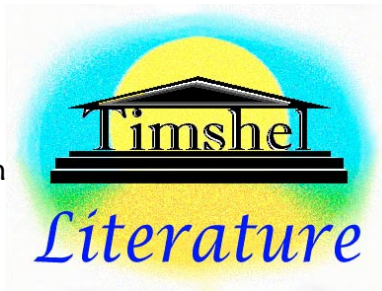


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## **Just Thinking, 06/16/03:**

### **A Parody of Misery**

by Justin Katz

A number of years ago, *Saturday Night Live* showed a skit in which three men were seated at a bar. The man in the middle was about to be married and was having some last-minute reservations. The other two, speaking from their own experience, assured him that he had nothing to fear and listed various ways in which his life would improve the day he walked down the aisle. The joke, if one chooses to see it as such, was that the married men were lying.

Obviously, in the real-life scenarios that this skit was presumably meant to reveal in their underlying truth by means of comedy, the elder men could have been dramatically misapplying their own experiences. Perhaps the young man's wife-to-be enjoyed cooking. Perhaps the man himself did. Moreover, only a bitter man takes it as a given that another's spouse will not satisfy her husband emotionally and sexually. It could also be true that those qualities that some men see as restrictive within their own marriages are exactly what other men desire.

The truth of the matter is that such exaggerated instances of "misery loving company" could be drawn in any direction. The script could just as easily be written in which the elder men were single and sought to dissuade the other from marriage by proclaiming the benefits that accrue to middle-aged bachelordom. "You don't have to worry about leaving the pizza box on the coffee

table for a week. Your income? That's yours entirely. And you can spend it all on yourself at a bar until they kick you out early Saturday morning."

None of the above suggests that such joking, or even real disingenuousness of this sort, is excessively dangerous. In some cases, it might even be helpful. Whether the influence is the opinions of others or the impression of truth garnered from irresponsible television shows (which do have an effect on the culture), a man who does not believe the statements to be either false or inapplicable to his own relationship may not have found his match. Certainly, his fiancé might be better off with a less-doubting husband.

For women, the cultural equivalent of men fooling other men into marriage is other women fooling them into separation or divorce. Actually, "equivalent" is the wrong word, because the story line for men is that they are better off married – tricked into it or not. One reason that the *Saturday Night Live* skit might have been considered funny is that it went against this truism. Modern society handles the question of women being better off without husbands much more seriously.

Last night – on Father's Day – one of the channels showed a Hallmark movie. Within the few minutes that I saw, the audience watched a woman's abusive live-in boyfriend chase her daughter down for the purpose of throwing a yappy puppy into a river in a pillowcase. After jumping off a bridge to save her dog, the daughter was put into protective custody under the care of another woman, whose husband had left her six years earlier because *their* daughter had been born with a severe handicap.

This plot is depressingly typical: women seeking their feminine strength in response to dangerous or selfish men. *The Hours*, a recent Hollywood hit, went a few steps beyond the cliché by taking the position that suicide or escape were preferable to lives trapped in the humdrum reality of loving and stable, but typical, relationships. In the standard story, one source of the

women's newfound strength is the desire to save their children from men. In *The Hours*, children are part of the oppressive construction of family life.

To be sure, marriages do exist that are better ended. But they are the exceptions, and divorce and separation are not to be undertaken lightly, especially when children are involved. What truth the *Saturday Night Live* skit had derived from the fact that marriage has its costs and its compromises. Only the mythically rare nuptial life will be without its rough spots — among which is boredom. And it is boredom that those who trumpet such messages as that of *The Hours* see as the greatest oppression, the most unconscionable abuse, of all.

This point of view shines a spotlight on modern society's endemic selfishness and obsession with drama. It encourages a worldview in which the value of a life is measured by how "interesting" it would be as a movie and the capacity to which the individual can act as the star. Most importantly, it obscures a truth that applies to most of what is meaningful in life: the fault for boredom and ennui lies with the individual. It is the divorcee, herself, who failed to construct — to discern — her own compelling story within the decisions that she had made. In a sense, the main character was poorly drawn, and simply thrusting her into a new plot that is more superficially interesting in a visceral way will not change that.

Were *Saturday Night Live* to rewrite the skit to mock the cachet of being middle-aged and divorced, the camera would fade in on a scene of three women milling about the water cooler at work. Two miserable women, insecure about the decisions that they have made and desperate to reaffirm the way of thinking that led them to make them, would be embellishing the insufferable affronts of their ex-husbands and describing how being divorced is like being young again. By the next commercial, the still-married woman would be convinced of the constant abuse under which she lived.

It wouldn't be very funny — especially for children too young to understand that they are only extras.