an informative, researched essay discussing any point that Paglia makes that you think merits further study.

b. Write a dialogue between Paglia and Jacoby, the author of the next selection. If desired, expand the dialogue to a discussion among Paglia, Jacoby, and Susan Sontag (Chapter 4), Gloria Steinem (Chapter 4), and Deborah Tannen (Chapter 6).

c. What would feminists say to Paglia? What has been said? Research the feminist response to Paglia’s ideas by reading book reviews, interviews, and feminist critiques of Sexual Personae and other books by Paglia.

Rape

Common Decency

Susan Jacoby

Susan Jacoby (b. 1947) is a freelance journalist who writes for the New York Times and McCall’s as well as for other publications. Her essays on women’s issues and the family have been published in several collections, including The Possible She (1979) and Money, Manners, and Morals (1993). Jacoby also has written on Russian culture in such books as The Friendship Barrier: Ten Russian Encounters (1972), Moscow Conversations (1972), Inside Soviet Schools (1974), and A Black Russian American Family 1865–1992 (1994), which she coauthored. Her most recent book is Half-Jew: A Daughter’s Search for her Family’s Buried Past (2000). “Common Decency” was written in response to Camille Paglia’s book Sexual Personae, which had just been published. This essay appeared in the New York Times in April 1991.

She was deeply in love with a man who was treating her badly. To assuage her wounded ego (and to prove to herself that she could get along nicely without him), she invited another man, an old boyfriend, to a dinner à deux in her apartment. They were on their way to the bedroom when, having realized that she wanted only the man who wasn’t there, she changed her mind. Her ex-boyfriend was understandably angry. He left her apartment with a not-so-politely phrased request that she leave him out of any future plans.

And that is the end of the story—except for the fact that he was eventually kind enough to accept her apology for what was surely a classic case of “mixed signals.”

I often recall this incident, in which I was the embarrassed female participant, as the controversy over “date rape”—intensified by the assault that William Kennedy Smith has been accused of—heats up across
the nation. What seems clear to me is that those who place acquaintance rape in a different category from “stranger rape”—those who excuse friendly social rapists on grounds that they are too dumb to understand when “no” means no—are being even more insulting to men than to women.

These apologists for date rape—and some of them are women—are really saying that the average man cannot be trusted to exercise any impulse control. Men are nasty and men are brutes—and a woman must be constantly on her guard to avoid giving a man any excuse to give way to his baser instincts.

If this view were accurate, few women would manage to get through life without being raped, and few men would fail to commit rape. For the reality is that all of us, men as well as women, send and receive innumerable mixed signals in the course of our sexual lives—and that is as true in marital beds at age fifty as in the back seats of cars at age fifteen.

Most men somehow manage to decode these signals without using superior physical strength to force themselves on their partners. And most women manage to handle conflicting male signals without, say, picking up carving knives to demonstrate their displeasure at sexual rejection. This is called civilization.

Civilized is exactly what my old boyfriend was being when he didn’t use my muddleheaded emotional distress as an excuse to rape me. But I don’t owe him excessive gratitude for his decent behavior—any more than he would have owed me special thanks for not stabbing him through the heart if our situations had been reversed. Most date rapes do not happen because a man honestly mistakes a woman’s “no” for a “yes” or a “maybe.” They occur because a minority of men—an ugly minority, to be sure—can’t stand to take “no” for an answer.

This minority behavior—and a culture that excuses it on grounds that boys will be boys—is the target of the movement against date rape that has surfaced on many campuses during the past year.

It’s not surprising that date rape is an issue of particular importance to college-age women. The campus concentration of large numbers of young people, in an unsupervised environment that encourages drinking and partying, tends to promote sexual aggression and discourage inhibition. Drunken young men who rape a woman at a party can always claim they didn’t know what they were doing—and a great many people will blame the victim for having been there in the first place.

That is the line adopted by antifeminists like Camille Paglia, author of the controversial Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. Paglia, whose views strongly resemble those expounded twenty years ago by Norman Mailer in The Prisoner of Sex, argues that feminists have deluded women by telling them they can go anywhere and do anything without fear of rape. Feminism, in this view, is both naïve and anti-

sexual because it ignores the power of women to incite uncontrollable male passions.

