1983

Ambivalent times: the short fiction of Tess Slesinger

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Ambivalent times: the short fiction of Tess Slesinger
by
Myrna Dunham

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The real things are too strong for us to grasp. We haven't time to catch them, we haven't strength to hold them.

The Unpossessed

Tess Slesinger
INTRODUCTION

The American nineteen thirties produced a number of female writers whose work is now largely unknown. Among these are Josephine Johnson, Josephine Herbst, and Tess Slesinger, who at the age of twenty-nine astonished the New York literary community with publication of her novel, The Unpossessed. Known as a short story writer and motion-picture script writer as well as a novelist, Tess Slesinger, born in New York City in 1905, was the youngest member of an achieving family. Her mother, Augusta Slesinger, was a practicing psychoanalyst and a long-time welfare worker in the city; her father, Anthony, was a textile executive as was her brother Laurence. Another brother, Donald, after a varied career as an analytical psychologist, studied with Erich Fromm and became a practicing psychoanalyst. A third brother, Stephen, was a television producer. Tess Slesinger, who chose her literary vocation early in life, said of herself, "I was born with the curse of intelligent parents, a happy childhood and nothing valid to rebel against so I rebelled against telling the truth ... I told whoppers at three, tall stories at four, and home runs at five. From six to sixteen I wrote them in a diary."2

Slesinger attended New York's Ethical Culture School at 33 Central Park West for twelve years, 3 Swarthmore College for two years, and the Columbia School of Journalism for two years, where, in 1927, she earned a B. Litt. degree. During her years at Columbia she worked as an
assistant fashion editor on the New York Herald Tribune and then as an assistant literary critic on the New York Evening Post Literary Review. In 1928, while still on the staff of the Literary Review, she married the political journalist, Herbert Solow.

Slesinger had a short but highly productive literary career. In addition to her novel, her works include over twenty short stories, all of which were published between 1930 and 1936. She was first published in The Menorah Journal. From then on, her stories appeared in popular magazines such as Redbook and The Forum, in the more sophisticated New Yorker and Vanity Fair, and in the smaller literary magazines such as Story, and the now defunct Pagany and This Quarter. (A more complete listing appears in Appendix A.) In 1935, a selection of eleven of her short stories was assembled in a volume titled Time: The Present.

Despite the considerable success of The Unpossessed and Time: The Present, Slesinger left New York in 1935 and apparently stopped writing fiction. During her next ten years on the west coast, she collaborated on scripts for seven films, the last of which, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, was coauthored by Slesinger and her second husband, Frank Davis. A victim of cancer, Slesinger died in Los Angeles at age thirty-nine.

The literary ambiance is Slesinger's own "modern" New York, her own middle class, a social microcosm which she dissects through minute portrayals of stifled and splintered lives. A majority of the stories deal with relationships within the world of marriage and the family. In these stories she concentrates on realistic subjects such as sibling rivalry, marital adjustment, infidelity, abortion, divorce, and problems of aging.
Often focused on a single character, and usually written in the stream-of-consciousness technique for which she was admired, these pieces show her ability to probe deeply the psyche of her characters.

The remaining stories cover a broader spectrum of social concerns. A few investigate conflicts in the world of work while others delve into relationships among the more affluent classes. The subjects range from job loss and office strike to socialites and literary parties and to problems of discrimination and protocol at private schools. Focused on groups, these traditionally narrated fictions show her versatility, her broad interest in contemporary issues, and her sense of social consciousness.

Slesinger wrote during a time of social change that affected the lives of women significantly, a time which witnessed greater numbers of women entering the work force and a relaxing of sexual codes. Yet she can hardly be called a feminist writer. As a woman writing about her contemporaries, Slesinger was aware that these shifts in the social structure spawned conflicts for women (and men) that were not easily resolved. The stories which deal with conflicts within marital relationships and/or the role of women in society show Slesinger's keen interest in the problems of her time rather than the particular grievances of women. Even when the point of view in a story is that of a woman, which it often is, Slesinger explores both sides of the male/female relationship. And sometimes, such as in "A Life in the Day of a Writer" and "Ben Grader Makes a Call," the central character is male. Thus as a novelist and short story writer she places her emphasis not just on women, but on individuals.
This essay argues that the growing moral confusion and sense of barrenness which Slesinger discerns is clearly visible in lives of people held in check by their ambivalence and velleities. As used by Slesinger in her fiction, velleity connotes attitudes of complacency and superficiality: "velleities, in which the sweetness of another person is irrelevant and intolerable, and indifference or even cruelty hurt in the same way."9

Since the duration of Slesinger's literary productivity is so brief, the work examined in this paper is not divided into periods. The stories treated here are, however, are discussed in the order in which they were published. Of the twenty-three pieces studied in the preparation of this essay, four representative stories have been selected for explication: "Mother to Dinner" (1930), "Missis Flinders" (1932), "On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover" (1935), and "A Life in the Day of a Writer" (1935).
As a critical observer of human affairs and the spirit of the times, Slesinger shows the inner struggles of her characters to balance emotion and intellect and their anguished attempts to make decisions amid a myriad of forces greater than themselves. In a letter to her publisher in which she discusses this dilemma, she wrote:

I picture them—us, my contemporaries, my fraternity-brothers—'on board the fast twentieth century express, the twentieth century unlimited, hell-bent for nowhere' on which one of my characters very consciously pictures herself. I do not mean at any point to treat my characters lightly or view their quandaries with nasty amusement. Neither do I wish to portray them as singularly tragic. But I have attempted to catch them at that vital point in their lives, both individually and collectively, the point from which they split off and save themselves or acknowledge and face their defeat. If they seem unusually hard-hit and too self-knowing, it is because I have tried to picture them on the level in their own consciousness where they are forced to tell themselves the truth.\\n
Although Slesinger's reference is to the characters in her novel, the quote aptly describes the plight of the people in her short fiction.

"Mother to Dinner," which appeared in The Menorah Journal, a magazine dedicated to the perpetuation of Jewish culture, is a little masterpiece of scorn and sympathy. It communicates Slesinger's concern with the deleterious effects of a matriarchal family environment on a newly married daughter who is confronted with making the transition from her small, inverted world to the larger world of marriage with a cold-hearted,
"modern" young man. Published in March of 1930 (before the sobering realities of the depression), "Mother to Dinner" depicts the complacent lives of a materially successful segment of the middle class. Set in a smart Charles Street apartment in the Village, amid a fierce thunderstorm that rocks the couple's charming living room, the story is a psychological study of blind devotion and dependency which revolves around the inner turmoil of Katherine Benjamin Jastrow who finds the reality of being Mrs. Gerald Jastrow ambiguous and terrifying.

Twenty-two-year-old Katherine, who envisioned the world of marriage as a sweet refuge where she would be surrounded and protected by Gerald's intelligence and care, much as she has been surrounded and protected by the care and companionship of her mother, finds herself rudely thrust into a cold, demanding world of logic and male dominance. Neither child nor woman, she feels suspended in an unknowable world governed by a stranger whom she fears and with whom she does not know how to communicate. Not having thought seriously about the drastic change she has made in her life, she wonders, as she tries to fathom what is happening to her, if other women, even those with "flat faces" that she sees in the market, were "aware of the waiting uncertainties, the uprooting, the transplanting, the bleeding, involved in their calmly leaving their homes to go to live with strangers."

Katherine lives in a limbo of stifled consciousness—a consciousness that contains very little sense of her own worth as an independent individual. Instead of acting decisively with a feeling of pride that reflects the power of her emerging womanhood and individuality, she stagnates in an
atmosphere of immobilizing fear.

To be happy, Katherine needs Gerald's approval. In her efforts to please him, to be the sort of wife she thinks she ought to be, she replicates the lightweight domestic world of Mrs. Benjamin which Gerald detests. Although Katherine finds comfort in her playhouse world of sentimentalities and little rituals of shopping and housekeeping (like carrying her key in her glove) which she copies from her mother, she is nervously aware that these habits irritate Gerald. He refers to those "damn habits" she's picked up from her mother as imbecilic wastes of time. But to give them up, to comply with Gerald's wishes, she must, or so she thinks, be a traitor to her mother. Thus she vacillates, anxiously juggling her sympathies and longings between the two opposing forces while frantically trying to conceal her burden of uneasiness from both of them.

After eleven months of married life, Katherine still dreads bringing Mother and Gerald together--but come together they will, for she has invited her parents to dinner. As the hours of the afternoon wear on, the impending dinner (at which Gerald will make an intellectual feast of roasting Mother with Katherine in between trying to protect both of them) looms large in her mind. When Katherine tries to analyze her feelings, tries to decide to whom her loyalty should belong, she can not do it. Like a child, she can only visualize herself in one role at a time, and for Katherine to be happy, that particular role must be defined by compliance with the other person's ideas and wishes. Thus she is totally unable to visualize an independent moral stance involving purposeful acts that extend beyond the sentimental considerations of her own private
universe.

Like a human shuttle she wove her way between these two, between Gerald and her mother, the two opposites who supported her web. (Why couldn't they both leave her alone?) When she was with her mother she could not rest, for she thought continually of the beacon of Gerald's intelligence, which must be protected from her mother's sullying incomprehension. And when she was with Gerald her heart ached for her deserted mother, she longed for her large enveloping sympathy in which to hide away from Gerald's too-clear gaze.

