

## ANALYSIS

*The Simple Truth* (1955)

Elizabeth Hardwick

(1916-2007)

"An ironic, and unobtrusively invidious commentary on commonplace people and meager lives, which have their own private presumptions of a special superiority, is occasioned by a murder trial in a rather featureless state university town in Iowa--where not the young man, who may face the ultimate penalty, but two spectators experience the resolution of his fate. They are Joseph Parks, a fellow student there whose own future is undetermined, and Anita Mitchell, a professor's wife who leads a quiet, childless life which enables her to indulge her "fine intelligence and small ambition." Theirs is a proprietary, partisan interest in the case which they attend from day to day--an interest quickened by their indignation at the possible injustice which may be dealt to Rudy Peck, the defendant, whom they (alone) know to be innocent [not accurate]. The trial concluded--and the verdict reached--Peck is freed. Theirs again is the anticlimactic disappointment that others (the jury) have been able to obtain this judgment without their special powers of divination and discernment.... An odd, original talent (*The Ghostly Lover*--1945) Elizabeth Hardwick writes with a tremendous subtlety and a fine drawn sensibility of common frailties. A special market here."

Kirkus Reviews  
(1 February 1954)

"'Novel of ideas,' muses Philip Quarles in his notebook, in that exemplary novel of ideas, Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*. 'The character of each personage must be implied, as far as possible, in the ideas of which he is the mouthpiece . . . The chief defect . . . is that you must write about people who have ideas to express--which excludes all but about .01 per cent of the human race.' Elizabeth Hardwick would never accept that lofty statistic, but the characteristic strength and weakness of the novel of ideas do appear in her stimulating...second novel. She is probably best known for her frequently brilliant criticism in *Partisan Review*.

In telling about the trial of a male student, one Rudy Peck, for the murder of a female one in an Iowa university town, Miss Hardwick eschews the melodrama of the courtroom and concentrates on the effects on those who observe the trial. As microcosms of this affected and equally affecting audience, she has chosen two people: Joseph Parks, an upper middle-class student from suburban New York, and now in his late twenties, and Anita Mitchell, one young and intelligent wife of an uninspiring professor.

In spite of overpowering evidence of the prisoner's guilt--in an emotional moment immediately after the crime, he has made what amounts to a confession, only to retract it later--both Parks and Anita are partisans of the accused. Anita's grounds are 'psychology,' which, as she understands it, proclaims Rudy to have been temporarily irresponsible for his actions (although sane) and therefore blameless. Parks, on the other hand, is for Rudy on the familiar social ground, explored by Dreiser, that he was a poor boy in love with a rich girl. So passionate do these two observers become that they take to spending their days attending the trial, and their evenings discussing it. A good part of Miss Hardwick's books is made up of conversations about the trial between Parks and Anita, who meet in the visitors' gallery, and between each of them and their respective spouses. As the trial progresses, Rudy's case becomes a deeply necessary, almost religious cause to each of them.

The denouement brings Miss Hardwick's irony into full play. Rudy is flatly acquitted--whether on Anita's grounds or Parks', nobody can say. Both of them are shocked, stunned, deflated--they had expected, even hoped, that their cause was an unpopular, a losing one. That a jury of their 'peers' could think in terms as advanced as they do is an unacceptable idea to them. Thus their defense of Rudy becomes a neat symbol of all the little snobbisms that advanced people try to substitute for belief these days, only to have the snobbisms constantly crumbling into popular fads. 'It is really unnerving,' says one character, 'to live in a world where *everyone*, just *anybody*, takes as complicated a view as the most clever people!... There's no

one to uphold common sense.' What a trenchant point. And with what skill do the ideas in this novel march forward, join ranks, and then explode like fireworks."

John Brooks  
"The Trial Watchers"  
New York Times  
(13 February 1955)

"I originally picked this book up for two reasons: it is a Virago Modern Classics edition which I've heard many good things about from several people, and Susan Sontag listed Elizabeth Hardwick as one of her favorite contemporary writers a number of times in interviews....

It tells the story of two people--Joseph Parks, a well-to-do student from New York who has come to Iowa to study, and Anita Mitchell, the wife of a boring chemistry professor at the same university. These two characters who would otherwise have nothing to do with one another are brought together by the local sensationalized murder trial of Rudy Peck, another local student, who is accused of killing his girlfriend. Even though it seems very clear that Rudy has actually killed her, both Joseph and Anita are rabid partisans in defending him--Joseph for reasons he describes as "Dreiserian" (Peck as a latter-day *American Tragedy*, a kind of male Jenny Gerhardt) and Anita for more vaguely Freudian reasons...

