

A Feminist Examination of the Fragmentation of Female Inner Spaces  
in Pamela Zoline’s “The Heat Death of the Universe”

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## TRANSCRIPT

### TITLE

[zippy retro music]

A Feminist Examination of the Fragmentation of Female Inner Spaces  
in Pamela Zoline’s *The Heat Death of the Universe*

By Rebecca Ross Bailey

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- Published in 1967, “Heat Death of the Universe” emerged at a pivotal moment in both feminist politics and speculative fiction, on the heels of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, the rise of 2nd wave feminism, and monumental shifts in reproductive rights.
- At the same time, the world of science fiction—despite women’s contributions from its earliest days—remained very much a man’s world. Writers such as Ursula K Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and Joanna Russ were met with sexual prejudice as they attempted to enter the genre in the 1960s and 70s.
- In her biting and necessary essay “The Image of Women in Science Fiction,” Russ concludes: “There are plenty of *images* of women in science fiction. There are hardly any women.” While female bodies and ideals proliferated, women rarely appeared as autonomous subjects with interiority, agency, or complexity.
- Philip K. Dick later agreed: “science fiction may touch the sky but it fails to touch the ground.”
- In *Gateways to Forever*, Mike Ashley identifies a movement away from “extroverted” outer space narratives of technological conquest toward what became known as “**inner space**,” or fiction concerned with “the planet (socially, politically, ecologically) and the state of humanity itself.”
- Within this turn the idea of *Entropy*, in particular, became a popular metaphor for the decline of civilization, something Ashley attests is “best exemplified in Pamela Zoline’s story” *The Heat Death of the Universe*.

### THESIS

- Zoline vividly illustrates a day in the life of a housewife, Sarah Boyle, constructing a domestic world in which rising entropy, manifested through an abundance of synthetic and commodified

objects within a closed domestic system, exposes how the illusory fantasies of mid-century capitalism and patriarchal order enforce psychological fragmentation and ecological entrapment for the women bound by them.

## INTRO

- The story opens with the definition of *Ontology*: [typewriter sound] “That branch of metaphysics which concerns itself with the problems of the nature of existence or being.” This instantly invites us to leave the physical world, and enter the realm of science fiction through the internal thoughts of Sarah Boyle.
- “Sarah Boyle is a vivacious and intelligent young wife and mother, educated at a fine Eastern college, proud of her growing family which keeps her busy and happy around the house.”
- Sarah Boyle has blue eyes.
- She is not very good at sports.
- She loves music, especially Bach.
- She is “passionately fond of children's dictionaries” and “reference books,” enjoys statistics and golden ratios, takes great pains to index everything in her home, “transfixed and comforted at their simulacra of a complete listing and ordering.”
- She knows that there are 819 separate moveable objects in the living room, counting books, 32 lines on her face (“and other intimations of mortality”), and 31 time-pieces and other measuring devices.
- She has an unknown number of unnamed children.
- “and only occasionally [is she] given to obsessions concerning Time/Entropy/Chaos and Death.”
- On the outside, Sarah Boyle is the perfect housewife. On the inside, there’s a rich and repressed life bubbling up.

## PATRIARCHAL GENDER CONSTRUCTS AND THE HOUSEWIFE PROBLEM

- In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan examines the befuddling two decades following WWII where American women were neatly tucked away into the domestic home, conditioned to accept marriage and childrearing as their sole roles, all while promoted as beacons of fulfillment, dismantling much of the progress that had been made by First-wave feminists at the turn of the century.
- She describes the existential crisis of repressed and unfeminine desires that grew in silence all the while, a syndrome exclusive to housewives, as “The Problem that has no name.”
- Zoline’s descriptions of Sarah reveal increasing tension, evidenced by her aspirations—particularly her love of knowledge and advanced acumen in science—juxtaposed with the deliberate blur of “unnamed children.” This contrast foregrounds Sarah’s longing to be an autonomous subject against her role as a mother, echoing the oppressive binaries that delineate man from woman, culture from nature, and reason from emotion.
- Feminists frameworks on gender reveal how drastically these inner desires conflict with the social contract of femininity and Sarah’s material reality, exposing the profound rift between her inner and outer worlds, a commonality Friedan observed was particularly troubling among educated

women, such as Sarah, who have had exposure to ideas and life beyond the home but then relegated to domesticity with no time of their own and no way out, caught in an endless cycle of caring and cleaning for others.

- Val Plumwood illuminates the ecological devastation these divides impose on women, arguing that: “women have offered a fertile field for such control and manipulation by a rationality which structures women’s experience of reproduction in two Cartesian halves: the suffering body deprived of agency, and the mastering, external rational agent.” (*Plumwood 38*)
- Underscoring how the duties pertaining to reproduction have been used to position women as a non-rational, non-subject in the background of men’s achievements.
- Sarah’s favorite toy, the Baba doll, exposes this illusion of emergent identity. Though it appears to offer infinite depth, each doll merely reproduces the same form: “she splits in the centre to reveal a doll smaller but in all other respects identical.” Zoline turns this repetition into a cruel punchline, revealing how women’s identities within the domestic sphere are permitted variation without complexity, endlessly bound to a single, pervasive image of womanhood.
- In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler similarly argues that these problematic dualisms sustain exclusionary social contracts that position gender as a regulatory framework rather than a natural category, defining women in opposition to men as passive, dependent, and subordinate.
- Zoline’s exploration of the INNER SPACE of the housewife exposes the illusion of the gender constructs that underlie “the Problem that has no name,” showing how idealized femininity operates as an ideological force that disciplines women into compliance rather than fulfillment, something Zoline renders with brutal clarity through a single day in the life of Sarah Boyle.