Just to make sure there is no doubt about a woman’s place, Paglia also links the male sexual aggression that leads to rape with the creative energy of art. “There is no female Mozart,” she has declared, “because there is no female Jack the Ripper.” According to this “logic,” one might expect to discover the next generation of composers in fraternity houses and dorms that have been singled out as sites of brutal gang rapes.

This type of unsubtle analysis makes no distinction between sex as an expression of the will to power and sex as a source of pleasure. When domination is seen as an inevitable component of sex, the act of rape is defined not by a man’s actions but by a woman’s signals.

It is true, of course, that some women (especially the young) initially resist sex not out of real conviction but as part of the elaborate persuasion and seduction rituals accompanying what was once called courtship. And it is true that many men (again, especially the young) take pride in the ability to coax a woman a step further than she intended to go.

But these mating rituals do not justify or even explain date rape. Even the most callow youth is capable of understanding the difference between resistance and genuine fear; between a halfhearted “no, we shouldn’t” and tears or screams; between a woman who is physically free to leave a room and one who is being physically restrained.

The immorality and absurdity of using mixed signals as an excuse for rape is cast in high relief when the assault involves one woman and a group of men. In cases of gang rape in a social setting (usually during or after a party), the defendants and their lawyers frequently claim that group sex took place but no force was involved. These upright young men, so the defense invariably contends, were confused because the girl had voluntarily gone to a party with them. Why, she may have even displayed sexual interest in one of them. How could they have been expected to understand that she didn’t wish to have sex with the whole group?

The very existence of the term “date rape” attests to a slow change in women’s consciousness that began with the feminist movement of the late 1960s. Implicit in this consciousness is the conviction that a woman has the right to say no at any point in the process leading to sexual intercourse—and that a man who fails to respect her wishes should incur serious legal and social consequences.

The other, equally important half of the equation is respect for men. If mixed signals are the real cause of sexual assault, it behooves every woman to regard every man as a potential rapist.

In such a benighted universe, it would be impossible for a woman (and, let us not forget, for a man) to engage in the tentative emotional and physical exploration that eventually produces a mature erotic life. She
would have to make up her mind right from the start in order to prevent a rampaging male from misreading her intentions.

Fortunately for everyone, neither the character of men nor the general quality of relations between the sexes is that crude. By censuring the minority of men who use ordinary socializing as an excuse for rape, feminists insist on sex as a source of pure pleasure rather than as a means of social control. Real men want an eager sexual partner—not a woman who is quaking with fear or even one who is ambivalent. Real men don’t rape.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

**Content**

a. How does Jacoby define *rape* and *date rape*? How are they similar? How do they differ?

b. Why does Jacoby dislike Paglia’s ideas so much? Are there other possible reasons that Jacoby does not mention?

c. Why does Jacoby call Paglia an “antifeminist” (paragraph 10)? What does she mean by “antifeminist”? If Paglia is an antifeminist, does that make Jacoby a feminist?

d. Jacoby claims that Paglia “makes no distinction between sex as an expression of the will to power and sex as a source of pleasure” (paragraph 12). What does she mean by this? Is she right in her assessment of Paglia?

e. Has Jacoby addressed all of Paglia’s points? If so, how well has she addressed them? If not, what points has she overlooked?

**Strategy and Style**

f. What was the effect on you of reading the personal story as an introduction to the essay? Why might Jacoby have started with a story, especially one that shows her in an unflattering light?

g. Where does Jacoby’s argument seem flawed? How would you describe the flaws? Could she have avoided these flaws?

h. Jacoby’s tone is less passionate than Paglia’s. Does this tone help or hinder Jacoby’s purpose?

i. What persuasive techniques does Jacoby use to get you to believe her? How do the persuasive techniques blend with her reasoned argument?

j. Jacoby ends with two sentences that begin with the well-known cliché “real men.” Is this phrase effective in emphasizing her points? If so, how?