In the end, Rudy is found not guilty, which brings out the most repulsive snobbery in Anita. She wonders how these simple Iowa farmer-hicks could possibly have so much empathy and understanding to see that Rudy might be anything other than guilty. Apparently the whole time she was thinking...they were a band of knuckle-dragging, trident-wielding witch-burners. One person echoes Anita's bewilderment: 'It is really unnerving to live in a world where everyone, just anybody, takes as complicated a view as the most clever people!... There's no one to uphold common sense.' I finished the novel wondering if people could really be so ignorant. But of course, the unpleasant fact of the matter is they can be--and perhaps that's Hardwick's point.... There is a remarkably bright and insightful afterward to the novel in this edition written in 1987, some thirty years after it was originally published. It intelligently and clearly explains what she was trying to do with the book."

nicholasofautrecourt.com  
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*The Simple Truth* is a literary crime novel that ends with the reader in the position of a juror who must decide the case--"of what, crime, tragedy, error, love?" To understand the novel a reader must discern the attitudes and prejudices of the main characters--all observers of the trial. The observers are analogous to the jurors without the discipline of actually being on the jury. Although we learn nothing about the jurors, they are implicitly common people and typical examples of human nature like the observers. The conflicting views of the observers in the novel are typical on juries, who sometimes take weeks to decide a case. Only when people with different views can agree on a "simple truth"--guilty or not--can they can go home. The observers are also analogous to the accused because the reader must judge them too, just as the observers judge the jury after their verdict.

A critique of legalistic thinking, the plot is a murder trial that has a simple outcome, whereas the main focus of the novel otherwise is upon the complicated perspectives of common people who follow the trial. As one observer says, in the trial "The character of the persons involved gets completely lost, buried under this pile of fact and description." Hardwick probes and exposes the characters of the persons involved. The simple legal outcome makes the title of the novel ironic because "the truth" about what happened is revealed to be not at all simple and remains uncertain at the end. Hardwick's novel differs from later "true crime" novels in its psychological subtlety, insight and lack of the sensationalism that made bestsellers out of *In Cold Blood* (1966) by Truman Capote and *The Executioner's Song* (1979) by Norman Mailer. Ironically, *The Simple Truth* is the most suspenseful of the three because readers of the two blockbusters knew the accused were guilty and had been executed.

This story has a social context selected in accord with the tradition of Realism to be as universal and as representative of human nature as possible. The accused "might have been anyone." Most of the characters are "common people" in "middle-America" in "the middle of the country" during the 1950s: "the citizens

of Iowa shared the qualities of the weather: plain, open, their life was not luxurious but not poor either, indeed prosperous; everything was indifferent to the eye and nothing eccentric. The absence of striking excess was a frequent topic for speculation among those inclined in that way." By the prosperous 1950s most Iowans have changed from being simple farming people to being more complicated middle-class Americans: "Where then are the Grant Wood faces, noble tillers of the Iowa soil? 'Retired! Moved to California!'" Iowa is now more diverse, especially here in Iowa City, with teachers at the state University "from Europe, from Vienna, Berlin, Paris, and Madrid."

Yet this place is still provincial: "In Iowa a few Southerners even longed for a black face around Woolworth's on a Saturday night." A key to understanding the novel is the distinction made in describing its setting as "a region which separated appearance and morality with an evangelical rigor." This implies that the outcome of the murder trial may be an example of appearance--"the simple truth"--prevailing over true morality. As some observers say, assuming guilt, "It all comes down to a simple fact. You can't go around killing people." That is reason enough to have a trial, but not enough to convict.

The accused, Rudy Peck, is a college student living in "a nonofficial residence for men, from which girls were excluded at all times by the University regulations." He breaks the rule when he brings his girlfriend Betty Jane Henderson to his room, then he breaks her neck--at least that is the charge. Since there were no witnesses, everything depends on the credibility of Rudy. Facts that prejudice many observers in his favor: He is a local Iowa boy working his way through school as a waiter in restaurants, personable, clean-cut, well-dressed, yet poor--"one more 'decent, honest college boy,' as the newspapers liked to have it." He was in love with Betty Jane. He "never lost his temper." After she dies he turns himself in at the police station and he is so remorseful he wants to kill himself. Rudy accepts responsibility and volunteers to sign a confession: "I must have done it. Who else could have?" Rudy seems to be liked by everyone. The observer Anita Mitchell says, "You see, what's so clear is that he's *perfectly* sane and normal, a good boy, more so than the average one thinks"; "I admire Rudy for going to the hospital, for putting himself in the hands of the psychiatrists before the trial.... It seems that he didn't really know what happened that night and that he wanted to find out.... He was depressed, jealous maybe, and might well have told the psychologist he felt like killing himself and killing her. But he didn't mean it."

