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Stage(d) mothers: mother-daughter tropes in Twentieth-Century American drama

Kristin Hanson

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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STAGE(D) MOTHERS:
MOTHER-DAUGHTER TROPES IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN DRAMA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Theatre

by
Kristin Hanson
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ABSTRACT

The relationship between mother and daughter is an important one for many women. In learning how to best become a successful member of society, daughters look to their mothers to demonstrate the behaviors and beliefs appropriate to a female. Such explicit and implicit instruction makes the mother-daughter relationship a central one in the socialization of women.

Because it is such a powerful site, the mother-daughter relationship has received attention in the world of representation. Of particular import to this study is the representation of the mother-daughter relationship in Twentieth-Century American drama. Recent scholarship has shown that such representations can, however, have greater import than simply as representations of an interpersonal relationship. Instead, representations of mother-daughter relationships often represent and reinforce patriarchal norms of feminine behavior and social constraints.

This study puts this recent scholarship into dialogue with many plays from the twentieth century, in order to explore this relationship between dramatic and theatrical representations of the mother-daughter relationship and patriarchal conventions. It is arranged thematically, so that plays with similar features of the mother-daughter relationship—“tropes”—are put into dialogue with one another.

As a work of feminist scholarship, this work seeks to both identify patriarchal messages contained in plays throughout twentieth-century America, as well as the potential for resistance to those messages. It is not intended as a master-narrative of the discourse on the mother-daughter relationship, but rather as an opening of that discourse to the world of theatrical and dramatic representation.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Stage mothers” rarely identify themselves. The term refers to women to who push their children into the limelight against their will, seeking to glorify themselves through their children’s achievements. Stage mothers are selfish, grasping, vain, and abusive. The term is a criticism, identifying bad mothers who are emotionally distant and use their children for selfish ends. These women often cross multiple gender boundaries. They reject traditional feminine behavior by seeking recognition and fame. As such, they counter patriarchal beliefs that women should be retiring and humble, seeking recognition only through their domestic sphere. Stage mothers often come off as frightening and pushy. They embody a kind of power and willingness to achieve control that women are rarely asked to display in public.

While the children of stage mothers are often pitied as abused children who are forced into uncomfortable situations they do not want, it is rare for people to examine the stage mothers themselves, asking why these women feel the need to thrust their children into the spotlight. Stage mothers are rarely pitied themselves, though it is not hard to see why a woman expected to be retiring and humble might chafe against those restrictions.

In this project, I am deliberately conjuring up such women. I invoke the stage mother in my title because she represents the most glaringly patriarchal trope of the mother-daughter relationship: the maternal monster. Stage mothers symbolize the worst that can happen when women are given a measure of power over children. The lesson stage mothers teach is that when women are given power, even if that power is over their own children, women will use that power for selfish ends. I wish to invert the image of the stage mother so that instead of

symbolizing the danger of women's power, it will become a symbol of patriarchal fear of such power.

This project is an examination of mother-daughter tropes in twentieth century American drama. I have contained the scope of this study to a specific time and cultural landscape because representations of mothers change as they are affected by cultural developments in their time period. My goal in this project is to change the way audiences receive mothers on stage. I hope that this endeavor will encourage audiences to question where their beliefs about the nature of mothers, daughters, and their roles have originated, and how those beliefs have served the social order. This task will, I believe, help audiences to understand better how the confluences of power, gender, mothers, and daughters have given birth to a series of myths about mothers.

Because I am addressing the world of theatrical representation, the mothers I will be discussing are, admittedly, intended for representation on the stage, making them "stage mothers." These representations are also "staged" in that they are created as reflections of a patriarchal ideology that seeks to reduce the mother-daughter relationship to a site of inevitable conflict between women. In such representations, mothers are "staged" as women who compete with their daughters for masculine attention, seek their daughters' destructions for selfish reasons, or smother their daughters with excessive affection. Such characters do a great injustice to real life mothers and daughters by continuing shallow stereotypes of women who either abuse the power they have over their children or become victims of it. Representations of mother-daughter relationships as complex, dynamic, loving sites of intimacy between women have only recently started to make their way to the stage via the pens of feminist playwrights.

Adrienne Rich once famously wrote, "We know more about the air we breathe, the seas

we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood” (Rich 11). She then went on to describe the cornerstone of feminist approaches to the mother-daughter relationship:

“Motherhood [...] has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism” (Rich 33). The exploration of motherhood as an institution, rather than as a series of interpersonal relationships, is an important distinction for feminists. By distinguishing between motherhood as *experience* and *institution*, feminists switch focus from the interpersonal struggles between women to the social forces and powers at work shaping those relationships. Rich distinguishes between “two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential--and all women--shall remain under male control” (Rich 13).

A cornerstone of my own project is that mother and daughter are independent subjects, with needs that must be addressed both within the relationship and in a larger social context. All too often, mothers are defined by that role, and their needs as women and individuals are subsumed by the needs they must fulfill for their children as mothers. I believe as Rich does, that it is important to recognize mothers as subjects with identities outside of their relationships with their children. “Motherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child, or children, is one part of female process; it is not an identity for all time” (Rich, 36-37).

Approaching motherhood in this way is often contrary to the way Americans are taught to conceive of mothers. From television programs of happy suburban homemakers to magazine ads of women happily engaged in vacuuming, popular culture disseminates the belief that women

happily embrace domestic life and motherhood. However, this belief comes with the partner belief that it is somehow unusual for mothers to be discontent or unhappy. “We are raised to believe that mother love is different from other kinds of love. It is not open to error, doubt, or to the ambivalence of ordinary affections. This is an illusion” (Friday 2). Bringing mother love into dialogue with other forms of love and interpersonal emotion allows it to be brought into a discourse examining mothers and daughters from many different perspectives.

One of the most prolific of modern perspectives is that of postmodernism. Bringing the discourse on mothers and daughters into the postmodern moment is difficult. One of the cornerstone beliefs of postmodernity is the collapse of the binary real/not-real. However, feminist discourses on mothers and daughters presuppose that there is a real lived experience which impacts women’s lives, and is in constant dialogue with popular culture. Others, however, believe that postmodernity reflects a complexity that has only recently been connected to the mother-daughter relationship. “One of the characteristics of the postmodern moment is the proliferation of subject positions that historical [real-life] individuals occupy. Whereas in earlier periods, looking now from the semiotic perspective, the sound-image “woman” was congruent with “mother,” things are now more complex” (Kaplan 182).

Postmodernity and feminism do not agree, however, on how gender should be interrogated. While postmodernity believes gender to be a wholly, and one of many, constructed identities, feminists embrace gender, not necessarily as an a priori identity, but as something that has important and lasting impact on people’s lived experiences and their access to power in patriarchal society. While feminists generally agree that accepted gender norms have been harmful to both men and women, they do not ignore the role of biology in determining gender

and social realities. Friday sees the influence of such biology on the mother-daughter relationship: “It is their sex, their sameness that distinguishes what a mother has with her daughter. No two people have such an opportunity for support and identification, and yet no human relationship is so mutually limiting” (Friday 17).

To others, the mother-daughter relationship is important for reasons far more social than biological. Marianne Hirsch sees the importance of the mother-daughter relationship largely in its capacity to socialize women. In her opinion, the mother-daughter relationship accounts for “the process of ‘becoming-woman,’ of engenderment, which is intimately tied to the process of transmission and the relationship to previous and subsequent generations of women” (Hirsch 11). That the mother-daughter relationship is a site for the creation of social women makes it a particularly important discourse for feminism. It is an interpersonal relationship conducted primarily between women, making the power fluctuations entirely in the hands of women, as they act upon one another and struggle over supremacy.

The roles mother and daughter play in their relationship are far from unchanging. Instead, they constantly change as the relationship’s needs and parameters change. Ideologies of how mothers and daughters should interact have some influence, as do the personal needs and desires of each member of the relationship. “From a materialist point of view women’s roles are neither grounded in biology nor indeterminate in nature, fluctuating through time for no apparent reason. Ideas about women’s capabilities and proper place in the scheme of things do not change at random; they are ultimately shaped by a society’s sexual division of labor, which in turn is casually related to its productive and reproductive imperatives” (Margolis 3).

The various approaches and perspectives to mothers and daughters, both feminist and

otherwise, often begin with a tacit understanding of the definition of “mother” and “daughter.” Such definitions are far from constant from one author to another, however. Definitions of mother and daughter are fluid, both in the roles implied in those words, as well as the relationship between them.

I wish to engage the changing definitions of “mother” and “daughter.” Part of this goal includes disengaging these terms from what they have meant in the past, including their close connections to specific gender identities. The question of who can rightly be called a mother is not easily answered. Among feminist theorists whose primary interest is the analysis of motherhood, there are contrasting schools of thought on the proper definition of “mother,” and to whom the definition can apply.

Definitions of mothers and mothering are complicated and multi-layered for the feminists, who wish to celebrate motherhood and this often unappreciated and unpaid work by women, but who also desire to question the role of motherhood in women’s lives and oppression. Marianne Hirsch describes this feminist discourse:

To be sure, the term “mother” and the discourse about/of mothering are objects of sometimes radical division within feminist analysis. The question that needs to be confronted is the question of definition: “What is a mother? What is maternal?” It is a question that situates itself at the breaking point between various feminist positions: between presence and absence, speech and silence, essentialism and constructivism, materialism and psychoanalysis. Is motherhood “experience” or “institution?” Is it biological or cultural? Is the mother present or absent, single or divided, in collusion with patriarchy or at odds with it, conformist or subversive? Can an analysis of motherhood point toward liberation or does it inevitably ensconce feminists in constraining cultural stereotypes? (163)

Rich complicates these complex definitions by taking the definition away from biological relations totally: “We are, none of us, “either” mothers or daughters; to our amazement,

confusion, and greater complexity, we are both. Women, mothers or not, who feel committed to other women, are increasingly giving each other a quality of caring filled with the diffuse kinds of identification that exist between actual mothers and daughters” (253). Rich goes on to further complicate such definitions by asking which women properly belong to the definition of mother:

Is a woman who bore a baby she could not keep a “childless” woman? Am I, whose children are grown-up, who come and go as I will, unchilded as compared to younger women still pushing prams, hurrying home to feedings, waking at night to a child’s cry? What makes us mothers? The care of small children? The physical changes of pregnancy and birth? The years of nurture? What of the woman who, never having been pregnant, begins lactating when she adopts an infant? What of the woman who stuffs her newborn into a bus-station locker and goes numbly back to her “child-free” life? What of the woman who, as the eldest girl in a large family, has practically raised her younger sisters and brothers, and then has entered a convent? (251)

One school of thought, supported by materialist feminists, holds that both men and women can properly be termed “mothers.” To these theorists, “mother” denotes a particular role or function in society, which, though traditionally associated with biological women, is not a role only women are capable of fulfilling. Such theorists subscribe primarily to the definition of “mother” as “one who mothers.” Thus, to them, mothering is primarily an activity one does, rather than a person one is. They subscribe to the definition of the verb “to mother” as defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*: “To give birth to; create and produce,” and “To watch over, nourish, and protect maternally.” There is nothing in either the biology of man or the gender of male that prohibits them from nourishing and protecting the young, nor creating and producing them. Thus, by this definition, anyone who is capable of taking care of the young is capable of being a mother.

Another school of thought approaches the question of who can mother from a different

angle. These theorists, who are primarily cultural feminists, believe that only women can be mothers. To them, mothering is a special province of women. To allow men to declare themselves as capable of being mothers would take away something special and valuable from women. These theorists subscribe to the definition of “mother” as a particular person who possesses specific traits, which are instilled in part through the very fact that such people are born as women. Their definition is more closely allied to that of the noun tense of “mother” in the *American Heritage Dictionary*: “A woman who conceives, gives birth to, or raises and nurtures a child.” To these theorists, a mother is first a woman, thus, men cannot be mothers.

In both the definitions above, there is a certain gray area regarding what mothers are. In the definition of mother as verb, there is the clause that mothers “protect maternally,” and in the definition of mother as a noun, there exists the state of “Maternal love and tenderness.” The same dictionary defines “maternal” as “Relating to or characteristic of a mother or motherhood.” Thus, even the dictionary has failed to define what makes mothering maternal. It can only come up with a circular definition that leaves space for individual interpretation. There is something uniquely maternal about mothering, but what it is confounds the dictionary.