Katherine's lopsided life centers heavily around her relationship with her mother. (Her father, who should have played an important role in her development, is only a shadow behind the *Saturday Evening Post.*) Mother and daughter share an intimacy that has been built on the kind of close readings of one another's habits and whereabouts that eventually create a bond as tight as the umbilical cord which first connects mother and child. Sometimes, especially when she is performing pleasant domestic tasks like shopping at Papenmeyer's market, Katherine sees herself complacently carrying out this routine "in Fall, in Winter, and in Spring." Her identification with her mother's way of life is so strong that she does not sense the need to break out of her narrow world and develop her own identity.

While Katherine is aware that she and her mother "had felt nothing deeply," their little conversations and shared rituals are a source of comfort and stability; these "simple patterns of thought" and well-established habits provide a continuity that give meaning to her otherwise underdeveloped life. A year ago, Katherine reminds herself, she would have stood at the bottom of the steps in the Benjamin house after having arrived
home from some event, shouting "Mother, where are you?" Now, locked in her own domestic loneliness, she longs to call Mother to report on such pleasantries as her purchase of butcher Papenmeyer's "recommended cut for four" and news of the "one-eyed errand boy." Furthermore, the threatening thunderstorm, the thought of which terrifies her, is rumbling ominously in the distance. Yet Katherine, who remembers well what Gerald said to her last weekend when he caught her calling Mother, resists the urge to call home. "Oh for God's sake, Katherine, like a two-year-old baby you are always running home to mother." Since such trifles and comforts are her life, Katherine's stability is threatened. Gerald has so "little concern" for the minute things that occupy her mind all day that she refrains from relating them to him; consequently, she has nothing to say to him. And since he objects vehemently to her conversations and close association with her mother, she is severed from the only kind of life she knows, a simple life of shrimp salad luncheons in favorite tearooms that Gerald in his cold, intellectual pride will not tolerate.

Gerald said their talk was no more than gossip; he said that Katherine and her mother had shut themselves up in a hothouse, talking and comforting each other for griefs that could never come to them while they remained in their lethargic half-life.\(^{13}\)

The men in the Benjamin family, who are politely relegated to the passive positions of bread winners and errand runners, are only half alive. Husbands, fathers, uncles—all submit to the matriarchal hierarchy. And Gerald, who is most certainly not a Benjamin man, will have none of it. He refers to the Benjamin men as "poor devils" and "emasculated boobs."
Gerald assesses the situation correctly, but his remarks to Katherine show his own jealously inspired drive to denigrate Mother in Katherine's eyes so that he can assert his influence over her. The remarks also reveal Gerald's underlying fear of becoming another one of the "poor devils."

You resent me, he said to Katherine, because you have a preconceived idea of the role to which all husbands are relegated by their wives; you'd like to laugh me out of any important existence.14

Gerald is over reacting; nevertheless he does have just reasons to complain about the kind of attachment Katherine has to her mother. Worse, however, than his jealous nagging and his superior attitude is his complete failure to understand the loneliness that surrounds Katherine "like a high black fence." Fiercely determined, Gerald, who is a sovereign subject, can not visualize what it is like to be submissively torn between two opposing forces. Gerald, with his lack of sensibility, can not conceive of Katherine's plight. Marriage for Gerald is only a part of his life, part of his total integration, one of several types of relationships that fit into his needs as an independent individual.

Conversely, Katherine, whose integration is constricted by her limited family life, can not realize that Gerald has a separate existence. She can not even visualize him at work. Moreover, the only time she feels comfortable in her marriage to Gerald is when he is away from her, when she is performing some small domestic task for him, like putting away his "male smelling underwear" left where he dropped it. Then she feels a sort of quiet comfortableness, "a maternal tolerance touched by affectionate irony" that parallels the way her mother views her father.
But she could never achieve this intimacy in his presence: when Gerald was with her, when she thought about Gerald, it faded; there was more strangeness. Gerald again! She was aware of a wish to sink Gerald into the bottom of her mind: she was too much aware of him; when she read, when she visited, when she noticed things, it was always with the desire to report back to Gerald: nothing was complete until Gerald had been told.15

Slesinger unveils Katherine's innermost anxieties. The fact that Katherine wants to sink Gerald to the depths of her subconscious suggests that she is becoming aware of a problem more serious than divided loyalty. Although Gerald has warned her that the hours she spends in "introspective analysis" are a "worthless luxury like the visits of the rich to Palm Beach and Paris," Katherine, who is afraid of real life experiences, feels she is "living most acutely." Since she lacks polished techniques of reasoning as well as worldliness, she relies on introspection for problem solving as well as for pleasure.

Sunk in remorseful reflection, she ignores the dinner she should be cooking. She tries to ignore the storm, but the room is stifling, and the storm's unseen presence seems like some "pent-up evil" that will "suddenly roll forth and smother the world." It is her fanciful world that is threatened, and it makes her uneasy to think about it. Intuitively, Katherine knows she can not ignore her internal strife any more than she can ignore the physical storm's jagged lightning and deep rolling thunder in her living room. Unconsciously Katherine is searching for the nexus that will explain and ease her dilemma. Unfortunately she does not understand the depth of her dependent tendencies, an understanding she must
have if she is to grow and bloom.

Bent on finding an answer, she drifts backward to her indulged childhood and forward again to her engagement and honeymoon. Finally, she seeks refuge in the delusion that by marrying Gerald she has hurt her parents terribly.

She had left her parents for no reason, they had given her no cause to leave them, she had left them for no better reason than that when Gerald said to her that he would never again ask her to marry him, she had been seized with panic lest he meant it.

The recitation shows Katherine's astounding immaturity. Her narrow experience leads her to believe that all relationships can be simply defined. Since she does not know that a normal adult attitude toward one's parents includes feelings not only of gratitude, but also strong feelings of guilt, love and shame, her sense of guilt is magnified to the point of something evil. Because of her childlike concepts, her feelings about Gerald are naturally very much like the childhood attitudes one has toward parents. As long as Katherine sees Gerald as a lofty symbol of intelligence and authority, (possibly the strong paternal force that appears to have been lacking in her childhood) she can not move outward toward an independent existence and a dynamic relationship with her husband.

Feeling deep guilt over hurting her parents and jittery about the thunder which now permeates the room, Katherine slides farther into the abyss of fear. Reviewing her courtship, she admits that she was never very "sure" about Gerald. A sickening feeling rises in her when she discovers
that deception began with her engagement. She knows, without doubt, that she only married Gerald out of panic lest she lose him, and she also knows that since the time of her engagement, in order to perpetuate the deception, she has adopted the frivolous pose of the clown. Forever smiling and posturing, she has debased herself in order to avoid Mother's questions about her choice of suitor and husband. Even more damming is the knowledge that she has refused to look seriously at either Gerald or herself. She has married a stranger, a stranger "whose eye had casually fallen on a blue dress." Disgusted by her dishonesty and cowardice and overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, Katherine is unable to reach a stance of reasonable forgiveness that would permit personal growth and independent action rather than mere substitution of her loyalty to a figurehead of security and superiority. Her guilt, coupled with her intense fear of the storm which is about to erupt, puts her in a state of terror and near panic.

It seemed to her that before the next clap of thunder she must have reached a decision or she would die. But what decision, she cried, striking her fist against the window? What decision? about what? The problem was obscure.17

Katherine's perceptions are good as far as they go, but since her integration revolves around symbolic transferences and confused identity that work on exaggerated feelings of devotion and dependency, she can not use her perceptions as a catalyst for forthright action. Instead, she dramatically imagines Mother struck by lightning, "her stout body collapsing with dignity under a tree"--and life ever after with Gerald. But even in imagination this solution is not satisfying so she imagines Gerald
struck down, "a look of hurt surprise in his eyes as he fell beneath a
tree, murmuring something about scientific change"--and a resumption of
life with Mother. With this dramatic visualization of her ambivalent
feelings comes the tearful realization that she can not conveniently
will one of them away, that she can not have one at the expense of the
other. Still, she can not act. Undone, Katherine can only limply con-
clude that the solution is "even more obscure than the problem."

Then as the storm suddenly unleashes its fury, her courage fails
altogether and she capitulates to its power.

Now everything was the storm. The storm, which had
circled about the room, wished for closer nucleus, and
entered her body. The lightning pierced her stomach,
the thunder shook her limbs, and retreated, growling,
to its home in her bowels. There was no escape for her;
she was no longer imprisoned in the storm: the storm was
imprisoned in her. She stood in a shaking lethargy, she
had no will, no feeling. She was frozen; she was a shell
in which storm raged without her will. All the world. . . .

Released from the intensity of her hysteria by the sound of the
doorbell, but having let herself sink too far to think coherently,
Katherine is beyond deciding whether she wants Gerald or Mother to be at
the door. Her defeat, like her terror, is rampant. As she turns the door
handle she can only wish "that one of them, Gerald or her mother, were
dead." The sweet refuge she had envisioned has become a nightmare that
has no end.

