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girl — who desires what appears impossible: a past and a future that differs from the ones adulthood offers. If the comic finally does not choose to answer political and historical questions about the future of adolescence in light of the false promises of late Capitalism, it leaves me that much more convinced of the importance of these questions and the necessity for building an “elsewhere” to *Ghost World*’s nowhere and everywhere, a bus stop at which Enid might alight and live in a better present.

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Close Reading Clowes’s Dialogue:

“You’ve grown into a very beautiful young woman.”

by KEN PARILLE

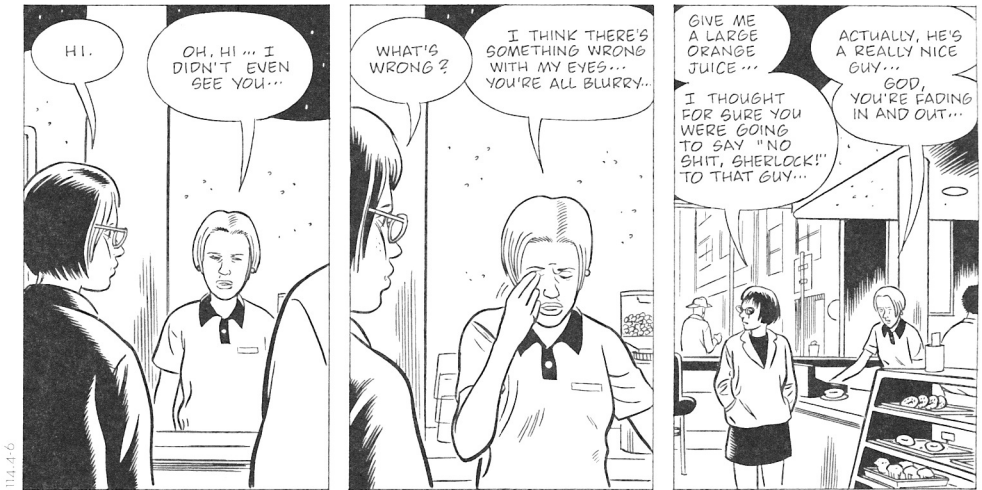


Reviewers of *Ghost World* have likened the characters’ dialogue to overheard conversations, imagining Clowes in a restaurant, pen and notebook in hand, furiously transcribing the banter of nearby teenagers. While the dialogue reads like off-the-cuff speech, it’s also careful and complex: one seemingly simple line can suggest numerous meanings and connect to several important themes. The comic’s final line, in which Enid says of Rebecca, “You’ve grown into a very beautiful young woman,” is a perfect example of such textured writing.

We can interpret Enid’s line in concert with her facial expression and the panel’s environment. While the end of a friendship would likely elicit visible emotion in most teenagers, Enid’s expression is hard to read; it’s strangely blank, unlike her standard sneers, smiles, and smirks. Does her apparent lack of emotion undermine the compliment she pays to Rebecca, whom she may never see again? It certainly

complicates any simple characterization of her feelings. Watching Rebecca and Josh together as she speaks this line, Enid is alone, set against billowy clouds in the panel's background that almost threaten to envelop her. The clouds convey a sense of drama (they're a romanticized way to stage the moment), yet Enid's face is deadpan, not dramatic. Perhaps the natural environment reveals or even adds emotional content that her face does not express. Clowes counterbalances the drama of the clouds with a hint of the semi-urban setting that has had such a powerful presence in Enid's life.

Enid's line has a slightly staged quality, as if she had heard it in an old movie — one other teens would never watch — and thinks it's the kind of thing you say, the sentiment you *want* to feel, as you mark the finality of a closing scene. Enid acknowledges to herself (and to an imaginary audience) the tenderness of the moment she is creating. Though the line may seem "stagey," even a little forced, Enid is certainly sincere, expressing genuine appreciation for her best friend. Her words are ostensibly addressed to Rebecca — Enid says "You've," not "She's" — yet Rebecca can't possibly hear them, making this intentional failure to communicate directly the final act, or so it seems, of a troubled friendship, which has had many awkward scenes of miscommunication and misunderstanding. The cartoonist marks the change in their relationship by having Rebecca's look change: she's wearing glasses (previously Enid's trademark), a shift in appearance he had set up a few pages earlier, in a short but symbolically loaded scene in which Rebecca discusses trouble she's having with her eyes. Enid is literally fading from Rebecca's — and shortly from the readers' and her author's — view.