I believe it is this small space, this hiccup in the official definition, that shows there is work to be done in defining what a “mother” is or can be. This inability of the maternal to be fully defined on the page gives hope to those theorists, like Rich, who seek a new definition of mothering, that allows mothers not to define themselves by what the culture at large says they are, but to locate a definition for their role within themselves. This space also leaves room for men to locate within themselves a “mother” role, if they are prepared to go against the grain of other definitions.

As to whether men can be daughters, there are even greater complications. While the word “mother” seemingly suffers from an overabundance of definitions and implications, the word “daughter” seems to suffer from too few. The same dictionary that defines “mother” so cryptically gives this definition for “daughter:” “1. One’s female child. 2. A female descendant. 3. A woman considered as if in a relationship of child to parent.” The word daughter, then, signifies fewer requirements than does mother. There are no characteristic behaviors associated with daughters, like protection or nurturing, and no characteristic features, like tenderness. The only requirement for a daughter, as far as the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* is concerned, is that it be either a female or a woman. Nor does daughter have an accompanying verb, like in mother. “To mother” has a definition, whereas “to daughter” does not. Thus, there are no characteristics, as there are in “mother,” that allow for people of many genders to lay claim to the definition.

Danuta Walters describes the complex relationship of colliding definitions of mother and daughter:

“Mother” is promoted and produced as a unitary and total identity; it contains a vast and complex place in our cultural mythology. “Daughter” is more of a generational location, almost valueless and without active qualities of volition and control. This disparity in the cultural resonances of the two terms is significant. The terms are immediately split between active and passive; between the doer and the done to. (232-233)

Though these definitions do not seem to allow for men or people of other genders to be daughters, I believe there is still room for men to declare themselves as such. As terms such as “man” and “woman” become more blurred and less finite than they have been in years past, there is every possibility that a biological man might declare himself a “female descendant” or even a

“woman” as required by the definition of daughter I’ve used above. Such a declaration, however, requires a man to inhabit a traditionally female role in a patriarchal society. While it is possible for a man to take on traditionally feminine traits, he cannot do this without some negative repercussions in society. Men who display characteristics which would align them with “female descendants” would be disdained by the patriarchy as weak and impotent figures of ridicule.

The power dynamic for a sharing father is quite different and more complicated. On one level he gains quite a bit of authority in the daily domestic sphere of childrearing, a heretofore female domain. But by dirtying his hands with diapers he also removes himself from his patriarchal pedestal as the breadwinning but distant father, a position crucial to men’s power in the traditional family. (Ehrensaft 50)

That men are qualified to serve as mothers is supported by psychoanalysis. The characteristics and talents required of mothers are not exclusively the province of those born as biological women.

According to recent psychological studies, anyone can “mother an infant who can do the following: provide frequent and sustained physical contact, soothe the child when distressed, be sensitive to the baby’s signals, and respond promptly to a baby’s crying. Beyond these immediate behavioral indices, psychoanalysts argue that anyone who has personally experienced a positive parent-child relationship that allowed the development of both trust and individuation in his or her own childhood has the emotional capabilities to parent. (Ehrensaft 48, quoting Ann Oakley’s *Woman’s Work*)

When a man takes on mothering, it is often as a choice. Many women do not feel they have this same choice regarding whether or not to mother. That such a choice exists shows a power dynamic. Men have the power to choose mothering behavior. Women, largely, do not. I believe it is important for feminism to make room for such men under the definitions

“daughter” and “mother.” Doing so would change the definition of these words, making room for a new breed of mothers and daughters.

Likewise, transgendered and transsexual individuals will be able to lay claim to the terms “daughter” and “mother” under the banner of “courageous mothering,” a phrase Adrienne Rich coined to define a uniquely feminist style of mothering. As feminist theorists pull apart notions of gender and sexuality more and more, it becomes obvious that the degree to which personal identities are socially constructed is vast. Women, men, and the members of the transgendered spectrum can all equally display traits traditionally considered “maternal,” and those considered “feminine.” The step between behaving as a mother and calling oneself a mother is not great, and will become easier as courageous mothering becomes more common.

There is a danger, of course, in the broadening of the term “mother” to include men and other genders beyond that of female. There is a possibility that the terms “mother” and “daughter” could lose all traction as signifiers. If anyone is a potential mother or daughter, the terms could eventually cease to designate anything of substance. This is not, however, necessarily a bad thing. It is possible that in finding a new definition of “mother,” one that is inclusive of all who desire to belong to that category, “mother” as we know it will cease to exist. There may be an entirely different form of motherhood to be found, available to our cognition only after we dismantle the old definition. Not only would this new definition allow for women to claim the title “non-mothers” as well as “mothers,” but could also give more of a participatory role to daughters.

There are still others to whom any definition or discussion of mothers is contrary to the best goals of feminism. Those who reject motherhood are often outspoken in their writings

about the negative relationship of motherhood and patriarchy. In her article *Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women*, Jeffner Allen writes:

I would like to affirm the rejection of motherhood on the grounds that motherhood is dangerous to women. If woman, in patriarchy, is she who exists as the womb and wife of man, every woman is by definition a mother: she who produces for the sake of men...Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers and, conversely, because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity and world that is open and free. (315)

Allen is not alone in her rejection of the role motherhood places upon women. While she equates the subjection of women with the state of motherhood, Martha Gimenez rejects motherhood from another perspective. In her article, *Feminism, Pronatalism, and Motherhood*, she writes, “Motherhood, if conceived as a taken-for-granted dimension of women’s normal adult role, becomes one of the key sources of women’s oppression” (287).

The approach of these writers comes from several objections to the way mothers and motherhood are approached by feminism. The objections come from two main facets. As in Allen’s case, many writers look at motherhood through a Marxist lens. These theorists cannot divorce any discussion of motherhood from the use-value motherhood has traditionally had for the patriarchy. Through this lens, turning women into mothers is the process by which the patriarchy reproduces itself. Because motherhood has served this function for the patriarchy, the institution of motherhood is complicit in the ultimate aim of patriarchy to maintain the superiority of men in society.

Allen and others call for an end to motherhood: “Until patriarchy no longer exists, all females, as historical beings, must resist, rebel against, and avoid producing for the sake of men” (316). Allen sees tremendous power in the choice to be a non-mother, a power that can

ultimately topple the patriarchy, because the patriarchy relies on women to reproduce it.

From Allen's perspective, my project of examining the mother-daughter relationship on stage would indeed be anti-feminist, because I do not take the stand that mothering is contrary to subject formation. I do, however, have several points of agreement with her. For instance, I agree that motherhood is an institution which can ultimately serve the goals of the patriarchy, and has the potential to be a destructive force in women's lives. However, I see room for resistance within this institution where she does not.

The second facet of objection some feminist writers have to most discussions of motherhood, as evidenced both by Allen's writing and Gimenez's, is the degree to which women are compelled to become mothers by society. In Gimenez's view, "feminism has not fundamentally challenged the compulsory nature of motherhood" (287). Such critique is well-earned. Many approaches to the act of mothering have not been sufficiently critical of the degree to which women are compelled into motherhood.

The theorists who engage in this critique question whether, in societies which encourage women to be mothers, women really possess a free will to choose motherhood. These writers believe the demands of the patriarchy are so overwhelming that they allow no space for women to freely choose motherhood. Thus, instead of being active participants in the act of mothering, women are acted upon by the patriarchy, which has made the decision for all women.

This critique, like that of some Marxist feminists, is well-deserved. There is indeed a great deal of pressure on women to become mothers, so much so that it often seems as if there is no choice for women to remain non-mothers. The proponents of this critique would find that my project of examining mothers and daughters on stage is anti-feminist because I believe that there

is room for choice within the institution of motherhood, and that women are not always negatively impacted by motherhood. Instead, I believe that there exists within motherhood the potential to create a liberation and growth for women, a belief shared with many other feminists.

I believe that creating such a site of liberation and advancement for women requires changing the institution of motherhood. This is often called “feminist mothering,” and has many proponents. Joyce Trebilcot writes, “Some women are concerned to re-conceive mothering, to create new concepts of reproducing and nurturing that will better express their own values, including their commitments to the transmission of feminism from one generation to the next and to the production and reproduction of women’s cultures” (1). This task of “re-conceiving mothering” is one that allows women to be pro-active in changing the state of motherhood for the better, rather than rejecting it out of hand for its position within patriarchy.

Other feminist theorists have added to the call for feminist mothering, seeing within it a new choice and outlet for women. Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, locates in the mother-daughter relationship the potential for stronger women:

It is the germ of our desire to create a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course...Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge–transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial–of mother-and-daughterhood. This cathexis between mother and daughter–essential, distorted, misused–is the great unwritten story. (225)

In this quotation, it is clear that Rich is at direct odds with those feminist theorists who think an examination of the mother-daughter relationship is anti-feminist. To Rich, the mother-daughter relationship is a key relationship between women, which is rarely explored in literature, because such examinations might ultimately reveal stronger women. The sisterhood of which she speaks, the community of feminists, is not at odds with mother- and daughterhood. Rich goes on to

speaking passionately about the need for mothers and daughters to take control of the definitions of their roles:

We want courageous mothering. The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of their limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with reductive images of females in children's books, movies, television, the schoolroom. It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. *To refuse to be the victim*: and then to go on from there. (246)

Though my project might be called anti-feminist by some theorists, it is deeply important to the interests of feminism according to the views of other feminist theorists. I choose to approach my project from the point of view that an exploration of the mother-daughter relationship in drama can be valuable to feminism, because it deals with the relationships between women, and how those relationships have been undervalued by the patriarchy. Like Rich, I refuse to be a victim, and I choose to see mothers and daughters not as defined by victimhood, but by their potential to redefine their roles within society.

This being said, it is still important to recognize the potentially deeply emotional connection between mothers and daughters, a connection which can often lead to trauma and conflict. It is likewise true that the mother-daughter relationship can also be deeply pleasurable and fulfilling for women. Because of its potential to be many things to women and the processes by which it can be a powerful force to connect women, for good or ill, the mother-daughter relationship is often an important one in women's lives. Hirsch locates in the mother-daughter relationship a strong connection to multiplicity, the ability to be many things at once. She writes, "The multiplicity of "women" is nowhere more obvious than for the figure of the mother, who is always both mother and daughter" (Hirsch 12). Such multiplicities could also be extended to the

daughter, who is always both a daughter and a mother or potential mother. Because they exist in these places of multiple identities and locations, women have the potential to use the mother-daughter relationship to redefine their relationships to patriarchal society. Though the identities of “mother” and “daughter” are often co-opted by the patriarchy for its own benefit, women can use these same identities to disrupt the location of their identities. Because a woman can potentially be a mother *or* daughter or mother *and* daughter, the mother-daughter relationship is a site where movement between identifying traits and functions shows how one might work against patriarchal definitions by constantly fluctuating between identities. Patriarchal society does not allow for a woman to be multiple things at the same time, and because the mother-daughter relationship allows for multiple identifications, there is room in the relationship for movement.

The mother-daughter relationship has another trait that is unique in its portrayal of women: a focus on the body as a site of knowledge and meaning. The mother-daughter relationship often presupposes an intense bodily connection between mother and daughter. Whether in the biological sense of one woman literally coming out of the other’s body, to adopted and social mothers whose bodies are impacted by the stresses and demands their daughters call for. A daughter’s body is involved in the relationship by being formed by the mother, either physically or socially, through her relationship with mothering figures. Adrienne Rich celebrates the potential for the body to become a site of feminist resistance to patriarchal definitions and knowledge-making:

I know no woman--virgin, mother, lesbian, married, celibate--whether she earns her keep as a housewife, a cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves--for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and

mutilations, its rapes and ripenings. There is for the first time today a possibility of converting our physicality into both knowledge and power. (284)

Here Rich calls for an investigation into ways the body creates meaning and power for women. Though the body is a “fundamental problem” for women, it is a problem of understanding and communication, rather than a problem hindering women’s access to knowledge. If the female body is a path to knowledge and power, the mother-daughter relationship, as a relationship strongly bound up with bodies and bodily relationships, can also be a relationship on the path to knowledge and understanding of self as well as (m)other.