## DOMESTIC CAPITALISM AND THE TRAP OF DEPENDENCE:

### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF SARAH BOYLE

- Sarah prepares breakfast for her children, doling out sugar frosted flakes that falsely promise *natural* energy, endless pubescence, and a secret “Surprise Gift” that compels all of “the children [to] request more cereal than they wish to eat.”
- She prepares for and hosts a birthday party.
- She cleans, and cleans, and cleans again.
- All the while, she quietly contemplates metaphysics, dadaism, and the heat death of the universe.
- As Zoline maps out Sarah’s routines, she paints a visceral scene of product placements and overconsumption, collapsing domestic life into one long advertisement. The allure of capitalism surfaces at every turn, reaching its most overwhelming expression in the grocery store.

### SHOPPING FOR THE BIRTHDAY CAKE

- In *Ecofeminism*, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva contend that “as more and more commodities are heaped on the supermarkets’ shelves the deeper the despair and an inarticulate desire for some absent basic element essential for a sense of fulfilment.”
- Mies and Shiva emphasize that in a capitalist society that suppresses desire, shopping becomes a placeholder for genuine agency.
- Sarah Boyle’s trip to the grocery store erupts into a grotesquely sensual shopping spree.

- Immersed in rich scents, sounds, colors, and “cheap” unnatural light, she senses what she calls some of that “old hysteria” and relinquishes herself to its chaos.
- She proceeds to fill THREE CARTS with every cleaning product the store sells, swelling with artificial ecstasy as she carefully selects shampoos, cleansers, antiperspirants, and sprays in every shape, size, and brand, participating in a ritual of excess that simultaneously animates and annihilates her agency.
- She cries on the way home.
- Sarah’s desperate accumulation stages the paradox Mies and Shiva identify as identify as deep “despair in the midst of plenty.”
- She likens herself to Tantalus who, in Greek mythology, is condemned to forever grasp for the fruit of the gods yet never reach it. This comparison exposes both the insatiable logic of capitalist desire and Sarah’s own impossible pursuit of plenitude.
- Emma Goldman invokes similar imagery in *The Tragedy of Woman’s Emancipation*, arguing that illusory liberation produces “an emptiness in woman’s soul that will not let her drink from the fountain of life.” For Goldman, genuine autonomy and the realization of desire are essential to closing the gap between women and their fulfillment.
- This scene reveals how capitalist abundance fractures rather than satiates, binding Sarah in a cycle of consumption that will never truly satisfy her.

## SUBJECT-OBJECT-OBJECT

- [typewriter sound] “Name given to the agency by means of which a viewed object influences the observer’s eyes.”
- By framing light as the agency through which objects act upon the observer, Zoline inverts the subject-object relationship, revealing how Sarah is materially inscribed by her commercial surroundings.
- In *The Undomesticated Nature of Feminism*, Stacy Alaimo examines the promotion of “consumer-oriented domesticity” as a mechanisms designed to anchor women firmly within the home in order to sustain capitalism’s demand for reliable consumers.
- Drawing on Foucault and Beauvoir, Butler similarly argues that female identity is both produced and constrained by the same structures of power that claim to represent it.
- Even Sarah’s blue eyes emerge as an uncanny site of entanglement, bearing witness to her veiled enclosure: “A fine, modern, acid, synthetic blue; the shiny cerulean of the skies on postcards sent from lush subtropics...the promising fat, unnatural blue of the heavy tranquilizer capsule; the cool mean blue of that fake kitchen sponge” (135)
- The imagery Zoline uses to describe the color of her eyes invokes the male gaze, colonial fantasies, and capitalist artifice, illustrating Sarah’s enforced participation in internalized patriarchy.
- Yet the horror of this complicity is heightened as the same color “hisses, bubbles, [and] burns in Sarah’s eyes,” signaling her vitriol, an embodied resistance to the systemic exploitation that entraps her.

- In *Wages Against Housework*, Silvia Federici further exposes this dynamic by insisting that housework is neither fulfilling nor natural, but a coerced form of prostitution that operates through shame and social regulation “through which capital has been able to maintain its power.”
- Those who reject it are cast as unfeminine, the abject Other, outcasts in their society and left to bear the shame for their social impropriety: “If you don’t like it, it is your problem, your failure, your guilt, your abnormality.”
- Together, these frameworks illuminate how the ideals of domestic femininity are sustained through social inscription, capital dependency, and ideological containment.