The confusions and turmoil that Katherine experiences in the entangle-
ment of these relationships so greatly exceed her understanding and sense
of self that she is reduced to a state of panic. Not only is the problem,
as Katherine puts it, "obscure," it is extremely complex. Although
Slesinger depicts Katherine as pathetically unworldly, "Mother to Dinner" is more than a study of over protection and adolescent timidity. Since Katherine has little or no experience with expansive relationships, and since Gerald in his insensitivity does not recognize her problems, she withdraws from the reality of her marriage. Through Katherine's anguish and terror, Slesinger portrays, better than any weighty text on feminine psychology, the desperate insecurity of a young wife who helplessly stifles her emerging womanhood.
II

The happily married woman is not a commonplace in the work of modern women authors (e.g. the fiction of Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, and Dorothy Parker). Slesinger's stories of faltering relationships are no exception. In "Missis Flinders," Slesinger shifts her emphasis from a young woman who is totally defined by others to a woman defined by denial. Considerably more worldly than Katherine Jastrow, Margaret Flinders, who has an office job, holds a more modern view of marriage as an institution. The story which records Margaret's growing self-reproachment for seeking to preserve her freedom by having an abortion reveals the deeply incriminating perceptions of a woman who ultimately feels that she has denied herself her womanhood.

Because of the blunt treatment of the subject matter, Slesinger apparently had difficulty getting "Missis Flinders" published. In 1932, one probably did not use the line "'What's a D and C between friends--Nobody at the hospital gave a damn about my little illegality'" in a short story, not, that is, for publication in any of the more popular American magazines. Whit Burnett and Martha Foley, who were then publishing Story magazine in Spain, had the courage and good judgment to publish it. Burnett, who classified the story as one of those pieces that probably was not what the public was thought to want, noted: "'Missis Flinders,' which in some ways epitomizes the end of an entire epoch, was dismissed as too frank, yet a more moral story never was written."19
In 1934 when "Missis Flinders" became the terminal chapter of Slesinger's novel, The Unpossessed, her publishers pointed out that the story already has "a reputation as a little classic of our post-war literature." The name "Missis," as Mrs. Flinders is called by the lower class mothers she encounters during her three-day-stay in the hospital, mocks the values of the more educated young marrieds of Slesinger's day.

Prosaically dismissed from Nurse Kane's care, Margaret and Miles Flinders, "intellectuals with habits generated from the right and tastes inclined to the left," taxi home from a New York City hospital called Greenway Maternity Home. Riding solemnly and death-like in midday down the length of Manhattan, from above 125th Street to number 60 Charles Street, Margaret, sick with the growing knowledge of her mistake, acridly reproaches her guilt-ridden husband, Miles, and herself, for "being afraid to perpetuate themselves--afraid maybe of a personal life." In the aftermath of the abortion they are still stied together, but there is a harsh new tear in their relationship, and the tone of Margaret's grave, insightful thoughts is caustic and sad.

He was a man, and could have made her a woman. 
She was a woman, and could have made him a man. 
He was not a man; she was not a woman. In each of them the life-stream had flowed to a dead-end.

Margaret, who sits with her legs up on the seat of the smoothly rolling taxi with Miles perched on the side-seat, feels the desperate need not only to hurt Miles for his part in the decision which has debased her but also piercing desire to "reduce" him as she has been
reduced. "If he felt shame, shame in his own eyes, she could forgive him; but if it was only guilt felt man-like in her presence, a guilt which he could drop off like a damp shirt, if he was putting it all off on her for being a woman," then, thinks Margaret, he should be made to feel the inundating degradation that corrupts her self-respect and reduces her as a woman. In her anger, she wants him to try, though he can not, to enter that unspeakable space that divides them as offenders, as mates, as man and woman, and as individuals.

Unfortunately Margaret cannot reach Miles to share with him the harsh new insights about her life that she has gained and the commitment to love that she has witnessed during her maternity ward stay with commonplace Missis Butter and Missis Wiggam any more than Miles can cross the threshold to the subterranean pain that walls Margaret off from him. Unlike Margaret, his intellectual veneer has not been cracked. Margaret, who has been incredulously referred to as a "funny one" by both Missis Butter and Missis Wiggam, has been laughed at in unbelief and made to feel more ridiculous and stupid than she thought these "good ladies" with their "grocery and baby minds" might ever be.

Whatever did you do it for, Missis Flinders, Missis Butter was always saying; if there's nothing the matter with your insides--doesn't your husband. . . .22

Missis Butter, who has an almost-paid-for baby carriage and whose breast milk is "turning to cheese," has had a stillborn baby. To the new mothers, looking in on her while "wobbling down the corridors for their prenursing constitutional," Missis Butter is their "symbol and their
pride, the one who had given up her baby that they might have theirs," while Margaret, who is merely an observer in their sentimental but sincere world of pride-filled superstition, can only be a symbol of low-mindedness.

Missis Wiggam, who wanted a boy, has had her fourth girl. Even the new negligee her husband gave her (she has worn the same flannel gown three years running) did not do the trick. Besides buying the negligee so they won't be shamed in front of the staff, so the nurses won't "talk about them behind their backs," Mister Wiggam told his wife, Hetty, that it might just bring them luck. Despite the fact that the negligee didn't help produce a son, they are pleased with themselves, and Missis Wiggam, filled with a maternal pride that is mixed with a particular type of self-satisfaction ("there was something lustful besides smug in their pride in being Missis") castigates Margaret for her unnatural action.

Well, I just have to laugh at you, Missis Flinders, not wanting one, why my sister went to doctors for five years and spent her good money just trying to have one.23

Margaret, who has elected not to give birth, has only Miles' "too-big" basket of fruit, a "poor pathetic inarticulate basket of fruit" to show as consolation for her aborted labor. During her three days in the hospital she has had to hold her own with only the basket of fruit as armor against the prolonged telling and retelling of the arrival of a healthy baby and a dead baby, and about Missis Butter's husband, who, frantic with worry, scaled the hospital wall at four A.M. to make sure his wife, Shirley, was all right. In response to Margaret's offer of fruit,
the good ladies either refuse (too much acid), or spit out the seeds, 
or cut away the bruised spots like they were tossing out Miles, the 
absent Miles who Margaret in her anguished thoughts longs for, and needs.

Miles! they scorn me, these ladies. They laugh 
at me, dear, almost as though I had no 'husband', 
as though I were a 'fallen woman.' Miles, would 
you buy me a new negligee if I bore you three 
daughters? Miles, would you scale the wall if I 
bore you a dead baby? Miles, I have an inferior-
ity complex because I am an intellectual.24

Though they think of themselves as intellectuals, the Flinders are 
not intellectual in the true spirit of the term. Margaret, as evinced 
by her confused thinking, can not, as yet, distinguish between being able 
to feel a mere intellectual and humanitarian indignation and being able 
to evince a deep, lasting concern for human affairs. "'Well, you see, we 
are making some kind of protest, my husband Miles and I; sometimes I for-
get what.'" Voguishly, Margaret has put her faith in the sanctity of their 
intellectualism, in Miles' rationalizing, in his solemn pronouncement that 
"in a regime like this it is a terrible thing to have a baby," in theories 
about the threat of over-population and the breakdown of civilization, in 
issues which are of great social importance, but which they, unknowingly, 
have substituted for a strong commitment to their marriage. Now riding 
home to a suddenly meaningless house in a broken state with wounded feel-
ings, Margaret is able to see with startling clarity the meagerness of 
their lives.
'Funny ones,' she and Miles, riding home with numb faces and a basket of fruit between them—past a park, past a museum, past elevated pillars—intellectuals they were, bastards, changelings... giving up a baby for economic freedom which meant that two of them would work in offices instead of one of them only, giving up a baby for intellectual freedom which meant that they smoked their cigarettes bitterly and looked out of the windows of a taxi onto streets and people and stores and hated them all.25

Slesinger's complaint is not against the true intellectual. Nor is it likely that it is against the working wife, especially in a time of economic depression. Moreover, it is probably not a specific charge against women like those in Margaret's crowd who "keep the names they were born with" and "sleep for a little variety with one another's husbands." Her complaint is against shallow relationships.

Margaret, who sees herself and Miles as consciously mocking bystanders at the feast of life, is having a difficult time justifying her reasons for her abortion. In retrospect, she ponders Miles' reticence to bear responsibility, for finally, when the decision had to be made, "Miles, frightened at himself, washed his hands of it." She also ponders the reasons for Miles' cold, intellectual attitude which she spinelessly let influence her in her decision.

And Miles? What book, what professor, what strange idea, had taught him to hunch his shoulders and stay indoors, had taught him to hide behind his glasses? Whence the fear that made him put, in cold block letters, implacably above his desk, the sign announcing him 'Not at Home' to life?26

Condemning as the musings may be, Margaret is not without sympathy for Miles. Her psychic burden, which is increasing with the proximity
of the taxi to Charles Street, is eased somewhat by the thought that Miles, "bobbing like an empty ghost" on the side-seat, is as miserable and unhappy as she, for "he too had had an abortion." In retrospect, Margaret sees that somehow the intrinsic stuff of life has been cut out of him.