Marianne Hirsch likewise focuses on the body as an important element for the mother-daughter relationship. She writes, “The figure of mother is determined by her body more intensely than the figure of woman” (Hirsch 12), and that “Nothing entangles women more firmly in their bodies than pregnancy, birth, lactation, miscarriage, or the inability to conceive” (Hirsch 166). She is cautious about defining such relationships solely as biological ones, especially if such definitions place adoptive and social mothers outside of the definition of “mother.”

The perspective of the maternal makes it difficult simply to reject the notion of biology and forces us to engage both the meaning of the body and the risks of what has been characterized as essentialist. This is equally true for adoptive mothers whose bodies, I would argue, are equally engaged in the process of mothering although they have not given birth to children. (Hirsch 12)

I agree with Hirsch that adoptive and non-biological mothers are greatly impacted in their bodies from the work of mothering, though that work may not necessarily involve biological conception. From an adoptive mother who is sleep-deprived because of her child to a teacher who aches from stooping over small desks and chairs to teach and mother her young charges,

mothering is an activity and career that takes a great toll on the body, a toll that is written in dark under-eye circles, aching backs, and stress headaches, a toll that does not discriminate between biological and non-biological mothers.

This project, in addition to being an exploration of mothers, is a specific exploration of mothers who mother daughters, a type of mothering that Rich as well as others have complained is often overlooked in favor of mother-son relationships. Walters also expresses a displeasure that mother-daughter relationships have not garnered the attention mother-son relationships have. She describes this disparity:

In our culture, mothers and daughters are the slightly tawdry “B” movies to the de Mille extravaganzas of mother/son passion and torment. Never achieving the stature of the Oedipal spectacle, the mother/daughter nexus nevertheless wanders through our cultural landscape in a sort of half-light, present and persistent but rarely claiming center stage. (4)

Walters’ feelings on the second-class status of mother-daughter relationships as compared to mother-son relationships closely mirrors Adrienne Rich’s complaints that mother-daughter relationships are little written about or explored. The causes for this are numerous. As the power to promulgate artistic representations and social beliefs about women largely rest in the hands of the patriarchy, that same body has the power to decide what types of representations are disseminated and valued. Producers, publishers, and agents largely decide what types of mothers and daughters find an outlet for public consumption and attention, and thus far those same bodies have not found the mother-daughter relationship of as much interest as Rich and Walters feel it deserves.

This being said, the mother-daughter relationship has indeed found its way into films, novels, and plays, though largely in forms that support patriarchal beliefs in mothers and

daughters instead of forms that show resistance and dissatisfaction with it. The use of tropes to describe the mother-daughter relationship largely serves these patriarchal ends, and has become so common to modern American society as to feel natural to today's audiences. Rich supports the idea that most mother-daughter representations have been the result of patriarchal efforts, rather than those of women themselves: "Women have *been* both mothers and daughters, but have written little on the subject; the vast majority of literary and visual images of motherhood comes to us filtered through a collective or individual male consciousness" (61).

This filtering of the mother-daughter relationship through male consciousness is not unique to novels and essays, but exists in all types and at all levels of artistic representation and output.

It is not simply films or television or novels that influence social attitudes and behaviors; the whole range of symbolic practices present in our culture often coheres in certain ways to create what the cultural theorist Raymond Williams called a "way of seeing" or a general "reading" of a relationship or an issue, in this case, the mother/daughter relationship. (Walters 13)

The symbolic practice I have chosen to examine as it contributes to cultural beliefs about the mother-daughter relationship is theater and drama. In order to do this, I have identified several dramatic texts to examine in light of their approach and contribution to the mother-daughter relationship in twentieth century America. The accounts of mothering in the plays I will examine here are overwhelmingly from the white, middle class majority. I have made an effort to address theatrical literature from groups other than this majority, but acknowledge the dominance of this group in the representations of motherhood on stage, much as this group is dominant in American society. Though my examinations have notable exceptions to this rule, the mother-daughter plays of the twentieth century have largely naturalized white, middle-class,

heterosexual mothers and daughters as the norm, and so these “normal” mothers and daughters find their way into the cultural shorthand of mother-daughter tropes.

At the outset of each of the chapters in this project, I introduce what I see as a classic paradigm of each trope. These paradigms are meant to introduce the trope in its purest form. Such tropes can only exist in artistic creation, because in lived experience, life intrudes in the mother-daughter relationship, making it far from an ideal representation of anything. In the dramatic representations I examine, the plays adhere to, and fight against, the tropes in different ways. Within the plays, there are elements of resistance to the tenets of the tropes, as well as elements that promulgate the trope as a viable way of defining women’s experiences.

Each of the tropes, besides the final one I examine, the feminist mother-daughter relationship, supports patriarchal beliefs about mothers and daughters. They reduce the potential for mothers and daughters to predetermined futures, while formulating patterns of behavior that ultimately revolve around heterosexuality and upholding the status quo.

These tropes are, in essence, patterns of behavior that serve as a kind of simplifying shorthand for a set of beliefs about how mothers and daughters naturally interact. Tropes are representations of actual lived experience, rather than reflections of it, but this does not make them any less powerful tools in shaping the way audiences view mothers and daughters, both on and off the stage. Though the creation of such tropes comes from a variety of sources, they are similar in that they each serve to reduce the possible permutations of the mother-daughter relationship into a few prearranged patterns.

Koppelman points to women’s actual experience as the source for tropes, which she sees as a kind of universal language to communicate women’s experiences:

Every turning point in the life of a mother or daughter precipitates a crisis in their relationship, and mothers and daughters engage in a pattern of interaction and communication on these occasions that is shared across time, space, and cultural heritage with other mothers and daughters. Because this pattern is so familiar to women readers, the writer has great latitude for using the most subtle forms of artistic literary innuendo and ellipsis. (xxvi)

I do not believe, however, that the development of tropes of mother-daughter relationships can be separated from the services they provide for the continuance of patriarchal power. Tropes indeed do serve as shorthand for the mother-daughter relationship, and do allow people across many cultural groups to grasp the basic conflicts of the relationship they are shown in representations, but this does not help the audience to understand the true depth of complexity the mother-daughter relationship can have. In using these tropes, artists and authors gain the expediency of predetermined patterns, but lose the qualities of truly innovative and complex explorations of mothers and daughters interacting.

The problem of using tropes and the benefits and damages they provide is a problem of representation. Thus far, mother-daughter relationships have more often than not been shown in overly simplistic ways, ways that frequently disregard the incredible complexity of lived experience and women's conflicting emotions and responses to mother- and daughterhood. Frequently, these simplistic manners of showing mothers and daughters concentrate wholly on the inner workings of the minds of mother and daughter, with little or no focus on the social, political, and cultural worlds in which those relationships are formed and negotiated. "One of the most important steps we can take in rethinking the mother/daughter relationship is to remove it from the confines of psychological description and prescription and locate it in the more varied and comprehensive realm of culture and society" (Walters, 10).

I have chosen not to discuss a specifically ethnic trope, such as “black mothers and daughters” or “Asian mothers and daughters.” I do not want to place white and minority mother-daughter relationships in opposition to one another. While I hope to be sensitive to the realities of living in a racist culture, I find that separating ethnic mothers and daughters might have the effect of further marginalizing already marginalized women.

It is important at the outset, however, to recognize that mother-daughter representations on the twentieth century American stage represent only a fraction of the cultural makeup of the country. “Although race (and class and ethnicity) do structure these representations, perhaps the specific representational choices also structure the final ideological moment of the text” (Walters 164). I will be looking at such representational moments in depth. I will do my best not to ignore the social realities of the people portrayed in these representations, but my focus is on how these representations construct ideology.

In exploring the mother-daughter relationship on stage, I have been strongly influenced by what I see as the three main tasks of feminist theatre scholarship. The first task is to recover past voices, little heard and examined by patriarchal scholars. The second task is to examine how the development of theatre has been affected by patriarchal power and influences, paying close attention to canonical texts, productions, and approaches. The third task is to develop new productions that reflect a feminist approach to performance in both content and form.

An exploration of the mother-daughter relationship in drama addresses the various goals of feminist theater scholarship in a variety of ways. As to the goal of recovering the voices of women from the past, such a study serves the purpose of bringing attention to many little-known and little-performed plays from the past. In my particular study, because I have restricted the

scope to twentieth-century drama, I have included lesser-known playwrights from the early twentieth century. Though such playwrights are familiar to feminist theater scholars, they have been largely ignored in the formation of the theatrical canon. By including these writers in my study, I hope to add the perspective of these past voices to the full examination of how mothers and daughters have traditionally been performed on the stage. By using the plays of these writers in my analysis, I hope to continue the task of recovering these largely forgotten playwrights, showing they are as worthy of study and production as more famous plays by their male contemporaries.

In regard to the goal of determining how theater has been impacted by patriarchy, a study of the mother-daughter relationship is valuable because it looks at how the larger cultural norm of male supremacy has impacted how the mother-daughter relationship is performed. In the several tropes of the mother-daughter relationship that I will be examining, a careful analysis shows how these patterns are privileged in showing the mother-daughter relationship, often reinforcing the patriarchy. For instance, in my analysis, I examine how the reoccurring trope of the “perfect mother” strengthens the patriarchy by valuing women only as mothers, and devaluing those women who choose a life without children. This value system seeks to contain the world of women to procreation and domestic life, leaving the public world of society and policy to the already dominant patriarchy, while denying the impact that public world has on the mother and daughter.

A study of the mother-daughter relationship in the theater also addresses the goal of translating women’s experiences to the stage. Through this project, I am able to discuss lesser-known works that are self-consciously feminist in scope, and specifically address the mother-

daughter relationship from this perspective. Plays such as *Calm Down Mother* by Megan Terry and *Why We Have a Body* by Claire Chafee address the unique complications and tensions the mother-daughter relationship suffers when one or both members of the relationship begin to resist patriarchal traditions. These plays attempt to translate a woman's experience of this relationship to the stage. Both do this while using a non-realistic episodic staging approach. These writers have chosen to avoid the linear, chronological approach they associate with a male-centered theater. By using such plays in my analysis of the mother-daughter relationship on stage, I am able to examine how the form and content of plays which contain mother-daughter tropes use different techniques in staging a woman's experience.

I have identified five different tropes under which many plays of twentieth century America can be grouped.¹ Each chapter examines a different trope. I have arranged the plays within each chapter mostly in chronological order, reserving one play for discussion at the end of the chapter to demonstrate how some plays use the tropes to show different approaches to mother-daughter relationships beyond those generally allowed by the tenets of the trope.

My second chapter, "Maternal Monsters," is an examination of abusive and domineering mothers, which also examines the pathology behind these abusive mothers and the reasons for the proliferation of such models of motherhood, particularly in post-WWII America. In this chapter I discuss the ideologies of motherhood that viewed the mother as a negative force in women's lives. Of particular interest in this chapter is Paul Wylie's *Generation of Vipers*, a scathing attack on American motherhood that led to views of the mother as a devourer of her

¹ Kaplan identifies three: "Popular culture represents all three types of mother in its main mother paradigms, namely the all-sacrificing "angel in the house," the over-indulgent mother, satisfying her own needs, and finally the evil, possessive and destructive all-devouring one" (48).

daughter, a view that still finds outlet in dramatic representations. Specific plays addressed in this chapter are *Mourning Becomes Electra* by Eugene O'Neill, *The Little Foxes* by Lillian Hellman, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon-Marigolds* by Paul Zindel, and *The Verge* by Susan Glaspell.

Chapter three, "Mirroring Mothers," examines portrayals of the mother-daughter relationship in which the mother and daughter are expected to mirror one another, having only a joint subjectivity, and no identity as separate entities. This trope frequently finds outlet through portrayals of mothers who have no identity other than that of "Mother," in portrayals of daughters who are destined to relive their mothers' lives, and in daughters desperate to break away from a smothering mother. Plays that will be discussed in this chapter include *'night, Mother* by Marsha Norman, the musical *Gypsy* by Arthur Laurents, and *Lu Ann Hampton Laverly Oberlander* by Preston Jones.