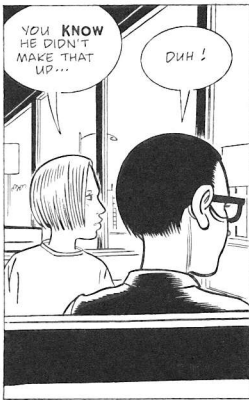
Enid's appearance has changed as well. In the final scene, she wears the most refined and conventionally feminine outfit of the many seen in the book. Gone are the more unusual fashions, especially the punk "looks," which had been a source of pride and anxiety for her. When Enid says, "You've grown into a very beautiful

young woman," perhaps she is not addressing Rebecca, but rather herself; she wants to believe that she has naturally "grown into," rather than consciously adopted, a new persona. This outfit is her most "adult," the kind of clothes a young woman who wants to appear grown up might wear. Enid's choice of outfit is significant; it shows her looking ahead to the future, to her place within the adult world.

Throughout the novel, she has often looked backward, revealing her intense investment in childhood, as seen, for example, in her attachment to a toy given to her in the fifth grade, and to a children's song she plays over and over. Floating over Enid, as if situated in one of her speech balloons, these lyrics may "speak" for her, articulating an unacknowledged desire: like the singer of "A Smile and a Ribbon," she wants to be something "special" and "rare," sentiments that foreshadow her description of Rebecca as a "beautiful young woman." With eyes closed, Enid presses the 45 against her chest and holds one arm, an act of self-mothering in which she tries to ease the pain caused by a relationship that's falling apart and a future that's uncertain. Perhaps Enid's final line is verbal self-mothering; she says to herself what she would want her mother to tell her at this pivotal moment.



100.5



116.3



118.2



118.3

When Enid says that Rebecca has "grown into a very beautiful young woman," she rhetorically positions herself as an adult, as someone capable of recognizing and appreciating her friend's growth. Yet, is this how Enid really feels about Becky? This carefully crafted sentiment may mask something less pleasant, something that reflects the increasingly tense nature of their friendship. Three pages earlier, Enid watches a child being cared for and quietly says aloud, "You little fucker" (115.4). The child has what she wants: a caring mother. Does Rebecca, sitting with Josh in

Angel's, have what Enid wants? In the closing scene, Rebecca and Josh occupy the restaurant booth where Enid and Rebecca had spent so much time (118.2). Enid, it seems, has been replaced. And Rebecca, as her chewed straw reveals, is distracted; perhaps she's unhappy with the turn of events in their friendship (118.3). Though sitting with Josh, she's not looking at him — is she's thinking about Enid? Since the girls had connected so strongly in the past, it's easy to imagine that they are concerned about each other at this crucial moment.

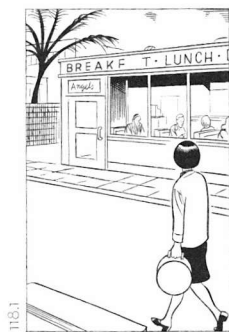


Enid decides to leave because many things in her life have gone wrong: she failed to get into college, she regrets the changes in her friendships with Rebecca and Josh, and her father is dating an ex-wife she hates. Enid's departure also may be inspired by Bob Skeetes and "Norman" (the name she gives him), oddballs who haunt the margins of *Ghost World*, yet exert an inexorable pull on Enid. Like Clowes, she finds outsiders compelling; Skeetes and "Norman" play crucial roles in her life, even if their "screen time" is limited. Skeetes offers an astrological reading that connects Enid to a woman from the "twenties or thirties . . . an artist of some kind, or a scholar . . . [and] a sexual libertine" (116.5). He "sees" a road "with many forks, all of which lead, it seems, to gloom" and then loses the image of

the woman: "She's running away." Maybe this reading encourages Enid to leave; shortly after it, she too runs away. Norman, Skeetes's fellow eccentric, is barely visible in the story's penultimate panel; is he riding the bus around town, going nowhere? (Is this what happens to Enid after she 'escapes our scrutiny?') In an earlier scene, the girls realized that Norman, whom they often saw waiting at the bus stop, had gotten on the bus and left — another moment that foreshadows Enid's escape. Enid may gravitate toward characters like Norman and Skeetes because they have no need to "grow into" anything. They seem to be beyond the personal and social pressures that weigh upon both girls.