The novel opens from the perspective of Joseph Parks, a university student from a suburb of New York City who wants to be a writer. The creative writing program at the University of Iowa attracted many such students, Joe is the name most often used in works of Realism to connote the common, New York is the center of literary publishing, and Joe's ambition associates him with the intellectual community to which the author herself belongs, which is dominated by males. Joe has a "masculine pomposity," a great "need for projection" and a "desire to articulate his opinions everywhere and to everyone." He attends the trial "to add to his store of impressions" and "to investigate the possibilities for dialogue." He thinks to himself, "It puts you in your place when you consider that all this might happen to anyone, any of us here in fact. It certainly makes you stop and think." This proves to be ironic because of what Joe proceeds to think. He is not as egalitarian as he thinks he is, as when he is condescending toward the people of Iowa: "The state seemed to him insufficiently subtle for the role it must assume. Of course, Parks hardly knew Iowa, having only recently arrived as a student at the State University."

Parks is like a driver passing through who merely parks here temporarily. Joe thinks of himself as a common man and is "skeptical of privilege," yet he and his wife Doris are privileged themselves: Doris's father was a lawyer and Parks's was a doctor. They both graduated from elite Dartmouth. Both had lived in Larchmont, New York, attended private schools and were living in Iowa on the GI Bill, supplemented by checks from their parents. Although "he knew not a single fact about any member of the jury," Parks immediately starts projecting judgments about them, as well as about the accused, his parents and others, based merely on visual impressions. Even before the trial starts he judges the accused from a photograph: "This first glimpse of Rudy's countenance aroused anger in Parks, who saw a slinking, shifty-eyed criminal." Joe Parks "had a prodigious capacity for sympathy" but he "was all emotion" and was generally considered an "intellectual lightweight" by his friends in college.

Joe's "soul inclined to partisanship." "It contented him to be recognized as a 'liberal'." He is content to *look* like a "liberal" in the classic sense defined by John Stuart Mill without always acting like one. He is a

"liberal" in the partisan sense of identifying with dogmas of the leftist political party. After he reads a statement in the press by the victim's father, "a prosperous banker," Joe identifies with the working-class father of the accused in a partisan stock response: "He was taken immediately by a convulsive attack of *party* spirit. Mr. Henderson's statement injured Parks's dearest feelings and by some sort of whirling logic he became Rudy Peck's defender." Since both he and his wife "were liberal," they are Politically Correct: To Joe, "Because the desperate Mr. Henderson had seemed to hint that Rudy was not the social equal of his daughter...'Rudy was blameless!' he cried." "He was suffused with a sensitive, extraordinary *decadence*: his luxurious, genuine, heartfelt addiction to the pathetic" [*italics added*].

As a decadent liberal, Joe has replaced belief in God with belief in "Equality," which actually means favoring some groups (for their votes) over others as determined by his party. For example, children are not among the favored groups: "Children!" Parks groaned. 'I hate children!'... 'A child would hate both of us, I promise you.'" By the 1960s, liberals would be promoting abortion on demand. By the 1990s they were selling baby parts. Joe feels he knows "truths beyond knowing" and his prejudice has "all the force of dogma, a moral principle embodied in suffering flesh." Already "his bias for the defense was complete...but he hoped, or rather *demand*ed in his heart, that the jury would see it *his* way, at the same time that he admitted the near impossibility of their doing so. The unlikelyness of these twelve Iowans seeing things in the 'right' way was a large part of Parks's own sight." At the peak of the Cold War against Communism, Hardwick is exposing the self-righteousness of liberals, who had supported Communism since the 1930s. Liberals are Marxists. In later years liberals like Joe and Doris would ignite the rebellions of the 1960s, wage the culture wars of the 1980s, destroy literary study, kill the classics, establish a police state in higher education, and impose the tyranny of political correctness throughout American culture.

Though Joe's wife Doris is married she is a "liberated" woman in having no children, no job, no graduate school and an aversion to housework. She is "puzzling over the way to be both a housewife and a "free person'." She has such a high standard of living compared to the rest of the world that she complains about having too much: "I'm bored with all these new products." She criticizes the "amiable Iowa wives with children" who live *below* her in the building and in her esteem, for their diligence in cleaning and baking and ironing, demeaning them as conformists. Lazy herself, she criticizes her husband Joe for not helping her with the housework. She criticizes one of her neighbors for her charity in waxing the steps of their common stairway, contradicting the image liberals have of themselves as altruistic and generous. Doris has a "chaotic" apartment but a clean face. She "did not want to appear in any sense different from the other women" yet she spends money on nice clothes with "extravagance" to look nicer than the other women. She thinks of herself as having an "equalitarian heart" yet feels superior.