Chapter four, "Saints and Martyrs of Motherhood," examines the numerous portrayals of mothers who sacrifice their own happiness, subjectivity, and/or lives for their daughters. Such mothers are often portrayed as highly domestic women, who show no displeasure or frustration with their task of mothering. They often have interactions with male advice-givers, whose advice they take or reject for varying reasons. In this chapter, I will discuss *I Remember Mama* by John Van Druten, *Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, *Steel Magnolias* by Robert Harling, and *He and She* by Rachel Crothers.

Chapter five, "Absent Mothers," will look at the mother-daughter relationship as it appears when the mother is missing, either through abandonment, death, or distance. In this case, the examination will look at how the relationship continues when one of the members of

the partnership has severed the relationship connection. While the discourse on absent mothers often focuses on the damage done to children growing up without mothers, the artistic representations of absent mothers are often humorous or melodramatic. Instead of tragedy, these plays often show a daughter succeeding greatly in the absence of her mother. The recurrence of this demonstrates a corollary belief to the tragedy of the absent mother: that a daughter without a mother is more often than not better off without her mother. Plays that will be discussed in this chapter include *Crimes of the Heart* by Beth Henley, the musical *Annie* by Charles Strouse, *My Sister in This House* by Wendy Kesselman, and *Why We Have a Body* by Claire Chafee.

Chapter six, “Feminist Mothers,” will look at the few portrayals of the mother-daughter relationship that consciously reject former models of motherhood in favor of a model that is true to feminist ideals of female subjectivity and enfranchisement. This model is still in development as the American feminist consciousness changes, though the plays of this model possess many of the same characteristics, such as the celebration of the chaos and mess of motherhood and the acknowledgement that mothering is difficult work. While these plays do not necessarily show mother-daughter relationships that are more contented or fulfilling than those of other tropes, their focus on the complexities and complications of the mother-daughter relationship suggests the relationship is far less simple than other tropes may imply. Plays that will be discussed in this chapter include *Yes, My Darling Daughter* by Mark Reed, *Calm Down Mother* by Megan Terry, and *The Theory of Total Blame* by Karen Finley.

I hope to conclude this study by locating the sites of resistance and conflict within each trope, and how there is potential for feminist resistance. This project is intended to inspire greater interrogation of mother and daughter images and portrayals in theatrical representation,

and to inspire new theatrical output, that is sensitive to the way mothers and daughters are shown. In studying the plays contained in this work, I have come to believe that representations of the mother-daughter relationship are all too often used as platforms to disseminate patriarchal power. Audiences learn the terrible price exacted by those mothers who resist such power and control. Playwrights need to find ways to resist falling into old patterns of representation, patterns which ultimately undermine women and their advancement in American society. It is my hope that this study will inspire its own audience to fight against old ways of seeing the mother-daughter relationship so that a new vision for the future can replace the old.

CHAPTER TWO: THE MONSTROUS MOTHER

The trope of the monstrous mother is one with a long history in the West. From the days of antiquity to the present, its characteristics have remained largely consistent. The monstrous mother is recognizable by her flagrant sexuality, her abuse of power over her children, her violent behavior in word and deed, and her general lack of warmth towards her children. When such monsters have daughters the two women are often shown in contrast to one another. The mothers usurp and undermine patriarchal authority, while their daughters stand in support of it. Toward the men around them, these monstrous mothers are often dominating and aggressive, while their daughters often identify with those same men. The monstrous mother is different from a merely bad mother, mostly in degree. Monstrous mothers are highly self-involved and willing to devour anyone who stands in their way, particularly those who are under the mother's power, such as her children.

The monstrous mother has several classic paradigms going back to Ancient Greece. There are mythic stories of women who kill or attack their children, destroy their children's hopes, or are murderesses of other family members. The one of these with the most complicated and hostile relationship with a daughter is Clytemnestra, mythic queen of Argos.

In Ancient Greek legend, Clytemnestra was the wife of King Agamemnon. After Agamemnon killed their daughter Iphigenia as a sacrifice to the gods in exchange for a wind to blow an army across the seas to fight the Trojan War, Clytemnestra vowed to seek revenge. While her husband was away at the war for ten years, Clytemnestra consolidated power as the regent of the nation-state and began an adulterous affair with Aegisthus, her husband's cousin.

When her husband returned from the war, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus killed him.

Clytemnestra's children Electra and Orestes then planned and executed the murder of their mother and her lover. Though hounded by the Furies for this murder, Orestes is acquitted of wrongdoing by the gods themselves, who declare that to kill one's mother is not really a true killing of a parent. Instead, to kill one's mother is only to kill a vessel of life, because the father is the true parent.

The emotions between Clytemnestra, Electra, and Orestes are so intense that Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides all included in their plays dynamic scenes in which the grievances between mother and children are aired. The playwrights treat Clytemnestra's own feelings of retribution for the sacrifice of Iphigenia in different ways. She is never portrayed as a truly warm woman, though she is certainly sympathetic when she laments the death of Iphigenia. The audience's potential sympathy for this bereaved mother must be balanced against her other actions, however. She battles constantly against her daughter Electra and son Orestes. Throughout these many battles she remains her husband's killer and an adulteress.

The many sides of Clytemnestra's personality are shown to be in conflict with her maternity: "The queen's primary motive was maternal vengeance for her child, Iphigenia; her second one was the sexual alliance she contracted with Aegisthus in her husband's absence. There the two traits of mother love and conjugal chastity diverge—are, in fact, contradictory" (Zeitlin 95). As a mother she is drawn in many directions between alliance to a dead daughter or a living husband, and between a living lover and two children who wish her dead. Her desire to have both a sexual alliance with Aegisthus and devoted children is destined to be thwarted.

Electra's intense hatred of her mother at times seems difficult to justify. She discounts

her mother's grief and defends the murder of Iphigenia as necessary to the development of the state. "In failing to understand her mother's outrage, and in justifying her sister's murder, Electra underwrites paternal law and male supremacy, as well as female antagonism, competition, and powerlessness" (Hirsch *Mother/Daughter* 31). Electra repeatedly supports the patriarchy instead of her mother. Electra will not listen to her mother's justifications for Agamemnon's death. In Electra's opinion, Agamemnon was justified in sacrificing Iphigenia. She does not believe her mother's grief is sincere. To Electra's eyes, Clytemnestra's affair with Aegisthus proves her guilt; a truly loving mother would never have begun a sexual affair.

In addition to her daughter's disgust over her sexuality, Clytemnestra has appropriated the role and power of a man.² This social disruption is partially alleviated by her daughter's embracing of the role that her mother has abandoned. Where Clytemnestra grasps power, Electra remains somewhat passive, insisting that it is the role of her brother Orestes to fully avenge Agamemnon's death. Whereas Clytemnestra's sexuality is under her own control, and fully expressed through her desire for Aegisthus, Electra remains determinedly chaste, even when married. Electra has fully embraced patriarchal roles, staying loyal to her father and brother. Electra combats her mother's social disruption through embracing pro-patriarchal behavior, and ultimately, through overturning her monstrous mother's power. "The only solution envisioned by the myth is the retaliatory defeat of this self-willed female principle whose potency is still a living and malignant force" (Zeitlin 95). That potency is diffused through Electra's overthrow and murdering of her mother.

The relationships between Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, and Electra constantly affect and

²Of Clytemnestra, the Watchman says, "That woman—she manoeuvres like a man" (Aeschylus 28).

reflect on each other. In the original myth, there are mother-daughter relationships between Clytemnestra and Iphigenia and Clytemnestra and Electra. That there are two such relationships allows the audience to compare Clytemnestra's loyalty to her murdered daughter and Electra's lack of loyalty toward her mother. While the audience gets information about Clytemnestra primarily from her hostile daughter Electra, it cannot watch the story without encountering the haunting figure of Iphigenia. The specter of Iphigenia tempers Electra's words about her mother, reminding the audience that what Electra says about Clytemnestra is only one person's viewpoint. Though Electra convicts her mother of being monstrous, Clytemnestra's actions for the memory of Iphigenia demonstrate her to be quite devoted to at least one of her daughters. Even in the classical paradigm of the monstrous mother, there is room for a multi-layered reading of the character.

Feminist responses to the *Oresteia* have been strong. Sue Ellen Case writes that, "Many feminist critics and historians have analysed *The Oresteia* as a text central to the formalisation of misogyny" (Case 12). Ferris adds, "The ultimate message here is that the male notion of democracy really presents a polar impasse: female assertion results in the annihilation of the male" (Ferris 114). Thus, the story of Clytemnestra and her children is central to many misogynist messages created and proliferated throughout the history of the West, and is intimately bound with our understanding of power relations in a democratic nation. Within such a powerful and multi-dimensional site, Clytemnestra's role of mother and her relationship with her daughters comes under great scrutiny for its role in these formations.

Clytemnestra is many things in one character. She is a woman, a mother, a wife, a killer, and a queen. Having so many avenues of power relations, these roles become intertwined with

one another. Thus, Clytemnestra the mother cannot be divorced from Clytemnestra the adulteress, nor Clytemnestra the powerful queen. Her actions, both the killing of her husband and the usurping of power in the realm, set her up as troublemaker. “The character of Clytemnestra stands for all women who through their strength and search for autonomy undermine and pervert the 'normality' of male power” (Ferris 114). Clytemnestra shows how delicate the male balance of power is. Thus, her death is the only answer to reestablishing the status quo. Clytemnestra’s death effectively erases the stain of the masculine, sexual woman who wrests power from her husband. She “must be killed because she is not the virgin mother who had become a cultural ideal: she is passionate and sexual, she is guilty of having murdered her husband, and, worst of all, she is politically active and aware” (Hirsch *Mother/Daughter* 30).

The amount of attention and energy given to exploring such a monstrous mother has led some modern-day scholars to speculate on the beginnings of the trope, and what its relationship to the patriarchy might be.

Some psychologists surmise that the mysterious power of the womb to bring forth life frightened men, who then projected their fear and aggression onto women in the form of monstrous mythical mothers who abandoned, maimed, slaughtered, or devoured their children (usually sons) [...] A glance at the "bad" mothers of any age reveals the fate of women who violated the gender norms of their time, whether by choice, by fiat, or by the force of circumstance. (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 6)

Ladd-Taylor attempts to formulate the beginning seeds of the monstrous mother, which rather than being an actual person, is a representation of Woman at her worst. In pointing to a possible cause for the first such mother, it becomes apparent that the monstrous mother is less about women, and more about patriarchal fears. The “fear and aggression” of men toward women’s power is behind the creation of such Monsters. Thus, the monstrous mother is

intimately bound up with patriarchal ideology. She is a site where the dangerous power of women over their progeny is displayed for all to condemn. The monstrous mother is not, then, an attack on vicious mothers, but an attack on all women, intended to keep them toeing the patriarchal line. In this paradigm, good mothers are those who follow the dictates of the patriarchy and teach their daughters to do the same.

The monstrous mother represents the ultimate patriarchal fear. Her ability to be violent and to exert control over her children shows that women have the ability to be active rather than passive in society, a traditionally masculine quality. Monstrous mothers have taken this masculine quality, however, and used the power towards selfish and destructive ends. Thus, stories of monstrous mothers become cautionary tales of why women should not be given power. The conclusion to which the audience of such tales is led is that power must be kept away from women, for both the good of their children and the good of society.

The recurrence of the monstrous mother trope throughout history has always been caught up with the power dynamics of patriarchy. As each patriarchal society has found ways to reinforce the power of men over women, the problem of whom to trust with child-rearing has been addressed. While the patriarchy wishes to stay in control of rearing the children, members of the ruling sex have a vested interest in passing the actual activity of rearing children to women, as it keeps them from gaining access to material resources. Because women who reject the traditional occupation of patriarchal mother upset this balance, they become recast in representations as monstrous mothers.

