I Am Woman, Hear Me Gasp for Air: An Analysis of Wendy Wasserstein's *Isn't It Romantic*  

Heather Baggott  
*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate](http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate)  
Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol3/iss1/9)

Recommended Citation

Available at: [http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol3/iss1/9](http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol3/iss1/9)
I AM WOMAN, HEAR ME GASP FOR AIR: AN ANALYSIS OF WENDY WASSERSTEIN’S ISN’T IT ROMANTIC.

BY HEATHER BAGGOTT ’99

Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question “Is this all?”

Betty Friedan
The Feminine Mystique

Over the past thirty years, feminism has become such an explosive word filled with different meanings and connotations that many scholars and laymen are afraid to casually apply it to their work and every day life. The meaning of feminism has changed and been distorted to such an extreme extent that we are often confused as to what it actually means. This obscuring of definition has given rise to questions which the modern, enlightened, and conscientious person is forced to ask of himself or herself. Can a man be a feminist? If I do not believe in glass ceilings and gender discrimination in the military am I a feminist? Am I a feminist if I believe that women have reproductive control over their body and it is their right to an abortion? Can you still be a feminist if you choose to have a husband and children over a career?

Such questions haunt the modern reflective psyche as it is commonplace to open the latest book about the feminist movement and perplexingly discover that there is not just one variation on the theme, but indeed several. Today, it seems out of fashion and almost blasé to merely label yourself a feminist. Instead, it is more in fashion and ever so politically correct to label yourself a Marxist-feminist, a radical-feminist, a cultural-feminist, a lesbian-feminist, a material-feminist, and so forth (Keyssar 4). In light of these various interpretations, we cannot help but wonder whether a unifying feminist theory and aesthetic exists that somehow connects these hyphenated movements.

Fortunately, a connection does exist and it is partly found in the works of Betty Friedan and Wendy Wasserstein. Whereas Friedan provides an unifying academic theory of feminism, Wasserstein provides an aesthetic outlet. One of the first manifestos on the Women’s Movement, Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963) supports the notion of a humanistic feminism which emphasizes the woman’s right to choose a lifestyle that makes her happy and fulfilled as an individual. Unlike many other feminists, Friedan does not qualify or judge the lifestyles that women prefer, but rather she is concerned with the idea that women be given the options and, indeed, the right to make choices. Thus, her ideology unites the Women’s Movement as the various types of feminism, although they might differ on many points, fundamentally agree on the woman’s right to choice. Wasserstein fits into this unification in that her plays serve to illustrate the philosophical aftermath of women who have forgotten Friedan’s feminist foundation. Plays such as Uncommon Women and Others (1977), Isn’t It Romantic (1983) and The Heidi Chronicles (1986) detail women’s search for independence and happiness in an increasingly hypersensitive and judgmental feminist world. Specifically, through the character of Janie in Isn’t It Romantic, Wasserstein clearly depicts the current dilemma of feminism as one in which the modern woman is caught in a paradox between feminist freedoms of choice while she simultaneously questions the merits of such definition and self-transformation. This internal debate serves to silence the female voice and causes Wasserstein to call for a return to Friedan’s humanistic roots of feminism.

Throughout Isn’t It Romantic, Janie struggles between her definition of self and the influence of her parents and peers as they attempt to impose their will on her life. Other themes and relationships (Harriet and Lillian, Cynthia Peterson, etc.) are also

Heather Baggott is a junior English (literature) major from Cleveland, Ohio. She is active as president of the Alpha Chi Omega sorority.

Articulāte · 1998
explored in the play, but Wasserstein is purposeful in her self-has noted Janie's strong sense of woman afraid to make choices (not willing to accept explodes. Finally, she discovers her own judgments and transformations her choices will command) and changes to a woman finally confident in her desires regardless of the pressures and opinions of her friends, family, and the feminist movement. Thus, Janie is a good example (possibly Wasserstein's best example) of a woman slowly liberated from the feminist paradox.

Although Janie is a well-educated Harvard graduate she surprisingly has considerable difficulty in her relationships with Harriet and Marty. Wasserstein commented on Janie's silence in a recent interview: "Janie is a character who has a problem expressing her feelings and she desperately wants to be liked" (Betsko 419).

In her relationship with her parents Janie's failure to assert her will is clearly seen. Unannounced, her parents move into her apartment in the early morning to celebrate her move to New York. Once together, however, instead of congratulating Janie, Tasha undermines her by criticizing Janie for not being involved in a serious relationship. Janie remains relatively passive to their complaints to compete in the male-dominated business world; she surprisingly has considerable difficulty in her relationships with Harriet and Marty. Wasserstein is a character who has a problem expressing her feelings and she desperately wants to be liked. Wasserstein herself has noted Janie's strong sense of humor: "Humor is a protection, but it's a vulnerability as well. I think that may be very female. Janie in Isn't Romanzi tells joke, joke, joke, then finally explodes. Finally, she discovers her own strength. Through the avoidance of her parent's questions it is clear that Janie is not willing to verbally justify her lifestyle as an educated and single freelance writer. Janie's failure to do so indicates her internal struggle in that she is not yet comfortable in her chosen existence to defend it to herself or her family.