Doris judges the dead girl based on her appearance. "I don't get quite as much out of this small picture as you seem to,' Parks said fondly, but trying to suggest Doris's sociological effort leaned too heavily on clothes." Yet he himself has already pre-judged the accused, also based on a photograph. Doris then pre-judges the entire case based on social status, implicitly siding with the female victim and identifying with her superiority: "I believe her sorority was a cut above his fraternity." Joe the liberal objects to the exclusiveness of sororities and fraternities and would abolish them. Doris says "The system's not my doing, pet, so don't be cross with me about it." But the system *is* her doing in the sense that the members of sororities select members based on the very prejudices that Doris has displayed. Joe says, "More exclusive you mean? Take more money or more family or more clothes?" Doris replies, "Yes, that's it and other things too. Don't make it too simple." But Joe wants it to be simple: "I don't care to go into all this so deeply..." The shallow liberals have already decided the case, believing they know "truths beyond knowing." Doris says, "I firmly believe she was tired of him, but not exactly *through* with him. Girls feel that way. It's awfully hard to be through with someone who's crazy about you." Like a Feminist, Doris claims to speak for all females and blames the male. She agrees essentially with the charge against Rudy Peck: "The State believed Rudy had killed the girl, wanted to kill her too, because of jealousy and resentment that their 'relationship' was at an end by Betty Jane's wish."

Anita Mitchell the faculty wife is introduced wearing a red beret, which connotes a transcendence of convention, even a radical difference of opinion. She has a "reasonably happy" marriage to a conventional chemistry professor, though they are so different from each other that she is in platonic love with one of her lodgers, Harold March. During the conservative 1950s, red was associated with the Communist Party and a

beret with cosmopolitanism such as American artists sought during the 1920s in Paris. This and her belief that Rudy is innocent contrasts Anita with the conformist liberal Doris Parks. It turns out that Anita is radical only in maintaining independence of mind and taking complexity into account. "She was a woman of fine intelligence and small ambition." Unlike Doris, she was poor before her marriage, has worked at a job, is not "pretty," enjoys cooking, sews her own clothes and is sweet to others in her building, even taking in lodgers who "liked her enormously." Also unlike Doris, she is as "thrifty as a squirrel" and studies psychology. It was "the soul Anita cared for most." Though she has made just one trip to Europe for six weeks, she has "dug into the surface of her being, queer little furrows of worldliness."

Anita's independence is expressed in "evasion of faculty life" and shyness "of a remarkable quality, pure and valuable as a gem." Doris is shallow, superficial and self-absorbed, whereas Anita has empathy and depth perception. She feels "tragic and pessimistic" about the trial. Anita understands the implication of the author that the jury represents "that coarse grain of humanity in the average." She is childless like Doris, but unlike her she responds to Rudy almost as if he were her own son. Like the author, especially in *Sleepless Nights*, Anita has a great interest in the "sad helplessness of people." She believes the death of Betty Jane "was either an accident or it was rooted in the two people somehow." This is the most probable interpretation by any observer. "I do think he's innocent!" Anita said, trembling. 'I do...and I don't, perhaps, in the most technical way, but in the real sense, the human one, the boy is harmless, a tragic, tragic person!'" Harold March agrees that the case is not simple: "I'm not saying that he's *fully* guilty, whatever that may mean, but *innocence* is another matter'." After testimony by friends of the dead girl that annoys Anita because they believe in simple truths, "their want of knowledge about life...made her want to cry.... It seemed clear that this boy and girl both liked and disliked each other. What was the need of pretending an absolute? It was unjust for Rudy to have to carry such an impossible demand on his back."

An entire chapter is given to the observer Thomas Drew, an old school friend who visits Rudy in jail. Tom is loyal to his friend as much as he would be to a brother. Throughout this chapter Rudy seems completely honest and innocent. Anita Mitchell the housewife, though she has never even met him, is just as supportive as his close friend, seeing Rudy as "a sacrificial animal, the fresh young lamb to be offered up for society's well-being.... There was a sickening, witch-burning pedantry that meant to punish the boy for what in the profoundest truth was not his responsibility.... No, Rudy was not a murderer. Perhaps he had not in any way harmed Betty Jane, but *if he had, if he had...* Somehow she threatened, struck at his very being, and he had killed her in self-defense, in every way the defense of the *self* and not only of his body." By comparing Rudy to a "sacrificial lamb" Anita goes so far as to imply that he is as innocent as the lambs sacrificed in ancient Jewish rituals and as innocent as Jesus Christ the "lamb" of God. This clearly is going much too far. Jesus did not defend himself nor bring girls into his room at night. However, the evocation of Jesus establishes a standard of judgment.