M. Rivka Polatnick has made a study of the systematic denial of social power to mothers. In her analysis of how power relations contribute to women's status, she declares, "Women's

responsibility for childrearing certainly contributes to their societal powerlessness” (23). It is not difficult to see how such powerlessness would cause women to act against the role that has led to that powerlessness. Likewise, it is not difficult to see how such resistance could be seen as profoundly threatening to the patriarchy. Thus, to combat such resistance, the patriarchy recasts the resistance as violence not towards the institution of motherhood, but towards children. That women continue to be asked to fill the position of mother even though it is a possible site of resistance is bound up with the control of material resources. Polatnick elaborates, “Full-time childrearing responsibility limits one's capacity to engage in most other activities. However, the most important thing, in power terms that childrearingers can't do is to be the family breadwinner. This is the job that men prefer as their primary family responsibility. It offers important power advantages over the home-based childrearing job” (24).

There are distinct advantages in being the breadwinner. Because the breadwinners bring in money to the family, they can control its use and dispersal. Money, and the power that goes with it, ultimately belongs to him who earns it. Because mothers largely aren't paid for their work, they gain no monetary power in society. Those mothers who upset this economy by earning their own money through work, or who attempt to gain control of resources and political power, are often vulnerable to representations of monstrosity. This can be seen in the ancient example of Clytemnestra, criticized for wielding political power in her state.

In order to convince women to happily accept the job of child rearing along with its consequent powerlessness, the patriarchy has invented the concept of “maternal instinct,” and largely convinced women that it was not the patriarchy that wanted women to mother, but rather women themselves. Feminist critics have largely discounted the notion of such an instinct as

harmful to women, because it keeps them engaged in a practice that reinforces powerlessness and convinces women that they must make real an idealized notion. “This is the tyranny of the notion of the maternal instinct. It idealizes motherhood beyond human capacity. A dangerous gap is set up. Mother feels the mixture of love and resentment, affection and anger she has for her child, but she cannot afford to know it” (Friday 14).

In analyzing the monstrous mother, it becomes clear that the figure has a complicated place in a feminist revision of history. One doesn’t want to discount that some mothers are not good at mothering, and that abuse exists. However, in the representations of monstrous mothers, women are far too frequently criticized for being evil because they have stepped out of gender norms, an evil that is compounded by abusive behavior towards their daughters. Looking past the outward behaviors of such monstrous mothers, both on the stage and off, requires sympathy and understanding of mothers who have mistreated their children. Such a sympathetic approach can be difficult, however, particularly in light of stories of actual abuse. It is, “Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her” (Rich 235).

Philip Wylie one of the founding members of the *New Yorker*, authored the 1942 book *Generation of Vipers*. Wylie’s work coined the term “momism” and has become the central critique of mothers to emerge from the mid-twentieth century. Printed over twenty times, as recently as 1996, *Vipers* spread the message of the harmful American mother to countless readers over a period of several decades. “Wylie seemed to open the floodgates to over a decade of stinging attacks on mothers” (Margolis 72). As the main proponent of attacks on American mothers, Wylie revitalized the monstrous mother in the twentieth century. He became the

primary voice warning the country against the powers and damages wrought by monstrous mothers.

Wylie's work is important in any investigation of twentieth century motherhood because his work was widely read and incredibly injurious towards mothers. His passionate attacks on motherhood warned against the horrible effects American mothers could unleash upon their children. As the definitive "expert" on monstrous mothers during the century, he states clearly the multiple problems mothers create for their children. *Generation of Vipers* is the seminal work on monstrous motherhood in the twentieth century. Because of its status, it is helpful to locate representations of monstrous mothers in relation to *Vipers*, in order to understand how such representations fit in to the general fabric of monstrous motherhood of the twentieth century.

Wylie's classic pronouncement was that "mom is a jerk" (198). His greatest criticisms were reserved for mothers who intruded in the lives of their sons, making them weakened and dependent. Such intrusions could take the form of specific interference with their sons' lives to intrusion into the social sphere of work and politics. Wylie went even farther, however, in describing the ills mothers had brought to American society, words that bear repeating at length here, to give the full impression of the vitriol unleashed against mothers during the mid-twentieth century:

In a preliminary test of strength, [Mom] also got herself the vote and, although politics never interested her (unless she was exceptionally naive, a hairy foghorn, or a size forty scorpion), the damage she forthwith did to society was so enormous and so rapid that even the best men lost track of things. Mom's first gracious presence at the ballot-box was roughly concomitant with the start toward a new all-time low in political scurviness, hoodlumism, gangsterism, labor strife, monopolistic thuggery, moral degeneration, civic corruption, smuggling, bribery, theft, murder, homosexuality, drunkenness, financial depression, chaos and war.

Note that. (Wylie 201)

And:

Like Hitler, [Mom] betrays the people who would give her a battle before she brings up her troops. Her whole personal life, so far as outward expression is concerned is, in consequence, a mopping-up action. Traitors are shot, yellow stars are slapped on those beneath notice, the good-looking men and boys are rounded up and beaten or sucked into pliability, a new slave population continually goes to work at making more munitions for momism, and mom herself sticks up her head, or maybe the periscope of the woman next door, to find some new region that needs taking over. (Wylie 206)

From Wylie's description of mothers came "momism," a movement in the 1940s and 1950s against American mothers. Mothers were recast in the popular psychology and representations of the day to be shown as emasculating, overbearing women. They were responsible for harming particularly their sons, and were themselves drunken, gossipy, selfish, power-mad women with little capacity for literacy, and they apparently had the ability to defeat people's souls, serving in the capacity of "spiritual saboteur" (Wylie 201).

Under the auspices of momism, women were under attack, and Wylie led the charge. He called moms a "thundering third sex" (Wylie 204), women who had betrayed the tenets of femininity to become masculine, an echo of the way Clytemnestra was criticized for speaking like a man. Over the decades of the twentieth century, blaming mothers for society's ills went in and out of fashion, leaving several theatrical representations in which blaming the mother becomes the reason d'être of the play. "To this day, mother-blaming perpetuates "momism" in a different sense, one that parallels other "isms": sexism, racism, ageism, classism. Perhaps it is time to use the word momism to label mother-blame and mother-hate explicitly and succinctly as a form of prejudice as virulent as the other "isms" are acknowledged to be" (Caplan 131).

The changing attitude towards mothers encapsulated in the tenets of momism was inextricably bound up with the changing American society in the wake of the Second World War. During the war years many American women had gone into the work force, filling occupations vacated by men sent off to war. With the end of the war, however, these women were expected to relinquish their wartime occupations in favor of a return to the home and full-time motherhood. Many of these women resented that they were expected to give up their careers, and many flatly refused to do so. This created a perceived dearth of jobs for returning soldiers, and unprecedented competition for jobs between men and women.

As a result, the social campaign to return women to their homes was waged on many fronts. Women were alternately disparaged for wanting to work and idealized through messages that told them motherhood was the highest achievement they could attain. Some women gladly gave up their wartime careers in favor of spending their time in the home. Other women resisted this move. Some returned to working within the home, carrying with them feelings of displeasure and resentment. There was a large-scale feeling of disappointment in American women, which was observed and transformed into the monstrous mother in many representations after that time. “By and large, the paradigm of the fearsome, dominating mother becomes central only in the wake of the Second World War” (Kaplan 13).

By the end of the 1940s, “mother was held to be the cause of her children's miseries, and, indeed, of the ills that beset humankind” (Thurer 247). Towards daughters, mothers were now the enemy. Mothers allegedly fought to relive their own failed childhoods through their innocent, impressionable daughters. Walters comments on the changing dynamic of the mother-daughter relationship in post-World War Two America:

Fundamentally, the move was from an idealized dream of the mother as sacrificial lamb to her daughter's social ascendancy to a much harsher nightmare of the mother as malevolent force on her daughter's struggling psyche, particularly as the war came to a close, and the specter of a more permanent working mother provoked anxiety. (69)

That women have indeed used the role of mother as a way to demonstrate power in a society in which they otherwise have little to show, is an idea not entirely discounted by feminist critics. Adrienne Rich herself agrees that such behavior does occur: "Powerless women have always used mothering as a channel--narrow but deep--for their own human will to power, their need to return upon the world what it has visited on them" (38). However, such instances of a mother's willful demonstration of power would not have the impact on us it does if not for the overarching belief that mothers are gentle creatures, prone to nurturance over violence. This general belief makes those mothers who exhort power over their children or over the larger world into criminals against motherhood:

As always, it is precisely because of prevailing mother-constructs that we expect, or indeed demand, that mothers be gentle and self-sacrificing. Their deviation is then all the more reprehensible. Men, meanwhile, are not expected to be "gentle," and hence their abuse is more socially acceptable. According to Paula Caplan mothers are blamed for more than seventy kinds of problems; fathers almost none. (Kaplan 193)

Not only is a proper mother supposed to embrace her powerlessness and be nurturing at all times, but lest one be labeled a monstrous mother, mothers are never supposed to show anger. Women who display anger are often labeled as difficult complainers who cannot be trusted and have no legitimate reason for their feelings. Mothers who display anger have the added detriment of being labeled bad mothers. It is often believed that a woman with anger cannot properly give care to her children. "The cultural separation between care and anger, care and dis-interest,

makes it as impossible for mothers to integrate anger into their activity of mothering as for mothers to care for themselves even as they nurture their children” (Hirsch 170).

Adrienne Rich, in particular, looks beyond the cultural stigma of anger to the possible reasons why a mother may feel it. Not only does she see the possibility of anger and love coexisting, but she sees in some women’s anger the results of cultural demands and pressures that frustrate many: “Love and anger can coexist concurrently; anger at the conditions of motherhood can become translated into anger at the child, along with the fear that we are not “loving”; grief at all we cannot do for our children in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration” (Rich 52).

A mother’s anger and feelings of ambivalence or frustration with her children are culturally unacceptable. Whereas a woman may feel a host of emotions towards and about her children in the course of her role as mother, she is not free to show all these feelings, lest she be labeled a bad mother. “She can be honest about anything else, but the myth that mothers always love their children is so controlling that even the daughter who can admit disliking her mother, when her own time comes, will deny all but positive emotions toward her children” (Friday 9). The monstrous mother trope often takes advantage of the cultural fear of ambivalent mothers by showing mothers with anything other than absolute and unquestioning devotion to their children as witches and criminals. In the plays I will be examining in this chapter, several of the monstrous mothers are also murderers. Such representations clearly show that an angry mother can become a monstrous one, capable of almost anything.

The ambivalence of many mothers can be compounded by the frustrations many women feel over the constraints placed on women in American society. Throughout the twentieth

century, women have been asked to sacrifice their personal desires and goals for the greater good. As in the post-World War II years, when women were asked to return to the home to repopulate the nation and give their jobs to returning GIs, women have often been asked to give up their career aspirations to play a supporting role in their marriages. Betty Friedan discusses the “problem with no name” in *The Feminine Mystique*, the problem of American women feeling unfulfilled by their role of wife and mother, which often comes about because these women’s aspirations were unrealized in favor of career motherhood.

The plays I have chosen to illustrate the trope of the monstrous mother are alike in that the mothers suffer from severe disappointments, which have turned them into the aggressive, hate-filled women they have become. The daughters they attack are largely attempting to stand against their mothers’ machinations while attempting to insulate themselves against their mothers’ hurtful influences. In addition, the majority of the plays show a mother who has lived without the control of a husband for an extended period of time. These mothers’ desire to rid themselves of the patriarchy is shown in how they prefer to live without a husband, sometimes going as far as to plot their husbands’ deaths. Except for the final example, *The Verge*, each play contains a mother who is single at the end of the play, and even in *The Verge*, the mother rejects her husband by carrying on multiple affairs. Overall, these plays belong to a corpus that shows women to be capable of turning against everyone in their lives, including those daughters who have no power to resist or defend against their mothers.

The first play I will be examining in light of the monstrous mother trope uses as its inspiration the classical paradigm of the monstrous mother: Clytemnestra. In his 1931 trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Eugene O’Neill transplants the myth from Ancient Greece to post-

civil war America. Written before Wylie's book, the context of O'Neill's work is an America in which women had recently received the right to vote. Fears of the New Woman and women's increasing entrance into male dominated occupations led to concerns over masculine women. These concerns and resentments contributed to the renewed support for the monstrous mother model to gain a foothold on the American consciousness illustrated by Wylie.