In coming-of-age stories, the protagonist typically grows up in some way, gaining a new understanding of the world and her place in it. But the kind of growth that matters most in *Ghost World* might be growing apart. That Rebecca has "grown into a very beautiful young woman" means that Rebecca is growing up and away from Enid. Throughout the comic, Rebecca engages more easily with the world than Enid does; Rebecca is interested, for example, in politics, one subject among many that Enid disdains. By the end of *Ghost World*, has Enid become more like Rebecca? Has she learned anything new about the world or herself? Has Enid grown up?

The changes in Enid and Rebecca are visually set up — and possibly even undetermined — by literal signs of decay that we can follow throughout the story. The sign for Angel's (a restaurant closely associated with Enid) repeatedly loses letters.



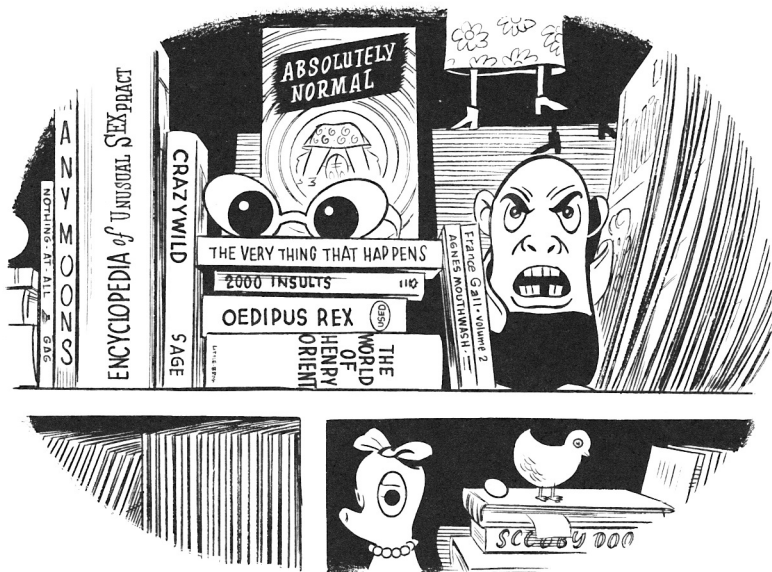
In the final scene, another sign carries symbolic significance: the sign for school children. Enid walks away from the school, from what the sign represents (childhood and safety), and from nearly everyone in the panel. To her left, we see the backs of two Clowes characters — Squirrel Girl and Candy-Pants (from *Eightball* #16) — a younger, more playful version of the Enid-Rebecca duo. An older female pair appears in *Ghost World* as “Windy” and “Georgie Girl”: “Look! It’s us in twenty years,” Rebecca shouts (86.1). Just as the playful past of Squirrel Girl and Candy-Pants is irretrievably lost to Enid and Rebecca, the happy future of Windy and Georgie Girl — who walk down the street arm in arm — is likely to be denied to our heroines.

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By virtue of location, opening and closing lines of a film, novel, or comic have a special prominence. It’s useful, then, to read the closing line of *Ghost World* in concert with its opening line, in which Enid asks Rebecca about a magazine in her bedroom: “Why do you have this?” This question expresses none of the final line’s tenderness. And while phrased as a question, it’s really an accusation. For Enid, the things you possess, the objects you identify with, are crucial markers of who you are. She believes that owning *Sassy*, a hipster culture-fashion magazine, is a mark against Rebecca, a sign she has failed to be critical of the culture around her. She has accepted an authorized and inauthentic view of the world.



An obsession with mass culture, consumption, and authenticity informs Enid's struggle throughout *Ghost World*. One of the comic's first images shows her as a consumer and collector:



Her collection holds numerous objects, many of which fall into two distinct age-based categories: children's books and objects (Wanda Ga'g's *Nothing at All* and the Goofie Gus toy), and adult books (*Encyclopedia of Unusual Sex Practices* and *Oedipus Rex*). These objects hint at the struggle Enid will face: that of leaving the past and childhood and growing into adulthood. Enid's last line conveys none of the anger present in the first line. She doesn't criticize Rebecca, but rather expresses appreciation of her. Yet the difference between the opening line's accusation and the closing line's affirmation expresses a profound irony. Only when Enid has grown apart from Rebecca, only when they are not talking to each other (and are not even in the same place) can she say that her friend has "grown into a very beautiful young woman."