Throughout the story Slesinger draws sharp distinctions between the Flinders' intellectual and social environment and the "maternity-fraternity" to which Missis Butter and Missis Wiggam belong, and to which Margaret now wishes she belonged. What Margaret really wants from Missis Butter and Missis Wiggam is their respect and acceptance of her as woman, a knowing, caring, bona fide woman. Unfortunately it is a status which they, in their maternal and ethical superiority, can not and will not confer on her. Slesinger's irony is keen, for it must hurt Margaret doubly to be rejected by the same kind of people that she and Miles fret about, those unenlightened multitudes who "will go on and on until the bottom of the world is filled with them," while she and Miles, she thinks, with their "good clear heads will one day go spinning out of the world and leave nothing behind." Set against the irony of the harsh maternity ward judgment, Margaret's plaintive lament, in which she seeks to defend herself as a fit candidate for motherhood, is a plea for acceptance.

But I am not such a funny one . . . I too have known my breasts to swell and harden. I too have been unable to sleep on them for their tenderness to weight and touch, I too have known what it is to undress slowly and imagine myself growing night to night . . . I knew this for two months, my dear Missis Wiggam; I had this strange joy for two months, my dear Missis Butter.27

The judgment against her, coupled with her growing shame, makes Margaret uncomfortable with their taxi driver, Mr. Carl Strite. Rather
condescendingly, and probably correctly, Margaret imagines him as the son of a German immigrant mother who worked her fingers to the bone to raise him and who instilled in him a decent respect for motherhood. Margaret, who notices that "in his duty to protect his precious burden of womanhood" he is driving extra carefully. She assumes that Mr. Strite assumes that she has had a baby—maybe had a baby and lost it like Missis Butter. "Awful to lean forward and tell Mr. Strite he was laboring under a mistake," she thinks.

As the taxi, under Mr. Strite's capable hands, rolls hearse-like down the island toward the bohemian part of town, Margaret, in her heightened state of consciousness, sees the city as she has not seen it before. Closed inside with Miles, she sees life spread out before her, "both life of the Fifth Avenue variety and life of the common or Fourteenth Street variety: in short, life." The closer they get to home the more tense they become. Miles, who had removed his glasses "was suck­ing now on the tortoise shell curve which wound around his ear." And Margaret, who has learned so much in the last three days, wonders if Miles knows that they are "coming to a place which suffered no change, but which would be different forever afterward."

When they arrive home, Mr. Strite, after helping them out of the taxi at the curb, sits watching and waiting in his cab until they are safely delivered to their house. Miles, it is discovered, has forgot­ten his key. While Margaret rummages in her suitcase for her key, Mr. Strite arrives at the door carrying the basket of fruit which they forgot. Margaret, who wears the frozen smile that is common to
Slesinger's posturing characters, is near the end of her strength. In an effort to delay their entrance into the empty house, she tries, with strident wit, to induce Mr. Strite to take some of the fruit. After several polite refusals she wears him down, and finally he accepts a pear.

The pear as a symbol of life is so obvious that it can hardly be called symbolic, yet because Slesinger uses the fruit that Miles sent Margaret as a substitute for the fruit of the womb, it can not be ignored. Mr. Strite holds the pear "as though it were something he would put in a memory book." The meaning of the line is not altogether apparent, but a probable interpretation is that Mr. Strite, like Missis Butter and Missis Wiggam, is bewildered by Mr. and Mrs. Flinders. Slesinger, who has Margaret point out during their ride home that Mr. Strite's photo along with his name is mounted overhead in the taxi, does not honor the Flinders by letting Mr. Strite treat the pear as though it belonged in a photo album. Instead the enigmatic Flinders are dismissed by Mr. Strite as no more important than other curiosities which eventually may be noted in his album of taxicab memories.

The sense of reduction in stature is carried through to the end of the story where Margaret, standing uncomfortably with Miles at the door of their house after Mr. Strite has departed, feels ashamed "as though she had wounded herself in some unsightly way." The abortion so glibly undertaken is now seen by Margaret as a denial of her womanhood, a denial which spawns an ambivalence about herself which in her shame she magnifies until she sees herself "not as a woman at all, but as a
creature who would not be a woman and could not be a man." Unlike other of Slesinger's characters, Margaret is able to recognize and stand up to her loss. Because of those heartfelt perceptions, "Missis Flinders" is a somewhat hopeful story.
III

Like "Missis Flinders," "On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover" (1925), was first published in *Story* magazine. And like its predecessor, its pertinency extends beyond problems particularly associated with the nineteen thirties. Subsequently in 1971 when Slesinger's selected short stories were reissued "On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover" was chosen as the title story, a decision indicative of the tale's relevance. Almost five decades after the story's initial printing, it germaneness to the continuing problems of independence versus dependence and marital infidelity is discernible.

The brave facade, the urbane and witty manner that Margaret Flinders attempts but fails to maintain in "Missis Flinders" prevail throughout "On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover." Cornelia Graham, who is as "hard-hit" as Margaret, but who is more experienced and self-knowing than Margaret, is more impervious to life's sudden blows. Beneath her pose, however, Cornelia is stunned emotionally and stymied intellectually by the unhappy turn of events that complicates and endangers her relationship with her second husband, Dill. Unlike Margaret, who is sharply defined by denial, the more seasoned Cornelia, with her "implacable logic," is defined by need.
Well (you think in a sprightly voice) this is no surprise, at least essentially. So it's nice my dear, that you are always so clever; and sad my dear that you always need to be.  

The differences between Margaret Flinders and Cornelia Graham are vast. Margaret is ultimately forgiving in her knowledge that Miles "a dried-up intellectual husk," is unable to feel deeply about their relationship. Conversely, Cornelia, who is acutely aware of the injustice of her situation, can only dwell on her urge for recrimination even though from past experience she knows that getting even by being unfaithful will only enhance the danger of losing her second husband. Hurt and insecure in her marriage and dreading the void and the even greater insecurity that might come again if Dill leaves her, she seeks instead a bitter kind of satisfaction. Resolving to rise to the occasion, she intends to show Dill that she can accept his philandering and also remain faithful to him. In her blind urge for retaliation she does not realize that her interpretation of steadfastness will only continue her status quo.

The reader's initial image of Cornelia is like that of a person in a state of suspended animation. Lying motionless in the arms of her husband in the still of the early morning, she protects herself from the shattering news that he now loves someone else by relying on her cleverness and steel-like will. Cornelia, who is long past believing that adulterous behavior is essentially, intrinsically, a fundamental part of the male character, does not, however, rashly lash out at Dill for his transgressions. Less emotional than in the past, and knowing that
she has not yet grasped the graveness of this new development, she momentarily suspends herself from the grim reality of the thing, waiting, before she acts, for her heart and mind to validate the odious pronouncement. While she lies there rigidly "so his arms can't sense the difference, can not feel the animal flinch that maybe after all" can not be avoided, Cornelia is preparing herself for the discussion she knows they must have. Though outwardly controlled, like Margaret Flinders she is inwardly recoiling from the humiliating sense of reduction she feels.

Coldly scrutinizing Dill, who is waiting for some kind of response to his early morning news, Cornelia sees: "the lines in his face, his weakness, his male pride which even in his moment of confession he cannot hide even from himself." Her observations strengthen her so that in her subtle web of consciousness all the past, including Dill's half-forgotten personality traits, is now concentrated in the present, giving her a sense of power that at first she was not sure she could muster.

Then courageously looking back, reviewing the manner in which she handled the bad news the first time, Cornelia realizes she has learned from her mistakes. Instead of talking-it-all-out and analyzing the wretched state of affairs for two days straight like she did the first time--

while Jimsie stayed home from work to listen and neither of you so much as dressed nor saw another person but the boy from the delicatessen bringing sandwiches and cigarettes at intervals, and at last vichy-water when you fell to drinking--

this time, Cornelia tells herself, she intends to retain the superior
level of control she now feels "surging through her veins."

Cornelia's dispassionate analysis and outward "mild disgust" over what to do about this business with Dill result in the self-protective judgment that if she is to get any "satisfaction," and if Dill is to confide in her, she must be extremely clever. The situation, she thinks, calls for a performance that will incorporate the skills of "a highly selective artist," i.e., "Mrs. Dill Graham, formerly something else; a gently restrained actress, nee Cornelia North."

The smarting, self ironic tone of the carefully noted legal statuses emphasizes the depth of Cornelia's bitterness about her marriages. Her observations are also a caustic comment on society's willingness to condone male adultery.

You can't of course go on lying there in his arms (and it's cowardice that keeps you so, even now) and mutter things about honor and weep, because you know too well that honor has nothing to do with it. . . . No it has nothing to do with honor, it unfortunately has nothing to do with anything but human nature, and how can you take a man to task for that--not to mention two men. 30

The sense of helplessness that underlies her wit is then exacerbated by Dill's callous question: "'Is it going to make any difference to you, from now on?'' In her desire to appear unmoved, Cornelia frames an unspoken brittle reply: How the hell should I know? The implication in this brief, guarded attempt at communication is that questions concerning honor, and perhaps love, are simply irrelevant. Slesinger appears to be saying that arrangements such as these are only mock semblances of better relationships from better times and that what remains are only
degenerate epilogues like the one the Grahams are acting out. Continuing their halting efforts to converse without revealing how they feel, Dill says,

But what are you going to do? he says, Dill says, and you discover that he too is lying without moving, as afraid as you that if a muscle twitches or a breath catches, something, or the whole of everything, will go smashing to small pieces in this life you share. What are you going to do? To do? Why, lie here, I suppose, for the rest of our married life, in your arms gone cold, in our bed gone cold, my heart gone cold as a philosopher's. What am I going to do, you think. It's a good question. One of the best questions, for there is never any answer to it. 31

In her first marriage, Cornelia attempted to find a ready answer to the question. Less skilled at dealing with these forays, she responded militantly to Jimsie's adultery by heroically answering the call to battle. Her daring, devil-may-care pose, and her zealous counter-actions, though temporarily satisfying on their (Cornelia's and Jimsie's) narrow scale of justice, only accelerated the ruin of the marriage. Now highly aware of the fragile state of the present relationship, Cornelia soberly reviews her options.