O'Neill uses the myth of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and their children as a backdrop to explore Freud's writings about family desire. His choice of this particular myth shows how strong the character of Clytemnestra and her particular style of mothering remain in the mythical history of the West. Though the myth is thousands of years old, O'Neill's work showed that it still had strong cultural resonance in the twentieth century.

Mourning Becomes Electra examines the conflicts and incestuous love that corrupt the Mannon family and lead to the death of all but Lavinia, the daughter and Electra figure. The world of this play is one in which the mother-daughter relationship is doomed to be destructive and unhealthy. "In his trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill identifies life with the intensified morbidity of the world he has constructed, a world without healing and without redemption" (Chioles 54). Virginia Floyd likewise characterizes the Mannon family as trapped within their unhealthy family relationships: "Normal love and emotional channels are blocked, and denied love finds an abnormal expression in sexual perversion: lust and incest" (403).

Mourning Becomes Electra is a play made up in three parts. The first part, *The Homecoming*, tells the story of Ezra Mannon's return from the Civil War. In his absence, his wife Christine has begun an affair with Captain Brant, a distant cousin of her husband's; this affair greatly offends Christine's daughter Lavinia, whose loyalty to her father is extreme. When

Christine learns that Lavinia is intent on informing her father of the affair and thereby sabotaging any attempt by her mother to continue her relationship, Christine decides the only answer is to kill Ezra, setting herself free from the marriage and making a marriage with Captain Brant possible. After the murder, Lavinia is suspicious of her mother. When her brother Orin returns in the second play, *The Hunted*, she informs him of her mother's affair and the murder of their father. Deeply offended by the notion of his mother involved with another man, Orin, under the direction of Lavinia, murders Captain Brant. Christine, distraught over the death of her lover, kills herself. The final play of the trilogy, *The Haunted*, shows the aftermath of these murders. Orin and Lavinia, after returning from an extended vacation, return to the Mannon house. Deeply disturbed and guilt-ridden, Orin kills himself, leaving Lavinia alone. Upon deciding that death would be a coward's way out, Lavinia decides to live alone, locked up with the ghosts of her family in the Mannon house.

In moving the original myth forward two millennia and around the world, O'Neill makes several changes to the plot. In doing so, he changes a story that spoke of a family cursed to deliver violence upon itself through generations, and makes it primarily about the conflict between Lavinia and Christine. The deaths of the father and brother in the play come from the primary conflict of mother and daughter, both of whom want control over the males of the family, and consequently the family itself.

One of the most significant changes O'Neill makes to the story of the *Oresteia* is the erasure of the figure of Iphigenia. In the Ancient Greek plays that enact the myth of Agamemnon's family, Iphigenia's death is Clytemnestra's main reason for turning against her husband and plotting his death. In the myth, it is the offense of killing her daughter, an offense

committed against her as a mother, which is the catalyst for her revenge against her husband. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the figure of Iphigenia is removed from the story, removing from Christine, the Clytemnestra figure, the persona of offended mother. In O'Neill's story, Christine kills her husband for entirely selfish reasons, so that she may leave the family and live with her lover, Captain Brant. In taking away the figure of Iphigenia, O'Neill takes from the Clytemnestra figure her right to be angry as a mother, and any sense that the murder she commits is in some way righteous. Rather than gaining justice for her sacrificed daughter, Christine gains only a chance at escape from her unhappy marriage.

Another significant alteration in the adapted story is the cause of the death of the Clytemnestra character. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Christine commits suicide, rather than being murdered by her son and daughter. This keeps the hands of Orin and Lavinia comparatively clean as compared to their Greek counterparts. However, this difference does not prevent Christine's children from feeling more guilt than did Clytemnestra's. Rather, the guilt of killing their mother leads Orin to kill himself and Lavinia to withdraw from the world.

Like Clytemnestra, Christine attempts to justify her emotions and motivations to her daughter. Christine attempts to communicate her motivations to Lavinia, this time not as a mother, but as an equal: "You will listen! I'm talking to you as a woman now, not as mother to daughter! That relationship has no meaning between us! You've called me vile and shameless! Well, I want you to know that's what I've felt about myself for over twenty years, giving my body to a man I--" (O'Neill 286). It is significant that O'Neill gives Christine a moment to justify her development into a monstrous mother. This moment, though it fails to entirely mitigate Christine's coldness, complicates the character by making her slightly sympathetic.

However, Lavinia rejects her mother's attempts to explain. Their ambivalent relationship has done a thorough job of distancing the women into combative enemies.

Christine's primary soliloquy of explanation occurs when Lavinia confronts her mother about Christine's cold feelings towards Lavinia: "So, I was born of your disgust! I've always guessed that, Mother—ever since I was little—when I used to come to you—with love—but you would always push me away! I've felt it ever since I can remember—your disgust! Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you!" (O'Neill 287). Christine responds in her own defense, attempting to explain how her disinterest in her daughter began: "I tried to love you. I told myself it wasn't human not to love my own child, born of my body. But I never could make myself feel you were born of any body but his [Ezra's]! You were always my wedding night to me—and my honeymoon!" (O'Neill 287).

As she tries to explain, Christine's distaste for her daughter is an extension of her hatred for her husband. Christine blames her estrangement from her daughter on Ezra's poisonous influence. Christine's ominous allusion to her wedding night conjures images of a bride forced to have sex with her new husband against her will. Such insinuations of conjugal rape explain Christine's coldness toward her daughter, the physical evidence of that rape. Christine fails to garner the sympathy she may have hoped for from Lavinia after this confession.

Milora ultimately blames the failure of communication between mother and daughter on Christine: "In the dialogue between Lavinia and Christine, it is apparent that Christine has never loved her daughter and that she failed to serve as a mirroring selfobject...Understandably, Lavinia turned to her father when she was a child and established an archaic selfobject with him" (98). While it is indeed understandable that Lavinia's personality has been deeply affected by

her mother's coldness, it is beneficial to listen to Christine's attempts to explain herself. Rather than being simply a cold woman without cause, Christine expresses reasons for her coldness towards her daughter that point to greater social causes. Christine dislikes her daughter because of the social demand that she marry and have sexual intercourse with a man she does not love. Christine cannot divorce her feelings of disgust for her marital obligations from the direct result—her daughter. Neither of these women is innocent of wrongdoing in their ongoing battles, but there is sympathy to be felt for each woman, whose pain and disappointment is palpable.

In Christine, one can find many characteristics of the monstrous mother, including a flagrant sexuality. The absence of warmth on the part of Christine is also signified by her level of sexuality. Sexual women are rarely represented as warm, caring mothers. O'Neill makes it clear early in the play that Christine is a sexual character through his written characterization in the stage directions:

Christine Mannon is a tall striking-looking woman of forty but she appears younger. She has a fine, voluptuous figure and she moves with a flowing animal grace. She wears a green satin dress, smartly cut and expensive, which brings out the peculiar color of her thick curly hair, partly a copper brown, partly a bronze gold, each shade distinct and yet blending with the other. Her face is unusual, handsome rather than beautiful. (O'Neill 266)

Such a characterization emphasizes Christine's sensuality. Her character invites tactile contact with her satin dress, and sexuality is clearly implied by her voluptuousness and "flowing animal grace." These details place Christine in the realm of the hyper-feminine by emphasizing animal movement over reason and higher thought. Christine's appearance signifies a sexuality that is expressed for herself and her lover, rather than for her husband. She uses this sexuality to fulfill her own desires and to affect the men around her. Rather than use this sexuality for the benefit

of the patriarchy, it becomes a tool of resistance in the hands of Christine.

Christine's sensuality is contrasted sharply with her daughter's lack thereof. Lavinia is "twenty-three but looks considerably older. Tall like her mother, her body is thin, flat-breasted and angular, and its unattractiveness is accentuated by her plain black dress. Her movements are stiff and she carries herself with a wooden, square-shouldered, military bearing" (O'Neill 267). While her mother evinces conspicuous sensuality, Lavinia has embraced austerity. She makes every attempt to be as little like her mother as possible, as O'Neill states in his stage directions, "it is evident Lavinia does all in her power to emphasize the dissimilarity rather than the resemblance to her parent" (267). She has even gone as far as to pull her hair back severely, to disguise that it is the same color and texture as her hated mother's.

This contrast in the appearance of mother and daughter helps to emphasize their deep estrangement. While one seeks to draw attention to her femininity, the other seeks to obscure that trait in favor of qualities more often associated with men. In contrast to her mother's appearance and movements, Lavinia's femininity is noticeable by its absence. Her black dress makes her into a perpetual mourner, calling attention to herself as an untouchable woman who has removed herself from the heterosexual economy. Her "military bearing" is the opposite of her mother's "animal grace." Where Christine's movements emphasize fluidity and sensuality, Lavinia's calls to mind a more severe, forbidding person. Lavinia strives to achieve supreme control over herself. She has effaced any hints of sexuality, she moves and commands with military precision, and her costume draws attention to her withdrawal from the social world. Lavinia's costume becomes a protest against her mother's use of sexuality as a tool to gain power. By contrast, Lavinia rejects all outward appearance of sexuality, preferring to stay

modest and reserved.

The contrast between these two women is made even clearer when, as the course of the trilogy unfolds, they attempt to create competing alliances to engage in their private battle. The members of each woman's alliance change as Christine and Lavinia struggle to gain supporters for their sides.

The most powerful ally over whom the two women fight is Ezra Mannon. While Lavinia is loyal to her father above all others, and appears to have the upper hand in gaining his support against her mother, Christine still manages to convince her husband that she has been a faithful wife in his absence. The scenes after Ezra's return from war show how the two women seek to undermine each other's relationship with Ezra. While Ezra was at war, Lavinia wrote to him about Captain Brant's visits to the Mannon house. Her attempt was to inform her father about her mother's affair without baldly stating that Captain Brant was her mother's lover. Knowing that Lavinia hadn't made a formal accusation in her letters to Ezra, Christine takes action by telling her husband that Brant was her daughter's beau:

Mannon—Vinnie wrote me you'd had company. I never heard of him. What business had he here?

Christine—*(with an easy smile)* You had better ask Vinnie! He's her latest beau! She even went walking in the moonlight with him!

Lavinia—*(with a gasp at being defied so brazenly)* Oh!

Mannon—*(now jealous and suspicious of his daughter)* I notice you didn't mention that in your letter, young lady! (304)

Here Christine successfully manages to deflect her daughter's intimations of an inappropriate relationship between herself and Brant, while simultaneously creating distance between Ezra and Lavinia. Ezra becomes "jealous and suspicious" when he hears that his daughter might have had a swain in his absence. Here, Christine forces her daughter on the defensive by creating

opposition between Lavinia and her father. Her position strengthens by casting her daughter as inconsiderate of her father: “And I think Vinnie is extremely inconsiderate the moment you’re home—to annoy you with such ridiculous nonsense! (*She turns to Lavinia.*) I think you’ve done enough mischief. Will you kindly leave us?” (O’Neill 305). In this scene, Christine gains the upper hand in her battle with Lavinia by gaining the attention of Ezra and placing Lavinia on the defensive.

Lavinia is also motivated against her mother by a desire to protect the integrity of the Mannon family honor. Lavinia repeatedly declares that her mother’s affair is a disgrace that needs to be punished. The motivations for such a declaration come from outside the confines of Freudian psychology. Instead, they are caused by the patriarchal notion of protecting the male bloodline, which comes under fire when Christine has sex with a man not her husband. Here again, the daughter has upheld the patriarchy, while her mother is attacking it.

Another character over whom the two women fight is Orin Mannon. Orin loves his mother with an incestuous passion, a feeling that Christine returns. The intensity of that relationship places Orin, in the beginning of the tale, into an alliance with his mother. This alliance comes under attack by Lavinia immediately upon Orin’s return from the war. He, too, had received word from Lavinia about the visits of Captain Brant, but, like his father, Orin does not come home convinced of any wrongdoing on Christine’s part. Knowing of his attachment to his mother, Lavinia must begin early to coax him into allying with her against Christine, “All I want to do is warn you to be on your guard. Don’t let her baby you the way she used to and get you under her thumb again. Don’t believe the lies she’ll tell you! Wait until you’ve talked to me!” (O’Neill 329).