Janie's failure to defend her lifestyle is also seen in her relationships with Harriet and Marty. Although Harriet does not consciously make an effort not to question Janie's decisions, Janie does resist the constant demands of her parents. In interviews, Wasserstein has noted that Janie is not in constant competition with Harriet. Janie does not view herself as equal to Harriet, but rather she sees herself as an inferior woman. Janie sees Harriet as a woman "who has it all" in terms of education, wealth, beauty, confidence. In several interviews, Wasserstein has been asked about whether she believes that women can really "have it all". She explains that Harriet is the closest representation of such a woman: Harriet has all the externals: Harriet could be a cover on Sassy magazine. The girl who "has it all". You know, the person who gets up at eight o'clock in the morning, spends twenty minutes with her daughter and ten minutes with her husband, then they jog together, then they go to work, drives to work, comes home to a wonderful life, studies French in the bathtub, and still has time to cry three minutes a day in front of the mirror. (Betsko 420)

Wasserstein subtly illustrates Janie's inferiority to Harriet's perceived perfection through small details in the play. For example, Janie encourages Harriet to take Tasha's advice and walk with determination with her chest and head up thinking "I am while Janie slumps (Act 1, scene 1)."

Also, because Janie admires Harriet's strength and courage as a woman, she commends her ability to compete in the male-dominated business world; Janie is continually seeking advice and justification from Harriet. Until the conclusion of the play, Janie views Harriet as the epitome of the truly modern woman, "a real feminist" and, consequently, she looks to Harriet to give her the answers on how to become a stronger woman. Janie consults Harriet on whether she should marry Marty:

Janie: Hattie, do you think I should marry Marty? Harriet: I never respected women who didn't learn to live alone and pay their own rent. Imagine spending your life pretending you aren't a person. To compromise on this would be antifeminist ... well, antihumanist ... well, just not impressive. I'm not being too harsh? (Act 1, scene 7)

We also see throughout the play that Harriet's advice is the only wisdom that Janie respects. Whereas Harriet unintentionally undermines Janie's courage, Marty deliberately attempts to make Janie feel weak and submissive. In many ways, Marty is the most damaging character to Janie's self-esteem. At the same time, however, he acts as the final catalyst in making Janie take an active stance on the direction of her life. Marty serves as the imperator that forces Janie to engage in dialogical thought which ultimately allows her to make a self-transformation. Throughout their relationship, it is clear that Marty does not perceive Janie, or any woman, as his equal. As a result, Marty makes decisions which constantly belittle Janie. Again, as in her relationship with her parents, Janie allows Marty to take control of her life.

We see Marty's degradation of Janie in several forms. He insists on calling her by the pet name "Monkey" which denotes a sense of ownership and control over Janie. The term takes away from Janie's status as an adult and makes her appear as a child. Marty further treats Janie as his inferior by making a decision without first consulting Janie, or on a hunch in Brooklyn. He justifies his decision by pointing on Janie's indifference: "I figured if I wanted for you to make up your mind to move, we'd never take anything" (Act 1, scene 7). Marty also does not treat Janie as his equal in her career. He can only accept Janie's decision to have a career as long as it does not interfere with his time with her. Yet, at the same time, Marty does not expect Janie to complain when he is on call as a doctor. The moment Janie's job interferes with Marty's plans to socialize with his family, he asks her to cancel her appointments: "Don't let it [work] take over your life. And don't let it take over our life" (Act 2, scene 2). Yet, again for most of the play, Marty acquiesces to Harriet's demands and double standards. She allows him to call her "Mom" and she agrees, with little debate, to move to Brooklyn. She even pretends to know how to cook in order to please Marty. Ironically, Janie understands her weakness to Marty and instead of denouncing her saying, "I am reflective and eager to please” (Act 1, scene 7). Nevertheless, Janie is still willing to continue in the relationship and entertain the idea of marriage.

Beyond her relationships with her family and peers, Wasserstein wisely see that Janie's voice is silenced in the very beginning of the play before any of the characters are even seen on stage. In the prologue, Janie's voice is heard on her answering machine, message but just as quickly as it is played to the audience, it is interrupted by a barrage of messages. Her parents, Harriet, and Cynthia leave messages asking Janie for her time and help, yet Janie's voice is never heard in response. Wasserstein uses these telephone machine scenes throughout the play to consistently show that Janie does not choose to exert her own responses to the demands placed upon her. Symbolically this represents Janie's apathy as a woman. So many people ask for her time and question her lifestyle (Tasha and Simon pestering her to take a marriage, Marty wanting to move to Brooklyn and start a family, Cynthia asking for love advice) that Janie shuts down as a curious and passionate individual.