Certainly, you think, you have a legalistic right to go out and get even. . . . But you did that once, you matched Jimsie amour for amour, and what happened? Why, the string between you wore out, it got like old elastic and finally, because it would never snap any more for deadness, each of you let go his end and wandered off, too empty to feel pain, too dead to feel anything. 32

Despite the deadness that she knows will continue to work its way into this relationship, Cornelia does not mention initiating divorce as
a desirable method of dealing with Dill's adultery. As a divorcée, Cornelia most likely knows the painful penalties and hazards of that role. Divorcées, like old maids, tend to be banished to the fringes of society. In deference to custom, divorced women can lead prim, lonely lives, or in acquiescence they can remarry, or in retaliation they can become tramps—"bums" Dill calls them. And since Cornelia was a bum during the interval between Jimmie and Dill—even "on the very night" she met Dill, in his eyes, her image, though slightly tantalizing, is badly tarnished.

In order to stay married to Dill, Cornelia must fulfill the traditional role of the stay-at-home-wife who honors and obeys, which means abiding by the double standard. Slesinger points out the gross inequality of this sanctified custom by having Dill ask Cornelia if she can love him "in spite of anything." Dill, the prime offender is not only asking for her compliance with an unfair code of behavior, he is asking for undying devotion, like devotion to a deity. Off-handedly answering "'Oh, sure,'" to Dill's heartless question, Cornelia philosophizes to herself that if there is such a thing as love, then maybe it (love) can occur "in spite of anything." She then turns the tables on Dill by inquiring about his capacity for love. "'And how about you, my gay deceiver? Would you love me in spite of anything?''"

Anything, but no gents, he says with fear piled up in his eyes and a sort of anticipatory hatred. Don't ask me why, I don't know why, but it's different with a man.34

His lameness is appalling, yet Cornelia, who is well aware of the
inviolability of his position as well as her own transgressions that resulted in the diastrous dissolution of her first marriage, seems to know of no solution except to circumvent the inequality and injustice by continuing to search for a strong defensive pose in which to finish the frightful morning drama.

At one point in the story, during Cornelia's search for a satisfactory mode of adjustment, she tells herself that there is nothing to get excited about. If Dill really loves the real her, and if she really loves the real him, then it doesn't matter if he "touches another woman"--"laughs with her"--"kisses" her, but her mind tells her the mode is ludicrous as well as fallacious. Next in her search for escape, she tortures herself in Katherine Jastrow's fashion by questioning the reality of the thing. "Does he actually exist when he leaves your sight?" Quick to recognize the dangers inherent in this approach, Cornelia then considers the satisfaction of "reducing" Dill's feelings of guilt "to mere sheepishness." Like Margaret Flinders' in her initial urge to hurt Miles, Cornelia thinks she will find joy through revenge. Triumphanty she concludes that there is no need to do anything because she knows that as long as Dill can lie there with fear written on his face and continue to say, "but no gents," she will have a power, an "integrity" which nothing can destroy.

You become a whole person even in your sadness, while he stands before you, however male, a split one. He will know it, you will know it.

Cornelia's victory would seem to be a hollow one. In order to keep
Dill she must submit to his demands.

'I couldn't stand it if I thought this changed things,' says Dill—and of course he knows it has changed things, what he means is he can't stand it if it's going to change your staying at home and waiting for him.36

Since it is not Cornelia's nature to be a martyr—"I'm not one to look back now that I know I've always had t.b. and say God how I have always suffered," and since she isn't sure that such a thing as love even exists, she reduces the meaning of their marriage to a struggle for power. Cornelia's "whole person" construct has about it the hauntingly familiar strains of the struggles for power and possession that Slesinger writes about in "Mother to Dinner." Cornelia thinks, perhaps as a last resort, that she is willing to be caged up, willing to let him own "what used to belong to nobody," at least for the time being, at least until she savor's her satisfaction. Through compliance with Dill's command, she thinks she will have a tactical advantage over him. Mistakenly she also thinks she understands human nature, but it is quite likely that Dill, whose ambivalence toward commitment to this marriage is greater than Cornelia's, will transgress more freely if the opportunities arise. Sadly, Cornelia is confusing her lust for revenge and self-righteousness with integrity. Slesinger's phrasing in Cornelia's "whole person" thoughts has a finality about it that resembles Margaret Flanders' threnody-like thoughts. "He was not a man; she was not a woman. In each of them the life-stream flowed to a dead-end."

Cornelia's final speech in this epilogue of a relationship comes
after a breakfast of perfectly cooked eggs, the good cloth napkins, and Cornelia playing the domestic role of the happy little wife while Dill, playing the role of the typical husband, sits at the table thumbing through the *Times*. To bolster her courage, Cornelia decides her controlled, civilized pose should equal the cool poses maintained by the insouciant characters in English comedies--the kind of comedies in which the expected murders, committed in response to family entanglements, come off smoothly, and the unruffled murderers, usually husbands or wives or butlers, carry on in their bored-with-life manner. But as the time nears for Dill to leave her, Cornelia, firm in resolve, but a bit weak at heart, presses herself against Dill's chest; however, she can "feel goodbye" in his fingertips so she gives up nicely.

Dill tells her then, that he has to "stop off for a cocktail or something--with my girl, because I'm helpless Cornelia, helpless, caught in as strong a web as your misery makes for you." Knowing the pain of his words will come after he leaves her, Cornelia tweaks his jaunty bow tie and wishes him well. Then regaining firmer control she says to him as a farewell gesture, "'There we are, now off with you in a cloud of dust.'" Her performance is plucky. But the debonair send-off, which she says is "meant in mocking admiration," is reminiscent not so much of the characters in the type of English comedy she has in mind as it is of the over-civilized, cynical characters in Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*.

Because her need to feel loved and wanted exceeds her desire for independence, Cornelia is left to cope in a limbo-like world of
nothingness where she has neither Dill's fidelity nor her own self-respect. Cynically, but with a great deal of honesty, Cornelia admits that overall her relationship with Dill is no deeper than the relationship she had with Jimsie. Dill, caught in the misery of his velleities, is not honest enough with himself to recognize that he has lost Cornelia even though she will be there when he returns. Neither of the Grahams has reached a level of caring profound enough for them to conceivably take from infidelity "its only possible lasting virtue, a possible binding closer together of the two original parties."

"On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover" is strikingly contemporary. Although written during a time when marriage was viewed as a more sacred institution than it is today, when young marrieds, especially women, were expected to be faithful and to endure, the story is hardly dated. Marriage is one of Slesinger's best subjects, and her sagacious, sometimes immutably female perceptions are as valid and revealing to read today as they were then. Her bold treatment of the pervasive loss of innocence and growing cynicism among young marrieds such as the Grahams speaks as clearly to readers of the present time as it did to readers of the nineteen thirties.
IV

In "A Life in the Day of a Writer," which was one of Slesinger's last published short stories (Story 1935), she places her emphasis on the equivocal position of the artist in society. Though the shift may appear to be a sharp departure from the world of unhappy relationships portrayed in "Mother to Dinner," "Missis Flinders," and "On Being Told . . .," in essence, it is not. Bertram Kyle, the thirty-year-old-novelist and short story writer who is the central focus of "A Life in the Day of a Writer" wants the security of marriage yet he wants to remain unfettered. Torn between his longing to roam randomly in the inner reality of his creative world and the pressure to perform responsibly in the external world of marriage and work, Bertram is unremittingly ambivalent. He is pulled excessively in the direction of his inner world, but social demands and a nagging conscience intermittently jolt him toward a position of compromise. In his attempts to come to terms with his conflict, he overlays his role in the external world with a mask of unreality that approximates his inner, imaginative life. Sometimes the two are inseparable. The result is a false compromise which encases him needlessly in self circumscribed longings and deceptions.

Bertram's agonies and ecstasies are wittily and intensely articulated in this next to last story Slesinger published. Moreover, in this story containing a fiction within the fiction, her stream-of-consciousness technique enables her to share with the reader the intricate working of a
writer's mind during the composing process.

The problem of the artist who must live in the world and yet not be entirely of it, who must achieve a fine balance between dedicating his life to his work and also live a life outside his work is a subject which has concerned countless writers both before and after Slesinger. She explores this subject through a writer who faces the dilemma of standing simultaneously in two worlds that do not mesh. In true Slesinger fashion, Bertram, who is high-flying, does not want to understand his conflict well enough to motivate him to dedicate himself to one life or the other. Though "said to be gifted with a fine imagination," Bertram does not have the stamina and discipline necessary for the artistic struggle he pictures himself a part of. He is, however, generously endowed with natural ability, a profound love for writing, and a frustrated but fiery desire to create.