Lavinia eventually succeeds in gaining Orin's support by convincing him of Christine's affair with Brant. Jealous of his mother cheating on him with another man, Orin kills Captain Brant under Lavinia's direction. This mutual crime solidifies Orin's switch from his mother's to his sister's control, a power under which he remains through Christine's suicide until his own.

The battle between Christine and Lavinia over Captain Brant is subtler. He is always allied with Christine, though he becomes a spy in the camp of her enemy by pretending to court Lavinia for an evening. Christine convinces her lover to pretend an infatuation with Lavinia in order to confuse Lavinia's growing suspicions about the affair. After a walk in the moonlight and a kiss, Lavinia unravels the deception, quickly developing a disgust for Brant. That Christine had taken the step of sabotaging her daughter's love life illustrates the degree to which the battle between the two women has escalated. The use of Brant as a confederate shows how much the two women themselves realize how much their alliances matter. They manipulate the men in their lives to carry out the action in their war, while the women themselves maintain the status as generals in the conflict, focusing on strategy and tactics.

The battle between mother and daughter ends up destroying the lives of both women in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. While Christine commits suicide, Lavinia is haunted by her guilt and chooses to live a life of suffering in atonement for her deeds. The final play of the trilogy, *The Haunted*, depicts the end of the Mannon family, as well as the way that the battle between mother and daughter continues even after Christine's death.

The Haunted begins with the return of Lavinia and Orin after an extended vacation. The most striking feature upon their return is the degree to which Lavinia's appearance and manner have changed. O'Neill's stage directions speak of this change as readily apparent: "One is at

once aware of an extraordinary change in her [...] She now bears a striking resemblance to her mother in every respect, even to being dressed in the green her mother had affected” (385). This new resemblance becomes a major point of concern in *The Haunted*. Orin addresses the cause and meaning of this dramatic change: “You don’t know how like Mother you’ve become, Vinnie...I mean the change in your soul, too. I’ve watched it ever since we sailed for the East. Little by little it grew like Mother’s soul—as if you were stealing hers—as if her death had set you free—to become her!” (388).

Growing into her mother’s twin has brought Lavinia closer to her mother than she had ever been before. Whereas in the first play Lavinia and Christine had expressed the degree to which they never understood one another, the third play of the trilogy shows mother and daughter after that distance had been erased to the point where they inhabit the same body. Lavinia, however, is poisoned by this possession. When her father was alive, Lavinia was willfully unaware of the unhealthy and destructive things at work in the Mannon household. Christine had attempted to communicate her distaste for these things to her daughter, but Lavinia could only see the family from her own perspective. Fused with her mother, she is able to see the family from her mother’s viewpoint, and is horrified by the destruction her family has wrought. Her final act of the play shows Lavinia accepting the penance for her entire family’s misdeeds, because she is able to see, as she never was before, that her family was not the all-powerful and positive group she had previously thought:

I’m the last Mannon. I’ve got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I’ll never go out or see anyone! I’ll have the shutters nailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I’ll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! I know they will see to it I live for a long time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born! (O’Neill 423)

In the third play of the trilogy, Lavinia had grown from Ezra's daughter into Christine's daughter, switching the parent with whom she shares a resemblance and characteristics. With Lavinia's decision to punish herself, these two versions of the Mannon daughter conflict. The daughter of the father wins out over the daughter of the mother in the end, declaring the need for retribution and absolution against herself and the past generations of Mannons.

Though the internal feelings and impulses of monstrous mothers are rarely examined in theatrical representation, the external actions receive examination from many directions. In the plays in which monstrous mothers occur, the mother is given little, if any, space to defend herself. Instead, the rest of the characters judge the mother. Such plays are often told from the daughter's point of view. As the victim of the relationship who must foil her mother, the daughter must help the audience to understand just how monstrous her mother is, and why she must overthrow the woman. Simone de Beauvoir has written of the judgments of such women: "In recent literature the "bad" mother has been frequently portrayed, and if such types seem somewhat exceptional, it is because most women have the morality and decency to repress their spontaneous impulses; nevertheless these impulses suddenly flash out at times in angry scenes, slaps, punishments, and the like" (573). However, Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky encapsulate the reasons why such judgments are often injurious: "Fundamentally, the "bad" mother serves as a scapegoat, a repository for social or physical ills that resist easy explanation or solution" (22).

The final result of Christine Mannon's monstrous mothering is the destruction of her entire family. If she had been content with staying at home and serving as a subservient sexual

partner to her husband, as well as self-sacrificing mother to her children, the destruction of the entire family might have been avoided. Her resistance to such roles ended up devastating not only herself, but also her husband, lover, and children. The bodies scattered around the stage after the performance of *Mourning Becomes Electra* can all be traced back to Christine's pursuit of her own sexual fulfillment. Her monstrosity results in multiple deaths and the end of the Mannon family line. The lesson left with the audience of this play is that if Christine Mannon had been a better mother, a tragedy might have been avoided.

At the end of the decade in which O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* was first produced, another play outlining the destructive powers of a monstrous mother upon the life of a daughter was written by Lillian Hellman. Produced in 1939, just before Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* came to print, Lillian Hellman's play *The Little Foxes* was being written at the same time as Wylie's composition. The social context of these two works is the same; they were written at a time in American history when women were increasingly looking outside the home for occupation, gaining education at unprecedented rates, and during a time when Freud's psychoanalysis was becoming widely accepted in medical and intellectual circles.

The Little Foxes takes place over three days in 1900. As the Hubbard men scheme to build a cotton mill, they lie, steal, and cheat, each fighting for dominance in a family rife with struggle. The play takes place in the Southern home of Regina Hubbard Giddens, whose husband Horace is hospitalized at Johns Hopkins with a terminal illness. Regina's daughter, Alexandra, called "Zan," is an energetic sixteen-year-old fiercely devoted to her father, a devotion that clearly demonstrates her commitment to patriarchal authority. The scheme to build a cotton mill is created by Regina's brothers, Ben and Oscar. When Horace refuses to give them

money towards the project, they steal it from him. Horace eventually dies, with his wife looking on and refusing him the medicine that would prolong his life. Regina then gains the upper hand over her brothers by threatening them with her knowledge of their illegal activities. In contrast to her daughter, Regina destroys the patriarchy, killing her husband and upsetting the balance of power in the Hubbard family.

Regina Hubbard Giddens is the main character of this play. It is Regina's struggles and machinations that weave the play and characters together. Though her actions are reprehensible, she is a seductive character as well. Regina's ability to pit evil against evil and win the struggle against her brothers is attractive to audiences, who made *The Little Foxes* a very successful play in its first run, and have continued to make the play a staple of theaters all over the country.

William Wright comments on the relationship between theater audiences and Regina:

She is the "heroine" of the play, yet allows her husband to die, so she is, in effect, a murderess. And we cannot applaud murderesses, at least not from the clearheaded distance of the scholarly study. But Regina's hold over audiences raises the suggestion that we can applaud them from a theater seat. Hellman has created perhaps her most vivid character in Regina. She is smart, good-looking and funny—all winning attributes in a heroine. She is strong, allows no one to push her around and is cannily resourceful in getting what she wants...A Broadway theater audience is not likely to scorn her for that. (153)

We are allowed subtle glimpses into the reasons why Regina is as she is. Her powerful and wealthy father left his money to his sons and none to Regina, who was forced to marry Horace to support herself. Regina has a good head for business and a will to succeed, but she lives in a time and place that does not value such characteristics in a woman. She resents the circumstances that have led her to where she is, and understandably is seeking another path, even if this means destroying her family members, including her daughter, to achieve her aims.

Regina has many classic characteristics of a monstrous mother. She is emotionally cold towards her daughter and other family members. Regina participates in hastening the death of her husband and therefore depriving her daughter of a beloved father. She also recognizes the use value of her daughter toward her own goals. Regina also possesses a classic trait of the monstrous mother: flagrant sexuality.

In the first scene of *The Little Foxes*, the Hubbards are entertaining William Marshall, a Chicago businessman who plans to enter into the cotton mill scheme with them. It is clear from their flirtatious banter that Regina would not be averse to engaging in a sexual relationship with Marshall, nor he with her. Their final words point towards their mutual desire:

Regina: I don't like to say good-bye to you, Mr. Marshall.

Marshall: Then we won't say good-bye. You have promised that you would come and let me show you Chicago. Do I have to make you promise again?

Regina, *looks at him as he presses her hand*: I promise again. [...]

Marshall, *as he passes Regina*: Remember.

Regina: I will. (Hellman 25)

These two are clearly hoping to form a tryst, though both are married to others. The promise of an affair with Marshall is so strong that Regina continues to use a trip to Chicago as her motivation throughout the play. The very sexuality Regina shows the audience in the first scene of the play shows the audience that she is at the least an unconventional woman, and at worst a selfish, promiscuous harridan with little loyalty for any member of her family, be they her husband, daughter, or brothers.

In *The Little Foxes*, Regina and Alexandra have a complicated relationship. In the beginning of the play, the two are politely distant. There are no great combative scenes, and Alexandra is respectful of her mother's wishes. The power her mother possesses is never far

from their interactions, however. At the end of the first act, after Regina has declared that she is sending her daughter to bring back the absent Horace, she demands that Alexandra follow her to bed. After speaking a few more lines, Addie the housekeeper says to Alexandra, “Come on, baby. Your mama’s waiting for you, and she ain’t nobody to keep waiting” (Hellman 44). Here we can see the constant, unspoken threat of Regina in Alexandra’s life. Though she has not been deliberately abusive, she is not someone to be angered if one can help it.

Throughout the play, Regina shows neither warmth or affection to Alexandra, nor much concern when the Hubbard brothers begin to scheme an alliance between Alexandra and Leo. Leo is a young man of twenty, who works at the town bank under Horace. He frequently visits Mobile to employ prostitutes, and is a man taken to beating horses. While the whole family knows of these proclivities, Regina does not object to such a man as a mate for her daughter. Though Alexandra is horrified at the suggestion of such a match, Regina appears rather nonchalant. The Hubbard brothers are convinced the marriage will be a great thing for the family. By marrying the cousins, their parents and uncle believe they can get even more access to Horace’s wealth through his daughter’s inheritance.

Regina is not above using her daughter’s relationship with Horace to engineer things to her own advantage. When she wishes Horace to come home in order to participate in the cotton mill scheme, she chooses to send Alexandra to summon him. She knows that Alexandra and Horace have an affectionate relationship, which Regina wishes to exploit for her own ends. Regina tells her daughter, “You’re to tell Papa how much you missed him, and that he must come home now—for your sake. Tell him that you *need* him home” (Hellman 41).

Regina also insists that Alexandra go alone on this quest. There are several reasons for

this. Regina is insistent that Alexandra do this because she is growing older and needs to take on greater responsibilities. She says, “I should think you’d like going alone. At your age it certainly would have delighted me. You’re a strange girl, Alexandra. Addie has babied you so much” (Hellman 40). By making her daughter go alone, against both Alexandra’s wishes and those of Addie and Birdie, Regina is showing the whole family that she is still in control of Alexandra, and still wields the most power as far as her daughter’s future and actions are concerned. On a more practical note, Regina must send Alexandra alone because there are no “safe” people to accompany her. If Birdie or Addie goes with Alexandra, as each woman offers, they would have an opportunity to warn Horace of the machinations awaiting him at home, which could potentially thwart Regina’s plans for him.

By arranging this trip, Regina shows that she recognizes her daughter’s use value very well. She recognizes her daughter as a potential pawn to be exploited in her war with her husband. Because Horace has a close relationship with Alexandra, he has a weakness that can be used against him. Regina, in keeping emotionally distant from Alexandra, does not have such a weakness. This is demonstrated in the scene when the marriage between Leo and Alexandra is discussed. Because she is not emotionally close to her daughter, Regina is capable of calmly discussing the proposed marriage, as Horace is not. When Horace learns of the idea, he is horrified and forbids any such event taking place. Because Regina has an emotional distance, she does not respond with emotional outbursts, so can tease Oscar with the possibility of her involvement in the scheme. This gives Regina leverage for future dealings with Oscar. She can threaten the removal of her consideration in the future when she wants to keep him in line.