As liberals, Joe and Doris reject a religious standard and replace it with their own: "I want to have him show remorse," says Doris, though he clearly has. She is disregarding the testimony that Rudy is very remorseful and is refusing to forgive him, making it ironic that she calls her father's lack of charity "contrary to the Christian spirit." When she uses the word *repentance* Joe feels threatened by his wife: "'You aren't becoming religious, are you?...It's so fashionable nowadays you might take it into your head to jump on the band wagon.' He shook his finger playfully at her. 'God, no!' Doris answered fervently. 'Still your idea may not be in his best interests after all. I imagine the people on the jury are religious, even if I am not!'" Joe speaks of belief in God as a current fashion, a mere "band wagon" rather than a belief that preceded his liberalism by over two thousand years. It is his liberalism that is merely fashionable. This scene is a possible explanation for the jury's ultimate verdict. A jury that includes religious people may follow the standard set by Jesus and forgive Rudy even if he bears some responsibility. Doris has a false view when she expects Christians to condemn rather than forgive. At the same time, if the jury is liberal enough, it might let Rudy off out of moral laxity. As Doris points out, Joe himself is "not at all morally opposed to girls going to men's rooming houses!"

Doubt that Rudy strangled Betty Jane is established when the pathologist Dr. Rako testifies that "a simple sneeze had been known in medical history to cause similar fractures." The jury must decide whether this doubt is "reasonable," under the circumstances. On the other hand, some testimony weighs against the accused: On the night in question "Rudy appeared disturbed about something, unnaturally alarmed when

Betty Jane was late, imagining she was out with another boy." One witness testifies that Betty Jane said "she wanted to be friendly with him, but was no longer in love with him." Another girl testifies that "Rudy was distasteful" to Betty Jane. These girls "apparently bore him no ill will.... Their simplicity was a more dreadful and searing thing than all the professionalism of the court, all the machinery of the law." Again, Anita is annoyed: "Was Rudy to be condemned if it could be proved the girl did not love him, thereby giving him a motive for violence...? If she didn't like him, why was she always seeing him?"

The most damning testimony is perhaps that of the psychologist Dr. Ashton, who testifies that Rudy had consulted him before the death of Betty Jane: "He expressed anxiety over impulses to take his own life and also to assault murderously the girl he was going with. He was alarmed. He said he was in love, astonished and troubled by these impulses...he denied being jealous of her with respect to any other man.... He telephoned me at three-thirty in the morning... He said he had the desire to throw himself under a truck." Asked by Rudy's attorney whether these impulses "showed an aversion to them," the psychologist answers, "Yes, I believe it might be interpreted in that way. I think one could accurately assume that if it were otherwise he would not have consulted me."

Anita the housewife, having become acquainted with Joe Parks the student while both were attending the trial, sees Joe as a liberal with what would later be called "white guilt," as in the book of that title by the black scholar Shelby Steele. In the 20th century the identity politics of liberals seeking votes expanded beyond "guilt" over slavery to any example of perceived "social injustice." Anita sees the liberal "guilt" of Parks as "usurping a throne not truly his in quite the same way some wretched madman imagined himself to be Napoleon." It is a claim to moral superiority. "She didn't for a moment believe in it, was suspicious of its authenticity and hostile to its reckless simplicity." White guilt eventually led to fake "hate crimes" by those who are "feeling sorry [they] haven't been unjustly persecuted."

One witness, Mrs. Maisie Finch, had worked with Rudy in the same restaurant and seems friendly to him. She is forgetful but testifies that Rudy had said of Betty Jane that "he wanted to kill her then but couldn't bring himself to." This is only part of what, in all its complexity, he had told his psychologist. Reduced to a simple truth, the testimony of Mrs. Finch makes Rudy seem guilty of murder, even though he said to her that he *could not* commit the crime. "Rudy shook his head violently for everyone to see, furiously denying the words, the sentences as they *appeared*" [italics added]. On her way out of the courthouse Anita overhears one observer express belief in Rudy's guilt based on the simple truth uttered by Mrs. Finch, while a different observer says, "people have been known to make up things in murder cases." Anita cries out "He's done for!"--thinking him doomed by a dubious simple truth.