Sometimes it was night when this happened and then he must go to bed because even a writer needs sleep, but at those times he went to bed and then lay there stark and wide awake with plots weaving like tunes in his head and characters leaping like mad chess-men, and words, words and their miraculous combinations, floating about on the ceiling above him and burying themselves in the pillow beneath him till he thought he would never sleep and knew that he was made... 37

Slesinger captures the personality of the undecided writer, almost completely, through the retelling of an early morning exchange of sentiment between Bertram and his wife, Louise. Pictured dutifully bent over his desk, Bertram is working on ideas for a short story. Highly frustrated because he has been sitting there for three long hours without writing "anything more than a complicated series of coat-hanger designs..."
in the shape of x's," he is snapped out his stupor by a telephone call from Louise.

It was like being startled out of sleep; like being caught making faces at yourself in the mirror—by an editor or a book critic; like being called to account again by your wife. His hand on the telephone, a million short miles in time and space from his writing desk, he discovered that he was shaking. He had spoken to no one all morning since Louise—shouting that she could put up with being the wife of a non-best seller, or even the wife of a chronic drunk with a fetish for carrying away coat-hangers for souvenirs, but not, by God, the duenna of a conceited, adolescent flirt—had slammed the door and gone off cursing to her office.

Louise's invectives against Bertram's zany inconstancy and her indirect threat to abandon him if he doesn't make serious effort to amend his ways momentarily sober him. Properly chastised and contrite, he responds obediently to her telephoned invitation to meet her "at five, at Freddie's" for cocktails. Before hanging up, Louise, perhaps worried by the thought of another of Bertram's escapades, acidly adds that he might try taking her, "his wife," home from the party, "instead of some-one else's."

Bertram Kyle is not bold enough to be the gay deceiver that Dill Graham is, but Bertram's hesitancy toward serious involvement, where he might be entrapped, does not restrict his roving eye and capricious behavior. His latest infatuation, whom he hopes to see at the cocktail party, is that "elegant creature Betsey, whom my rather plump Louise considers a bit too much on the thin side." Before Betsey, and before Bertram met and married Louise, he had "met and coveted Kitty Braithwaite,
Margery, Connie, Sylvia, Elinor."

Like Katherine Jastrow, who seeks refuge from life in the paternal-like protection of marriage with Gerald, Bertram Kyle seeks refuge in the security of the indulgent, mother-type wife he finds in Louise. Bertram Kyle and Katherine Jastrow, who both want to remain in the security of their own private worlds, react to overtures and challenges from the outer world of direct experience with extreme vacillation and hesitancy. Victims of their fine-tuned sensibilities, they can be instantaneously transported to the heights of aesthetic ecstasy and just as rapidly plunged to the lower depths. Often they mistake their ability to "feel" with the type of clear, disciplined thought that is intellectually and responsibly directed as well as felt. Bertram is not as terrified of life as Katherine. But Bertram, who is eight years older than Katherine and expected to be settled in both his profession and personal life, feels more pressure to ally his inner, imaginative life with his life in the outer world than does the more complacent and wary Katherine. Bertram's family, who wanted him to go into banking, considers him "something of a sissy." His ambivalence, which is readily apparent in his fluctuating and exaggerated reactions to trivial matters, suggests that his insecurity is as deep-seated as Katherine's.

Initially Bertram is delighted with Louise's invitation to the party with its prospects of a five P.M. release from the agonies of his constantly demanding world of writing into the white collar world of their nine-to-five friends who will be celebrating the end of their work day. Then after relishing the anticipated delights of his release, he is
plunged into fear of going to the party—a fear which stems, most likely, from the unavoidable awareness of his failure to succeed either in their world or his. Mulling over the agonies of having to participate in a social function, he adopts an exaggerated defense against Louise's command to appear at the cocktail party. In fright and sullenness, her affable peace offering following their early morning squabble is rejected.

She had no right, damn it, no damn right, to disturb him with that sharp malicious ringing, to present him with the bugbear, the insult, the indignity, of a cocktail party—she, who was proud enough of him in public (Bertram Kyle, author of Fifty Thousand Lives, that rather brilliant book).

The title of Bertram's novel, Fifty Thousand Lives, is somewhat similar to the title of William Saroyan's successful short story, "Seventy Thousand Assyrians." And from the title Bertram has chosen, it appears that he has not been as inventive as one would expect of a writer "said to be gifted with a fine imagination." In spite of thenoticeably imitative qualities in his work, he does strive for originality. Like many other writers, Bertram has notebooks full of outlines for future stories. During this particular day's search for ideas, he exhausts the contents of the notebooks then turns to the flaps at the back of the notebooks "into which he poured the findings in his pockets each night." On the back of a night-club menu he sees that one night he wrote a note to Saroyan. "Dear Saroyan," he reads, "but take a day off from your writing mon vieux, or your writing will get to be a habit." The contents of the note suggest that Bertram, despite what he says, is probably suffering
pangs of guilt at being in yet another night-club; he may also be rationalizing his attempt to synthesize his artistic life and his social life. Slesinger's list of collectibles provides an intimate look at his idiosyncratic method of generating creative ideas and reveals still more about his personality.

Out came old menus, the torn-off backs of matchbooks, hotel stationery that he had begged of waiters, ticket-stubs, a timetable, a theatre program, and odd unrecognizable scraps of paper he had picked up anywhere. The writing on these was born of drinking sometimes; of loneliness in the midst of laughing people; of a need to assert himself, perhaps, a desire to remind himself—-that he was a writer; but more than anything, he thought, for the sheer love of grasping a pencil and scratching with it on a scrap of paper.40

Bertram is creatively restless. Besides expressing himself on the backs of menus, he unfortunately allays his restlessness, not with consistent hard work, but with alcohol and talk. Now after another night of revelry he is sifting through his treasures in search of a piece of the present on which he can base a story. Bertram's artistic approach (like Slesinger's) involves minute examination of character and phenomena in time the present, but the notes he has seen so far are all too vague to be a springboard for a creative idea.

In addition to the note to Saroyan, he discovers a note to himself that he wrote on the menu of yet another night-club—a place to which he had insisted they go because it had a floor show with "naked women" as Louise called them, and where Louise, who "loathed the place," but had indulged his whim to see the floor show, sat neglected and bored, while Bertram wrote:
Nostalgia, a nostalgia for all the other nostalgic nights on which nothing would suffice . . . a thing of boredom, of content, of restlessness, velleities, in which the sweetness of another person is irrelevant and intolerable, and indifference or even cruelty hurt in the same way. {41

Bertram appears to grasp the meaning of his conflict between dedication and dalliance, but he is not able to translate his insights into healing action. The nostalgia he feels is born of velleities rather than a desire to discover a piece of the present which he can interpret to others. The cumulative effect on Bertram "of too many scotch-and-sodas, of too perfect dancing, of too many smooth-faced, slick-haired women" is a malaise which is intermittently offset by intense aesthetic enchainment.

His creative power, like his aesthetic response, manifests itself in an all-at-onceness that is like the exhalation of one huge breath. Unable to work slowly, line by line, hour by hour, relying on hundreds of separate stored up little inspirations which gradually get translated into long days of work and finally into a completed work, Bertram must wait for that moment of inspiration when his psychic energy is at its peak. After half a day of fruitless searching through worthless notes, and feeling sorry for himself about the excruciating demands that are placed on a writer as opposed to the ordinary forty-hour-a-week folk, Bertram is "pulled up short" by a little sentence that he finds among his notes which reads: "At bottom one is really grave." At the moment he reads it everything fits together. Struck by the wonder of creativity, he is "terrified" and "elated." At the same time, he revels in the relief
and ecstasy of the discovery that he is, after all, creative. Gearing up for the release of the story, and feeling "as alive as hell," he knows all he has to do is "wait till the whole reeling sum of things adds itself up or boils itself down, to a story." Then feeling the intense pressure of the creative power which takes possession of him, he breathes life into his ideas.

Listen, there is a name. Bettina Gregory. Bettina is a thin girl, wiry, her curves so slight as to be ripples, so hidden that the male eye cannot stop searching for them; she drinks too much; she is nicer when she is sober, a little shy, but less approachable. Bettina Gregory. She is the kind of girl who almost cares about people, almost is at bottom really grave. She is the kind of girl who would be at a cocktail party when someone named Fr—named Gerry—would call up and say he couldn't come because he was prosecuting a taxi-driver who had robbed him of four dollars. She is the kind of girl who would then toss off another drink and think it funny to take old Carl along up to the night-court to watch old Gerry prosecute a taxi-man. She is the kind of girl who will somehow collect coat-hangers (I give you my coat-hangers, Betsey-Bettina, Bertram Kyle almost shouted in his joy) and who will then go ilting and looping into the night-court armed to the teeth with coat-hangers and defense mechanisms, who will mock at the whores that have been rounded up, leer at the taxi-driver, ogle the red-faced detective, mimic the rather sheepish Gerry—all the time mocking, leering, ogling, mimicking—nothing but herself. Frankly we are just three people, she explains to the detective, with an arm about Gerry and Carl, who love each other veddy veddy much. She must pretend to be drunker than she is, because she is bitterly and deeply ashamed; she must wave her coat-hangers and put on a show because she knows it is a rotten show and she cannot stop it. It is not merely the liquor she has drunk; it is the wrong books she has read, the Noel Coward plays she has gone to, the fact that there is a drought in the Middle West, that there was a war when she was a child, that there will be another when she has a child, that she and Carl have something between them but it is not enough, that she is sorry for the taxi-driver and ashamed of being sorry, that at bottom she is almost grave.
Bertram and Bettina, of course, are nearly one and the same, and Slesinger's implication is that neither is brave enough to make an honest commitment to a personal relationship or to life. Through his lively story Bertram has described the uncertain spirit of the times. He has also described the more specific maladies of life in his youthful milieu.