## UNRAVELING: ENTROPY, FRAGMENTATION

### FRAGMENTATION

- These cycles of consumption and dependency sustain the illusion of domestic agency, while Zoline’s application of entropy exposes the pressure created by rising material disorder and impossible standards of domestic control. As entropy encroaches upon the household, Sarah’s psyche fractures alongside it.
- Entropy:[typewriter sound] “*The entropy of a system is a measure of its degree of disorder. The total entropy of any isolated system can never decrease in any change; it must either increase (irreversible process) or remain constant (reversible process).*”
- “There must be more than this, Sarah Boyle thinks, from time to time.”
- Zoline sprinkles in evidence of Sarah’s slow unraveling throughout the story:
  - Sarah mislabels items, calling the hand cream CAT
  - Her body bears traces rebellion, her “natural spaniel-brown” hair having been abruptly dyed red on what she describes as a “hysterical day.”
  - Above the stove, Sarah scrawls “*HELP*” FIVE times, a repetition that intensifies her silent despair while underscoring the normalization of female suffering.
  - She leaves notes around the house, in an attempt to reassure herself that: “Many young wives feel trapped” even as she laments that the “Housework is never completed, the chaos always lurks ready to encroach on any area left unweeded, a jungle filled with dirty pans and the roaring giant stuffed toy animals suddenly turned savage.”
- The central irony of Zoline’s work is that the true horror does not emerge from the speculative, but from the domestic and material. The disconnect between Sarah’s inner and outer spaces becomes painfully palpable, and psychological distress manifests in bodily estrangement.
  - “Sometimes, at extremes,” she reflects, “her Body seems to her an animal on a leash, taken for walks in the park by her Mind.”
  - Betty Friedan similarly observes that “the image of American woman seems to have suffered a schizophrenic split. And the split in the image goes much further than the savage obliteration of career from women’s dreams.”
  - Unable to integrate these incompatible demands, Sarah is driven toward fragmentation under the weight of idealized domestic order. One that Friedan and Zoline expose as domestic propaganda: a carefully curated fantasy of harmony and control that depends on women’s silent sacrifice.

## ENTROPY

- As Sarah struggles to maintain control, entropic chaos intrudes on her routines: a vacuum suddenly “blows instead of sucks, spewing marbles, dolls’ eyes, crackers” (134) Zoline deploys entropy to puncture the fantasy of the perfectly controlled domestic sphere promised by consumer culture, revealing that this ideal of order is held together by carefully curated social constructs.
- Zoline intensifies this dissolution through form. The narrative fractures into fifty-four numbered sections, slipping between idyllic scenes, scientific insight, and domestic chaos. These fragments enact Sarah’s anxious attempts to impose order on a world that will not hold. Read alongside the story’s scientific lexicon, the number carries a suggestive resonance: element 54, xenon, long believed to be inert until Neil Bartlett’s 1962 discovery revealed its capacity to react, a reversal that mirrors Sarah’s trajectory: from passive domestic participant to explosive rupture under entropic pressure.

## THE RUPTURE /RAPTURE

- Heat death of the Universe [typewriter sound]: “The second law of thermodynamics can be interpreted to mean that the ENTROPY of a closed system tends towards a maximum and that... a time must finally come when the Universe ‘unwinds’ itself... This state is referred to as the ‘heat death of the Universe.’”
- In the final moment of the story, Sarah Boyle smashes every object in her kitchen. Glasses, dishes, cups, pots, and eggs shatter across the floor, and a jar of strawberry jam is hurled against the stove, causing it to “bleed.” This destruction signals the collapse of the domestic order itself, the space that promised stability while quietly consuming her.
- Sarah’s rupture marks the unwinding of the ideological structure that sought to contain her. The objects she breaks in the kitchen are emblematic instruments of a system that sustains *the problem that has no name*, by systematically reducing women to bodily labor, while demanding endless care and normalizing their suffering as duty. Like a system driven toward heat death, the domestic sphere exhausts its available energy in the pursuit of perfect order.
- Significantly, Sarah’s final trigger is not domestic failure, but profound ecological loss. The death of the family’s pet turtle, a creature that Sarah has carefully monitored throughout the story, aligns her plight with that of nature under patriarchal conditions of control and confinement. The *emys orbicularis*, or European Pond Turtle, she recalls, can live up to a century in the wild. The shortened life of their domesticated turtle mirrors Sarah’s own arrested existence, exposing the violence of environments that restrict living systems in the name of order.
- As Betty Friedan observes, many housewives were compelled to live vicariously through their husbands and children. For Sarah Boyle, she lives vicariously through science and philosophy, modes of thinking that transcend the home and the binaries that trap her there. She dreams of a world where the refuse all around her might “take new heart and come to life again, reaching out green shoots towards the sun” where “the garden would enter in at the door.” In this fantasy, she aligns her emancipation with nature and she rewilds her surroundings as an act of resilience.
- In this ultimate rupture, Sarah Boyle annihilates the domestic order that confines her, revealing the collapse of patriarchal fantasies of control embedded in commodified life. By exposing the

ideological veil sustaining *the problem that has no name*, Zoline insists on the unwinding of domestic capitalism as a precondition for reclaiming embodied vitality and agency.

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