In a bar Joe Parks encounters Thomas Drew, the close friend of Rudy who visited him in jail. "There is quite a bit of sympathy for the boy," Joe says, "'and some worry that he won't get a square deal.... It's a sort of Dreiser thing,' he added in his evangelistic tone... 'I mean he is a poor boy, wanting the bright things of life...a pretty girl, one who had had things easier...difficulty with her parents.'" This implicitly compares Rudy to Clyde in *An American Tragedy* (1925) by Dreiser, a liberal who became a Communist Christian!--a preposterous contradiction. Both cases are similarly ambiguous. In the more conservative past, Clyde was executed. Joe reduces the case of Rudy to "the class or social difference between the two people," implying that he is guilty, but should be found not guilty. In recent decades liberals have often taken this position and demanded the release of blacks imprisoned for murder. During this dialogue Joe "remembered the outskirts of Chicago," where many blacks live and where *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright is set. Like Dreiser and Wright, Joe is a Naturalist in denying free will and blaming society as leftists do. Tom Drew is an uneducated guy who works in a gas station but he disagrees with the educated Joe's simple truth. He knows Rudy well and denies that he was disadvantaged: "his life, not bad...not bad at all..."

Joe visits Anita Mitchell the housewife to talk about the case with a fellow observer. Anita is honest enough to admit to her faults, whereas Joe is unaware of his. However, she too relies on simple truths, derived not from politics like Joe but from "modern psychology." She fears that Rudy will be found guilty because the male jurors "would be afraid of overidentifying with Rudy. It's not just a matter of sympathizing with the girl as the fear perhaps of their own deep-seated lack of sympathy, their own destructive instincts toward women.... They must be hostile to him because they reject a certain side of themselves--the side that doesn't feel the tenderness and protectiveness for women they are supposed to

feel." She even drags in the archetype of the "terrible mother" from Jung and the Oedipus complex from Freud. Anita does not trust the women jurors either: "You know how women are, proud of their horror, their frayed nerves, their cringing and gasping over everything...tears... But they don't like in the end to face up to the complexity of things, the difficult relations between men and women as groups." Now Anita is group-thinking like a sociologist. Joe thinks to himself that "the jury could not be asked to undergo the self-purification and self-analysis Anita considered a prelude to justice." Again, however, Anita is honest enough to admit that "I don't know.... I couldn't possibly judge.... I'm not God."

Parks distrusts journalists covering the trial: "These men and women often misrepresented facts in their headlines": "TOLD DOCTOR WANTED TO KILL GIRL!" According to the reporters' poll, they were "Split between manslaughter and second degree!" Other observers are overheard proclaiming their theories, their contending simple "truths": "She wasn't playing fair with him!" a stout lady intoned, honoring some phantasmagorical dream of a betraying siren, a wicked coquette, a calamitous charmer. "That type gets in trouble!" Another thinks "he deserves a pretty heavy sentence!... He's bright, educated, had all the chance in the world." Opinion seems evenly divided. "Two of the doctors believed that Betty Jane had, at least by implication, killed herself! They pieced it all together in good faith to mean that she had fallen and crushed her own throat and then dug her own fingernails deep into the flesh of her neck, making a desperate attempt to breathe....the way a choking person acts."

On the contrary, "Two other medical men pronounced this interpretation fantastic and unreasonable... 'Extremely unlikely...' one doctor insisted. 'I have never seen people grab their throats when choking except in the movies,' another added." Rudy's version of the event does seem farfetched, but it is perhaps enough to create reasonable doubt. On the stand Rudy seems just as honest and straightforward as he was with his friend Tom Drew in the privacy of their meeting in his cell, giving credence to his denial that he said what Mrs. Finch testified that he had. Anita is dissatisfied: "his testimony did not appeal to me somehow. I thought it was too mushy." Joe Parks says "Many people I heard in the lobby thought it convincing."

After the verdict of not guilty is rendered, Anita is "very much surprised!" She is a "yielding" person--the opposite of Doris--"with a provisional air about her, as though her whole character were subject to revision on a moment's notice." Her lodger Harold March says "The verdict means that they could not find him guilty. It doesn't mean that he had 'no more to do with it than I had' as you just said.... Your charity toward the boy made me feel a bit crass inside--I admit it now--because I couldn't always accept him quite so completely!.. They certainly wanted him to get off and I think never even considered anything more serious than manslaughter."