This apathy pervades to a deeper level in Janie's consciousness. She says to Marty on their first date, "I want very badly to be someone else without going through the effort of actually changing myself into someone else. I have very little courage, but I'm highly critical of others who don't." (Act 1, scene 4). On the one hand, Janie seeks a stronger woman so as to exert her will in contrast to the demands and judgments levied against her. But, on the other hand, she does not want to actively take the time to change her mental attitudes. An internal level, Janie knows she does not have the necessary to define her own existence, but she is afraid to make such choices because active self-transformation involves intense and dialogical questioning between
her sense of reason and emotion. This theme of si-
multaneously wanting to both change and not change
your life is seen throughout Wasserstein's work. In a
recent article by Mervyn Rothstein of the New York
Times Wasserstein remarks, "There is a difference
between making a choice and really taking something
to heart; to be a true believer and live your life by is
not so much about making a choice and remaining silent
and oppressed. Thus, Wasserstein's solution
illustrates the paradox of the modern feminist move-
ment as one in which the choices that are now avail-
able to women are not created equal. Instead, choices
are ranked in a hierarchy and women are judged by the
choices they make. Fearing this judgment, many women
(like Janie) remain silent and, consequently, the
advancement of women's rights does not move for-
wards, but indeed backwards. Wasserstein's solu-
tion is a return to Friedan's sense of humanistic femi-
ninism in which importance is placed on the process
of making the choice, not on the choice itself.

As Wasserstein said to Mel Gusow of the New York
Times, "Janie has a right, even if that means she's
going to be alone. Even, if she's wrong in her choice.
Even if she's going to sit in her apartment and cry
every night, that it's what she wants.

In deciding the direction in which her life will
follow, Janie must choose to follow her stronger sense.
She must listen to the sense that will give her the
most freedom and happiness. She must ask tough
questions of herself: will a life and marriage to Marty
be a happy and rewarding existence? Continuing as a
free-lance writer is exciting and enriching, but will
that mean she's going to be alone and find out what
they can do, put off

An Analysis of Wendy Wasserstein Isn't It Romantic

play: she cannot move forward as long as she stays
with Marty; she will never be seen as a woman, but
always as a girl.

Janie also learns to raise opposition to her par-
ents. The play comes full circle as it concludes in the
same manner in which it begins. Janie's parents
were both fighting a mink coat. The coat is a size four
and physically too small to fit Janie. Symbolically, Janie
sees the coat as more than simply a gift that does not
fit. Instead, she sees it as a physical manifestation of
her parent's attempts to mold and fit her into a lifestyle
that is not her own. Just as the coat does not fit Janie
neither does married life. And, for the first time.
Janie expresses her opinion to her parents saying,
"Look, I'm sorry. Things didn't work out as you
planned. There's nothing wrong with that life [mar-
riage, but it just isn't mine right now" (Act 2, scene
6). Janie is able to assert herself with the same confi-
dence that she always encouraged Harriet to display.
On her own terms, she is able to become a true prod-
uct of mother's wisdom as she speaks with the confi-
dence of "I am"(Act 2, scene 6).

Janie's most courageous moment in the play is
when she finally gains the strength to express her
disappointment with Harriet. As Janie makes the
decision to leave Harriet, Harriet simultaneously de-
cides to marry Joe. Wasserstein inverts Janie and Harriet's representa-
tions. In the beginning of the play, Janie is lonely
and eager to marry while Harriet is steadfast in her
opposition to marriage, establishment of a vertical
career track; so

In the last three scenes of the play
Janie successfully chooses to end her relationship
with Marty and articulates her agitation with her parents
and Harriet. Janie expresses her doubts about her
for Marty saying: "I don't want to sneak around
you. I'm not afraid of you. I don't want to be afraid of
you. This is what I want. I want to feel not just that I can talk, but that you'll
listen"(Act 2, scene 4). On her own, Janie under-
stands that Marty systematically silences her voice as
a woman and an individual. She's always been a monos-
sweet little girl"(Act 2, scene 4). As Judith Weinraub
of the Washington Post points out, "This is not a grand
feminist realization on Janie's part. It is simply
Wasserstein's method of showing that we need to look
past feminism and towards individualism. Janie doesn't
make Janie happy so she leaves." In this scene,
Janie consciously reaches the central epiphany of the

Nevertheless Janie is convinced in her new
found strength and this conviction allows her to re-
main true to her choice and Harriet's new
life style. This courage gives rise to Janie's continued
agitation with Harriet because she sees her conforming
to the current trend of female existence and the pressure
for women to "have it all".

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)

Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every
current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone
and find out what they can do, put off

What is your life? When you make
the choice to marry or not to marry, it is about
passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with
Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has
to do with what Harriet does. (Act 2, scene 3)
Wasserstein shows that value judgments leveled against the way women choose to live their lives has become self-defeating and, ultimately, destructive. Janie, like the modern woman, is silenced by the fear of judgment and, consequently, struggles throughout much of her life to simply make a choice. She fears that men like Marty will expect her to "have it all". She fears that women like Harriet and Lillian expect her to sacrifice a family for a career. And she fears that her parents only expect her to marry and bear children. Janie fears being trapped into just one of these situations. To avoid Janie's struggle, Wasserstein implores her audience to return to the roots and fundamentals of feminism where the choice is all that matters. Choosing to be a mother, a businesswoman, an academic, a professional dancer take equal courage and strength of character and should therefore be equally respected. Feminism began as a humanistic movement and Wasserstein is arguing that it should once again be understood in terms of individual happiness and personal empowerment.

Works Cited