When Bertram exhausts himself, when he is, so to speak, out of breath, he stops his feverish writing and leaves the four walls of his life to hurry off to the party which he almost forgot about. His entrance into the external world is quick, but his stay is brief. Walking down the street to Freddie's, he is joined by Bettina, "waving her drunken coat-hangers," then by Gerry, and at the corner by Carl. Bertram's short story, which ends with the taxi-driver spending a week in jail because Carl and Gerry and Bettina, bored with the whole affair, abandon him and go off in Bettina's car "for a three-day spree," is completely written, but Bertram, filled with the joy of creation, cannot make the transition from the creative world to Louise's world. Bursting madly in on the cocktail scene, with Louise, "ominous and tolerant, placing her hands in disgust on her soft hips at the sight of him," Bertram yells: "'Hello, I'm cockeyed.'" And he asks the guests if they've seen his friends, "Bettina, Gregory, Gerry, and a detective" who he has invited to come along to the party. Then in deference to Louise, he tries to explain his condition to her by telling her that he feels like he has been "floating for forty days." Bertram is once again at the heights, and he tells his "good wife" that he needs a "little drink to sober down."

Slesinger's concern over the inability of people to assume
responsibility for their complacency despite the times they live in is more fully expressed in "A Life in the Day of a Writer" than in the other stories which are examined above. It is a "rotten show" as Bertram says in his story, but one in which they can not stop performing. Bertram, who is at that melancholy juncture that often accompanies the passage from one's twenties to one's thirties, seems inwardly aware of his own lack of graveness, but outwardly he persists in perpetuating the adolescent stance in which he feels safe. Although Slesinger may not intend it as justification for Bertram's continued indecisiveness and triflings, the fact that he tends to excuse Bettina's lack of graveness by pointing out that there "was a war when she was a child, that there will be another when she has a child," points to Slesinger's sympathy as well as her scorn for her contemporaries.

Bertram also excuses Bettina's (and his own?) lack of graveness by placing the blame on her cultural environment. "It is not merely the liquor which she has drunk; it is the wrong books she has read, the Noel Coward plays she has gone to." Like Bettina, Bertram may not realize that in his search for answers he often chooses and mistakes style for substance. For instance, he prefers Betsey with "the hiding ripples that the male eye can't stop searching for" rather than plumpish Louise on whom he depends for moral and economic support.

This year he had a large room with a very high ceiling; he works better, Louise used to tell people, who came in. Last year he had worked in a very small room with a low ceiling; he works better Louise used to tell people, in a small place.
Bertram is too insecure to change the direction of his life. Perhaps, like Bettina, he is at bottom bitterly and deeply ashamed," but if so he can only admit it through his fiction.

These four short stories of husbands and wives who shrink from life, of men who manipulate and women who subjugate themselves to a neither-nor, limbo-like existence are insightful portraits of inner confusion and turmoil that show Slesinger's awareness of the barrenness she saw around her. Her lively manner of relating the plight of her characters often belies her seriousness, but close examination makes clear that these witty portrayals are serious stories of denial, emptiness, and insecurity.

Slesinger's choice of topics further underscores her perspicacity. "Case" studies such as the stifled development in "Mother to Dinner," the abortion in "Missis Flinders," the ramifications of infidelity explored in "On Being Told . . .," and the stagnated development depicted in "A Life in the Day of a Writer," emphasize her concern over the lack of grave commitment so evident in the lives of the middle class marrieds she mocks, yet sympathizes with.

Caught in perplexing cross-currents of changing social codes, yet compelled to live "life as it is spoken in the twentieth century," her posing characters are unable to connect more than superficially with themselves or one another. Rarely do they feel shame. They experience guilt over their failures to achieve higher planes of commitment, but their guilt, which is often solace for their superficiality, is closely
analyzed and guarded because it replaces the depth of feeling they deny themselves and protects them from opening their hearts to the vulnerability involved in a deep relationship. Because of their intense need for love and self respect they withdraw into fantasy like Bertram and Katherine, or take refuge in "intellectual" attitudinizing like Miles, or search endlessly like Dill; or like Cornelia, in their bitterness they reduce their spouses' triumphs and guilts to sheepishness. Occasionally a character like Gerald, who "slinks" by the doorman on one of his too frequent visits to the Benjamins' house, feels no more than sheepishness.

Margaret Flinders is the exception. Margaret, who is truly ashamed, is more honest with herself than the other characters. Although unable to express her grief for a child that would have been had she not had the abortion, she is at least able to express her shame in terms of her reduction as a woman. And she is able to forgive Miles. Her display of heartfelt perception is the only time in the four stories that the voice of conscience is heard and heeded, the only time a character is able to relinquish posturing long enough to experience honest sentiment. Slesinger, who had an uncommon understanding of human weaknesses and needs, knew that if not faced honestly, "the visual inner eye [which] is a keen thing, a sharp sadist, a talented beast of an artist, an old devil of a perverted surgeon" may stain "the heart's plate permanently."
Slesinger's move from New York to Hollywood and her shift from writing serious fictions to writing mainly light-hearted, sentimental screenplays is perplexing. By the time her last story, "For Better, for Worse," appeared in the *Delineator* (January 1936), she was working on the screenplay for *The Good Earth*. The film, which premiered at the Astor in New York early in 1937, was well received. Frank Nugent, screen reviewer for *The New York Times*, noted that while taking some liberty with the text, the picture did full justice to the novel. Overall he considered it "one of the finest things Hollywood has done this season or any time." Subsequent films for which Slesinger wrote screenplays were not so successful. *The Bride Wore Red* (1937), *Girls' School* (1938), *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940), *Remember the Day* (1941), and *Are Husbands Necessary?* (1942), were thought to be sweet nostalgic affairs of the heart--pleasing little films that had very little to say; however, her last film, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945), though also an affair of the heart, was recognized as a warm and compassionate study of a slum family's heartfelt courage. But compared to the four sharp, mocking tales of indecision discussed in this paper, the films, for the most part, are sentimental pap. If the disparities are viewed from the perspectives of change in the temper of the time and the vast differences between the small eastern audience for her fiction and the all-inclusive film audience, the shift to less meaningful material, though regrettable for Slesinger admirers, is understandable. Still, the
reasons for her no longer writing novels and short stories are unknown.

Although it is impossible to know why she shifted her emphasis, the subjects of her novel and her stories, their settings, and her theme of growing moral confusion provide some worthwhile insights into the puzzling question. The prolonged and worsening nightmare she pictures in her fictions may well have been close to her own experiences. The animus for the novel, in which "Missis Flinders" comprises the final chapter, appears to have been not only the desire to express her discontent with her isolated environment, but the increasing unhappiness that surrounded her personal life. One of the reasons for the furor and heated discussions that followed the publication of The Unpossessed was the recognition by her contemporaries that the characters she pilloried were (loosely) based on her associates, particularly members of the closely-knit group of intellectuals whose early work was published in The Menorah Journal. Though it is unkind to suggest that Slesinger herself is the base for the fictional Margaret Flinders, the close resemblance between Slesinger and some of the female characters in her fiction is more than coincidental. For instance, in her short story, "After the Party" (1934), Slesinger turns the familiar New York "literary tea" into a story of a neurotic socialite whose party giving, through which she courts newly famous authors, is sublimation for an empty personal life. At one of the parties the guest of honor is the newly "arrived" superficial Regina Sawyer whose novel, The Undecided, has just been published. Most reviewers agree that Slesinger overtly portrayed herself as Regina Sawyer.

In addition to charges that the purpose of her novel was her desire
to vindicate her unhappiness by mocking the superficial lives of characters who resembled her contemporaries, Slesinger was also criticized for excluding the "real" background of the confusion and floundering that afflicted the intellectual community. Though praising her for being the first to write about the dilemma of her contemporaries, Robert Cantwell took her to task for neglecting to explain the motives for their involvement in radical politics, their need as Edmund Wilson put it, to "take Communism away from the Communists." In The Unpossessed Slesinger primarily mocks the feeble attempts of her male characters, a copywriter, a novelist, and a college professor, to embrace radical politics. The focus is on their failure, not their need, to launch their Marxist magazine. Cantwell suggests that she should have placed more emphasis on the intellectuals' efforts to evolve a "coherent social program" for their work. According to him, in the wake of the economic chaos that struck the country, a small group of intellectuals—"novelists, critics, college professors, journalists"—began "forming committees, drawing up manifestos, arguing about proletariat art, and taking sides in the revolution"—groping painfully to find "an emotional and intellectually adequate program for their work." 46 If one looks at Slesinger's novel mainly as a transcript of the New York intellectual community's attempt to survive the crisis in the publishing world, then Cantwell's criticism is well taken. If however, one views the novel as part of her larger effort to convey the moral confusion of the times, then Cantwell's point is not as important to her novel as he suggests.