Anita is perplexed by the social trend to liberalism: "We can be upright and morally acceptable if we want to make the effort.... But this verdict gives me the idea that perhaps this isn't believed any longer.... It seems that even farmers, women, and typical citizens have all sorts of modern ideas without exactly knowing they have them.... I find it impossible to believe they went into all the psychological complexity of the thing." Anita is disturbed by the reduction of the case to a *simple* truth, even though she wanted this outcome all along, whereas Harold March accepts the simplicity: "It is really unnerving to live in a world where everyone, just anybody, takes as complicated a view as the most clever people. When everyone sees things in all their paralyzing ambiguity... There's no one to uphold common sense." Ironically, Anita feels a "sudden aversion for Rudy Peck....the boy had been transformed into mediocrity, his history merely squalid and darkened with imponderables." Her verdict, taking complexity into account, seems to be Hardwick's as well: "She had thought him innocently guilty."

The liberal Doris Parks likewise changes her perspective when she hears the verdict, but seemingly in favor of Rudy: "I felt like crying too.... There's *only one way* to think it [italics added]. He didn't kill the girl, didn't do anything wrong, didn't plan or desire to harm her. *That* is innocence." Imposing her own sentimentality, Doris decides that "the jurors simply couldn't stand the thought of being responsible for the boy's punishment." Declaring this "the only way to think," Doris expresses the self-righteous totalitarianism of liberals, who censored free speech and free thought when they took over higher education throughout the country during the 1980s--establishing the cultural police state of Political Correctness. Joe then refers to his wife as "pigeon," a term in popular culture meaning gullible. Intolerant of disagreement, Doris presses him to agree with her. Joe "wanted him to get off... But there are many unanswered problems." Doris

disagrees "aggressively, her eyes flashing with the combat. 'No, you're not telling the truth! You thought he was guilty as hell, but you wanted everyone to feel sorry for him because he was a poor boy whose father worked in a factory.... I know you, Joseph Parks, like a book.'" The book would be *An American Tragedy*, since Joe had said Rudy's case is "a sort of Dreiser thing."

Joe replies that "it was not a simple matter to judge." Doris has said that "there's only one way to think" --Rudy is innocent--but now she accuses the jury of being simpleminded: "They took him at face value." She laughs and "bit into an apple," feeling that her superiority has been validated. After calling him a liar, she demeans her husband with sarcasm: "Don't you think these people must be extremely intelligent, very much aware, to arrive all by themselves at the very same idea you had... What went on in their minds? I imagine there was quite a bit of wind blowing about in that space just as there was in yours,' Doris said cruelly." She finishes eating the apple and "tossed the core into the wastebasket." In literary tradition, eating an apple evokes the pride of Eve. The last word of Hardwick's first novel *The Ghostly Lover* is "Eden." The combative Doris pulls a cigarette holder from a pocket of her red jacket, lights up and starts "puffing grandly.... On her face there came an expression of sly pride...."

The most famous image of someone using a cigarette holder is that of the aristocratic President Franklin Roosevelt, who was accused by adversaries of being so liberal he was virtually a Red, as evinced by the Communists hired during his administrations and by his policies. Few Americans affected a cigarette holder, perhaps because of its aristocratic connotation. One of the few was the writer Lillian Hellman, an aristocratic Communist loyal to the Soviet Union who used a cigarette holder to associate herself with the leftwing politics of the popular President. Her aquiline nose, haughty manner and posturing with the cigarette holder made her look pretentious. She was a Stalinist who had a feud with Mary McCarthy and eventually sued her for libel, but she died before a trial. The Cold War against Communism was at its peak in 1955 when this novel was published. Both Hardwick and McCarthy wrote for the *Partisan Review*, a journal that crusaded against Stalinism as espoused by Hellman. McCarthy was a close friend of Hardwick, who said that Hellman was "an appalling liar. And a very bad person." Her *red* jacket, intolerance, superior attitude, combativeness, and cigarette holder identify Doris with Lillian Hellman.

The last two pages of *The Simple Truth* (1955) focus on the feminist movement, which did not gain force until about 1965. First a page is devoted to the issue of sexual assault, as Doris thinks about her boss in the sociology library: "That afternoon Mr. Emersen had put his hand on her breast." She thinks for awhile about whether she likes him before she decides that she is "very much annoyed." Then "simply bored and irritated." This is a faint echo of the case against Rudy and the possible ambivalence or change of mind by the victim Betty Jane. "Doris was very happy to learn that these were her true feelings." This suggests that she has had fake or pretended feelings. "She felt sorry for Rudy more than ever now." More than when he was in danger of execution? "Poor, poor Rudy! Anarchy left everyone ill, chewing upon the sour and bitter leaves in the bottom of the cup." Though found not guilty, Rudy's reputation is ruined. He is like the males on campuses around the country today who have been reflexively judged guilty of rape by Feminists. Doris is pleased because the male did not really "get away with it" while at the same time she can feel a little bit sorry for him and continue to see herself as a sympathetic liberal. Feminism contradicts classic liberalism in being intolerant, polarized against men, and totalitarian.