If the motive for her writing was her discontent with her
environment, her contemporaries, and her own unhappiness, perhaps the changed direction of her life and work helped ease her concern over the prevailing ambivalence and disorder she was a part of. If so, the bland screenplays may have provided a respite plus a time to contemplate new directions for her fiction. After six years of revealing the confusion and hypocrisy she saw around her the light-hearted films on which she concentrated her energies after leaving New York might also have supplied a counterpoint of serenity that was absent from the time and place and people she wrote about. Whatever her reasons for shifting her emphasis, the films are the antithesis of the political struggles and indecisiveness pictured in *The Unpossessed*. Moreover, they are the polar opposites of the growing bitterness and frustration exhibited in the similar worlds of Bertram Kyle and Bettina Gregory. Though it is possible to conclude that Slesinger's fiction reflects the unrest and ambivalence of her own intellectual community, one should not infer that her decision to stop writing fiction was in any way connected with her negative reaction to that community.

The publishers of *On Being Told* . . . remark that "notebooks with jottings for further novels and stories, now in the possession of her son, show that she intended to get back to fiction."47 Though she may have considered her task unfinished, unlike Margaret Flinders who feared she would go "spinning out of the world, and leave nothing behind," Slesinger has given her readers a clear-eyed perception of matters that troubled her contemporaries--matters that continue to be of concern in an even more fragmented time: the present.
NOTES


2 The quote is taken from a letter to her publisher which appears on the dust jacket of the first edition of Slesinger's novel, The Unpossessed (May, 1934). Also, the biographical note on the dust jacket of Time: The Present (Simon and Schuster, May 1935) states that Slesinger "started to write as soon as she could print, and at no time in her life did she plan to be anything but a writer."

3 The Ethical Culture School, which opened its doors in 1904 at number 33 Central Park West, New York City, was an outgrowth of the free schools for workers' children initiated by Dr. Felix Adler's Ethical Culture Movement. Growing from kindergartens to a full twelve-year secondary school, the Ethical Culture School was concerned with social ethics as well as academic subjects. The curriculum of this experiment in education included the usual subject matter plus the classics, training projects for social service, and classes in ethics. The school, which still operates at the same address, is now mainly a college preparatory school. During the 1920s, the school made a practice of accepting students of various races, religions, and social classes. In one of Slesinger's short stories, "White on Black," which deals with discrimination at a private school, she severely criticizes the hypocritical behavior of the whites toward two black students -- the only blacks in the school. Although the school in her story is anonymous, it is likely that the story is based on Slesinger's experiences at the Ethical Culture School.

4 Herbert Solow (1903-1964), was a political journalist whose youthful years were dedicated to radical politics. In 1928, the year of his marriage to Tess Slesinger, he was an assistant editor on The Menorah Journal and a reviewer for the New York Evening Post Literary Review. In 1929, he was appointed assistant editor of The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences. A 1924 graduate of Columbia, Solow worked under John Dewey in the early thirties as an organizer of the Trotsky Commission. Later he worked as an assistant to the president of The New School for Social Research and then as an editor for Time. Finally, from 1945 until his death, he was an editor of Fortune.

5 Tess Slesinger, Time: The Present A Book of Short Stories (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1935). In 1971, Time: The Present was
republished and retitled, On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover And Other Stories. (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971). Also, the short story, "A Life in the Day of a Writer," was added to this volume.

6 The seven films on which Slesinger collaborated as a script writer are: The Good Earth (1937), The Bride Wore Red (1937), The Girls' School (1938) an adaptation of her short story, "The Answer on the Magnolia Tree"), Dance, Girl, Dance (1940), Remember the Day (1941), Are Husbands Necessary? (1942), and A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (1945).

7 A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was nominated for Academy Awards in several categories. The script, coauthored by Slesinger and Davis, was nominated for the best screenplay based on a novel. Although they did not win this award, James Dunn, who portrayed Johnny Nolan, won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor. Peggy Ann Garner, who played the role of Francie Nolan, the thirteen-year-old through whose eyes the story is seen, received a Special Award in which she was named the Outstanding Child Actress of 1945. Produced by Twentieth Century-Fox, and directed by Elia Kazan (his first film), A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was praised for its sympathetic but unsentimental treatment of the characters and the material, and for its authentic portrayal of city life.


9 Tess Slesinger, On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover And Other Stories (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), p. 386. This is the paperback edition of the 1971 Chicago edition.

10 Dust Jacket, The Unpossessed.

11 The Menorah Journal, a publication of the Intercollegiate Menorah Association, was begun in 1915 by editor Henry Hurwitz, and continued under his editorship until its demise in 1947. For a brief period in the late nineteen twenties, under the influence of its managing editor, Elliot Cohen (founding editor of Commentary), the usually sedate magazine became known for publishing the work of young intellectuals such as Clifton Fadiman, Albert Halper, Louis Berg, Lewis Mumford, Lionel Trilling, and Tess Slesinger.

12 On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover And Other Stories (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), p. 98.
13 On Being Told . . ., p. 100
15 On Being Told . . ., p. 102.
16 On Being Told . . ., p. 105.
17 On Being Told . . ., p. 114.

19 Whit Burnett and Martha Foley, eds., A Story Anthology 1931-1933

20 Dust jacket, The Unpossessed.
21 On Being Told . . ., p. 234.
22 On Being Told . . ., p. 244.
23 On Being Told . . ., p. 246.
24 On Being Told . . ., p. 247.
26 On Being Told . . ., p. 245.
28 On Being Told . . ., p. 3.
29 On Being Told . . ., p. 9.
30 On Being Told . . ., p. 6.
31 On Being Told . . ., p. 8.
Two of Slesinger's stories which are set in Reno, Nevada, "After the Cure" and "For Better, For Worse," portray cynical, unhappy women who have just been granted divorces.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


---------- *On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover And Other Stories.* New York: Quadrangle, 1975.


APPENDIX A

Published Works

Novel

The Unpossessed, (Simon and Schuster, May 1934).

Collections


On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover And Other Stories, (Quadrangle, Chicago: cloth, 1971; Quadrangle, New York: paper, 1975).

This collection contains all the stories that appear in Time: The Present plus one additional story, "A Life in the Day of a Writer."

Short Stories

"Mother to Dinner," (The Menorah Journal, March 1930).<sup>a</sup>
"White on Black," (The American Mercury, December 1930).<sup>a</sup>
"The Friedmans' Annie," (The Menorah Journal, March 1931).<sup>a</sup>
"Young Wife," (This Quarter, Spring 1931).<sup>b</sup>
"Brother to the Happy," (Pagany, Fall/Winter 1932).<sup>b</sup>
"Missis Flinders," (Story, December 1932).<sup>a</sup>
"Kleine Frau," (Modern Youth, March 1933).<sup>b</sup>
"Relax Is All," (The Forum and Century, August 1933).<sup>a</sup>
"The Lonelier Eve," (The New Yorker, April 1934).<sup>b</sup>
"Ben Grader Makes a Call," (Vanity Fair, January 1935).<sup>b</sup>
"The Old Lady Counts Her Injuries," Vanity Fair, October 1934).<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Collected in Time: The Present and On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover And Other Stories.

<sup>b</sup>Uncollected.
"After the Cure," (Vanity Fair, January 1935). b
"Jobs in the Sky," (Scribner's, March 1935). a
"The Times So Unsettled Are," (Redbook, March 1935). a
"On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover," (Story, April 1935). a
"Mr. Palmer's Party," (The New Yorker, April 1935). b
"The Mouse-Trap"a
"After the Party"a
"The Answer on the Magnolia Tree"a
"You G-I-V-E Yourself," (Vanity Fair, May 1935). b
"The Best Things in Life Are Three," (Vanity Fair, August 1935). b
"A Life in the Day of a Writer," (Story, November 1935). c
"For Better, For Worse," (Delineator, January 1936). b

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[a] Collected in Time: The Present and On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover And Other Stories.
[b] Uncollected.
[c] On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover And Other Stories.
## APPENDIX B

### The Films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Good Earth</td>
<td>Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer</td>
<td>1937</td>
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<tr>
<td>Screenplay by Tess Slesinger, Talbot Jennings and Claudine West</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Bride Wore Red</td>
<td>Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer</td>
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<td>Screenplay by Tess Slesinger and Bradbury Foote</td>
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<td>Girls' School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Screenplay by Tess Slesinger and Richard Sherman based on Slesinger's short story, &quot;The Answer on the Magnolia Tree&quot;</td>
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<td>Dance, Girl, Dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remember the Day</td>
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<td>Screenplay by Tess Slesinger, Frank Davis and Allan Scott</td>
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<td>Paramount Pictures</td>
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<td>Screenplay by Tess Slesinger and Frank Davis</td>
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<td>A Tree Grows in Brooklyn</td>
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