On the telephone Joe is saying "the very simplicity of the verdict, it almost looks fishy," illustrating that Doris is correct, Rudy will always be suspect. Joe speculates that the verdict might have been "merely a childish reaction on the jury's part.... Sentimentality... A way of showing they disapproved of the girl for *leading him on*.... Maybe they thought she shouldn't have allowed herself to be taken to the rooming house, no decent girl and all that rot.... I heard, you remember, people speculating in those terms.... It is not just to use the double standard in that way.... Women..." Always blaming others, Joe the liberal accuses the jurors, eight men and four women, of sentimentality, as if they *all* had exactly the same prejudice against women, including the four women. This is ironic because Joe himself and his wife Doris have been shown to reverse their feelings on the basis of sentiments and prejudices, whereas the jurors have been disciplined by the need to agree on a verdict based on facts.

Doris resembles Betty Jane: she is blonde and attractive with perfect white teeth. When she first sees a snapshot of Betty Jane, Doris praises her "smartness and prettiness. She's almost like a model." Doris

identifies with the victim. She jumps to a conclusion that seems to be a projection of her own feelings about Joe, given her criticisms of him, calling him fat and a liar: "I firmly believe she was tired of him, but not exactly *through* with him. Girls feel that way. It's awfully hard to be through with someone who's crazy about you." As a Feminist, Doris is "proud" that she and her husband "were in every way equals.... She did not feel sorry for her husband and was therefore able to criticize him in a comfortable way." The similarity between Doris and Betty Jane suggests a parallel between Doris's "cruel" criticisms of Joe and what Betty Jane might have said to Rudy that would cause him to snap. Hardwick cleverly increases the ambiguity of the case by having Doris refer to Rudy as a "poor *devil*" near the end [italics added].

Doris is insecure: "She hadn't anything to say for herself. Nothing exceptional, nor even admirable." She sounds like the frustrated housewife Betty Friedan, whose book *The Feminine Mystique* would launch the "second wave" of feminism in 1963: "I'm not doing anything worthwhile. I'm ashamed of myself. I think the life I lead is disgusting." She decides that she must go out and get a job. Joe "had no doubt Doris was cherishing some operatic protest in her bosom; in her silences he heard screams of accusation; her docility was as sharp as a knife." By the end of *The Simple Truth*, Doris is thinking about Betty Jane as a rival--feminism will make rivals of women as never before. Doris resents Betty Jane's "fair beauty," "sparkling" personality, and happiness. Doris has expressed jealousy at Joe's relationship with Anita the married housewife, whereas Betty Jane was single, attractive, and a fellow student. Doris seems to envy the girl while demeaning her as cheap, even loose: "within the reach of all like a rhinestone." Now she dismisses the victim with a flippant "*adieu!*" as if saying "good riddance."

The novel concludes with Doris reloading her cigarette holder, which is black and white like simple truths. Whereas Betty Jane was "warm," Doris the combative Feminist is cool: "A single cool tear clung pleasantly to her eyelashes." Ironically, Doris "detested" a "dishonesty or an affectation," but a single tear is all this sentimental liberal can muster for the victim, a politically correct reflex, hence "cool." It "clung," maintaining the pretense of sympathy--"pleasantly" because she is actually pleased the girl is dead, yet pleased to see herself as a liberal nevertheless--as Joe was earlier said to be about himself--pleased that the accused male did not really get away with it, pleased to be able to quit the job she just got, pleased to blame her male employer, and pleased to have converted Joe to Feminism.

The simple basic structure of *The Simple Truth* is comparable to that of many other works of American literature that are not as simple as they might seem, including *The Scarlet Letter* by Hawthorne, *Moby-Dick* by Melville, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Stevens, *As I Lay Dying* by Faulkner and *Death in the Afternoon* by Hemingway: a diversity of viewpoints surrounding the same symbolic image or event--adulteress, whale, blackbird, dying mother, fighting bull. This novel has characteristics of Modernism: (1) multiple points of view, (2) religious theme, and (3) circularity. However, *The Simple Truth* is also Postmodernist: (1) relativistic about truth; (2) lacks transcendent tone; and (3) is deconstructive toward systems, human nature, and simple truths. Hardwick's intellectual skepticism recalls Melville in *Pierre*. Politically, *The Simple Truth* satirizes liberals, feminists in particular. Today a jury of Feminists would convict Rudy of rape as well as murder, judging by the way they have treated accused males on campuses throughout the country for years, where they do not even allow due process.

Michael Hollister (2020)