The most important element of the relationship between Alexandra and Regina is Horace.

While Regina has little affection for Horace, Alexandra is devoted to her father. After bringing him home from the hospital, she becomes severely agitated when her mother begins to harangue Horace in the upstairs, unseen, portion of the house. She attempts to stand up to her mother by saying, “Mama–Mama–don’t...” (Hellman 74), but the argument continues, so Alexandra attempts to enlist the help of her uncle Ben. She then furiously demands of her mother, “How can you treat Papa like this? He’s sick. He’s very sick. Don’t you know that? I won’t let you” (Hellman 75), to which her mother replies, “Mind your own business, Alexandra.” Here we have the beginning of a change in the relationship between Alexandra and Regina. While Alexandra was respectfully distant and obedient before, when her father is threatened, she stands up to her mother. This growing sense of resistance is solidified when Alexandra is horrified to hear her mother say to her father, “I hope you die. I hope you die soon. I’ll be waiting for you to die” (Hellman 77).

Alexandra has another mother in her life, though, who can stand as a counterpoint to Regina’s lack of concern. The woman who forms a more traditional maternal relationship with Alexandra is the housekeeper Addie, whose mothering stands out so clearly in *The Little Foxes* because it is radically different from that of Regina Hubbard Giddens. Addie’s position is that of servant to the Giddens family, a servant who showers her employer’s daughter, “Miss Zan,” with warmth and affection. Addie’s character is difficult to fully accept. While she is one of the few truly sympathetic characters in the play, she all too frequently calls to mind the “Mammy” stereotype so common in twentieth-century representations of African-Americans.

Addie is clearly the woman who has raised Alexandra, and who feels the most anxiety over what is best for the girl. However, Addie’s choices are limited. She is a servant of the

family, dependant on them for her financial survival. Contrasted with the mothering shown by Regina towards her daughter, Addie shows a “natural” inclination to mother the girl. Addie’s mothering is “natural,” in a manner similar to that discussed by Walters regarding postwar representations of mothers: “Although white motherhood becomes problematized with the onslaught of popular psychology and the postwar rush to domesticity, black motherhood remains completely ‘natural’ and assumed to be inevitably beneficent” (89). Under the stereotype that has some characteristics in common with Addie, a “Mammy” is valued for her mothering skills, but only towards white children. Addie is not valued for mothering her own children. In fact, the audience never learns whether or not Addie has any children of her own. The use-value of a mother is never as clear as it is in the “Mammy” figure. By hiring an African-American woman to fill the role of mother for Alexandra, the Giddens family demonstrates that such work can be passed on to another, and that financial dependence can keep such a worker in that role. Addie does not in any way resist her use for this purpose. Rather, she is all too happy to be used as a surrogate mother for Alexandra. The fantasy of the African-American woman who is happy to serve in this capacity, out of love for her white family, is a fantasy of the ruling white class that lies at the heart of the “Mammy” stereotype.

As Alexandra’s primary caregiver, Addie fills the role of Alexandra’s protector against the machinations of Regina and the Hubbard brothers. At the first opportunity, Addie informs Horace about the plans to marry Alexandra off to her cousin Leo. In this, Addie shows loyalty to the man who employs her and the girl she is paid to mother. Though the script describes Addie as “hesitating” before she chooses to reveal the marriage plan to Horace, she says, “I’m telling you. There’s going to be a wedding—(*Angrily turns away*) Over my dead body there is”

(Hellman 58). The indecision Addie shows to Horace contrasts sharply with the words that reveal Addie's determination to protect Alexandra. However, within the family, Addie is basically powerless to stop harm from coming to Alexandra. Addie must rely on Horace's intervention, because realistically there is no way for Addie to prevent the powerful Hubbards from doing whatever they wish.

Addie's mothering also reveals itself in the message she delivers to Alexandra, which the girl later repeats in her repudiation of Regina. Addie says, "Yeah, they got mighty well off cheating niggers. Well, there are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it like in the Bible with the locusts. Then there are people who stand around and watch them eat it. (*Softly*) Sometimes I think it ain't right to stand and watch them do it" (84). Here Addie shows her disgust with the Hubbards and their ilk. She is neither ignorant nor forgiving of the way the Hubbard family have treated people of color or their own family. Her soft explanation that it isn't right to "stand and watch them do it" seems an illustration of Addie's own frustrations. She can see the Hubbards enacting their schemes, but has neither the economic nor social power to resist them. She can only be a bystander, telling Horace about what is going on, and subtly steering Alexandra into seeing her family's crimes.

Addie also functions as the outlet of hope for Alexandra. Horace uses her as a way to extract Alexandra from the Hubbard influence in the event of his death. He tells Addie to take the seventeen hundred dollars from his desk and take Alexandra away. After his death, there will be no one to prevent the Hubbards from using Alexandra as a pawn in marriage or anything else they desire. Addie agrees to fill this role, though there are great risks to herself. In the final scene of the play, Addie stands by Alexandra as Regina ascends the stairs alone, suggesting that

even if Addie isn't able to take Alexandra away, Addie has more influence over Alexandra than does her mother. Symbolized by their body positions in this final scene, Alexandra has chosen Addie as her "true" mother, quoting her words and rejecting the Hubbards. Thus, she stands alongside Addie, while Regina drifts away alone. The monstrous mother has been overthrown by taking away her power to manipulate her daughter.

After the death of Horace, hastened by Regina's refusal to help him get to his life-saving medicine, the relationship between Alexandra and Regina is forever changed. Without Horace between them, the two women have nothing in common, and their opposition is made clear. Alexandra declares that she will not go away with her mother as commanded, and when Regina declares that she may forbid Alexandra's rebellion, Alexandra responds, "Say it, Mama, say it. And see what happens" (Hellman 111). Regina doesn't forbid Alexandra to leave her. Rather, she begins to address her daughter almost as an equal, while offering another insight into her past: "I'd like to keep you with me, but I won't make you stay. Too many people used to make me do too many things. No, I won't make you stay" (Hellman 111). Though there is still no warmth in the interaction between mother and daughter, there is a sense that Regina does not see her daughter as an enemy, and has no desire to be deliberately cruel to her. Alexandra then delivers a scathing condemnation of her mother and her mother's family, calling them "people who eat the earth," and declaring that she will not stand around to watch the destruction. Regina's final words of the play are to her daughter, with a newfound respect:

Well, you have spirit, after all. I used to think you were all sugar water. We don't have to be bad friends. I don't want us to be bad friends, Alexandra. *Starts, stops, turns to Alexandra:* Would you like to come and talk to me, Alexandra? Would you—would you like to sleep in my room tonight? (Hellman 112)

Here Regina shows a vulnerability that she had not shown previously in the play. She makes a late effort to form some relationship with her daughter, but it is too late. Alexandra will not form a relationship with a woman who so callously caused the death of her father. Instead, she asks, “Are you afraid, Mama?” (112), and stands by Addie as Regina ascends the stairs alone, while the curtain descends.

In these closing lines between Regina and Alexandra, the play clearly speaks to the complicated opposition between mother and daughter. Though neither truly wishes to be enemies, Alexandra cannot forgive her mother’s cruelty, and Regina will not apologize for her actions. So, the two women stand in opposition to each other, a position they have grown into throughout the play. Lederer comments on the complex unsaid elements of this scene:

In *The Little Foxes* Hellman bumps Regina slightly at the end, turning her just enough to show another facet of her character, as she moves slowly into the dark at the top of the stairs. Regina stops the playacting for an instant to show us another dimension...It is only Regina who hints that her life could have been different: “Oh, Ben, if Papa had only left me his money” (44)

The Little Foxes leaves the audience with disgust for Regina Hubbard and a hope that Alexandra will be able to resist her machinations in the future with Addie’s help. The relationship between mother and daughter appears permanently broken. Alexandra will never be able to forgive her mother for Regina’s role in destroying Horace. The two women cannot interact without that fact intruding.

Their relationship is deeply affected by the role reversal in the final moments of the play. While Alexandra may seem the more defenseless of the two women without her father to protect her from the Hubbards, it is Regina who expresses vulnerability in her final invitation to have Alexandra join her in sleep. The audience is left to celebrate the downfall of a strong woman

who has successfully wrested power in her family. In this way, *The Little Foxes* upholds patriarchal standards of feminine behavior. Regina Hubbard, a strong woman who finds a way to exert her own power, is found wanting as a woman and a mother.

Several decades after *The Little Foxes*, Paul Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon-Marigolds* continued the trope of the monstrous mother. First produced in 1976, at the height of the second-wave of the feminist movement, Zindel's play dramatized a mother-daughter relationship little different from *Mourning Becomes Electra* or *The Little Foxes*, though it was first produced decades later than the others.

Though Zindel's play has many characteristics in common with other monstrous mother plays, it is unique in that its monstrous mother is also of a lower economic class. While Christine Mannon and Regina Giddens were wealthy and surrounded by physical comfort, Zindel's Beatrice must struggle to survive economically. This feature of Zindel's work gives his monstrous mother a distinct feature and suggests that monstrous mothers can exist on all levels of society. Beatrice has the added stress of being the sole breadwinner living in a tattered and threadbare home.

The Effect of Gamma Rays tells the story of Tillie, a girl living with her mother, sister, and elderly renter in a former vegetable store. Tillie is a good student, and though her mother often prevents her from attending the school she so loves, she manages to win an award for her science project. Tillie's mother Beatrice earns money for the small family by taking care of Nanny, an elderly woman whose own daughter pays for her to stay with Beatrice. Ruth is Tillie's sister, called "The Other Daughter" in Zindel's list of characters. Ruth suffers from convulsions apparently brought on by high emotion. Over the course of two acts, *The Effect of*

Gamma Rays shows Beatrice to be a monstrous mother. She is alternately cold and abusive, she smokes and drinks, she displays a conspicuous sexuality, she has failed to provide a stable home for her daughters, and even kills her daughter's pet rabbit while her daughter is receiving an award.

When first we meet Beatrice, she answers the phone. It is a call from Mr. Goodman, Tillie's science teacher and the man Tillie speaks of in a near-reverent manner. Beatrice proceeds to flirt with Mr. Goodman. Mr. Goodman has clearly called Beatrice to speak about Tillie, but Beatrice brushes off any real discussion of Tillie with, "I've tried just everything, but she isn't a pretty girl—I mean, let's be frank about it—she's going to have her problems" (Zindel 4). The next thing out of her mouth is to discern whether or not Mr. Goodman is married, and therefore available for her own sexual advances.

That Beatrice is completely unconcerned about Tillie's schoolwork, and uses the phone call from Mr. Goodman for her own purposes, shows a high degree of self-involvement. She isn't interested in her daughter, except to mention that she isn't a "pretty girl." After hanging up the phone, Beatrice changes the tone by which she addresses the subject of Mr. Goodman. She is first furious with Tillie for giving the teacher the impression that she's "running a concentration camp," then moves on to call Mr. Goodman "ugly," and speaks of her real feelings for the man she had just then pursued on the phone: "You know, I really feel sorry for him. I never saw a man with a more effeminate face in my life. When I saw you talking to him by the lobster tank I said to myself, 'Good Lord, for a science teacher my poor girl has got herself a Hebrew hermaphrodite'" (Zindel 7). She goes on to question Mr. Goodman's sexuality with, "he looks like the kind that would do his experimenting after sundown" (Zindel 9).

The contrast between Beatrice's behavior towards Mr. Goodman and her true opinions about him show that she is a woman fully aware of the power of showing multiple faces to the world. She is able to show men the face she wants them to see, a woman sexually attracted and available to them. However, in reality, she is playing a game with authority figures. She is a threat to patriarchal dominance, because she shows how easy it is for a person to play multiple roles, gaining control by convincing people she is other than she is.

We see both of Beatrice's daughters being harmed directly through Beatrice's unwillingness to provide affection and her violent actions of killing the rabbit and refusing to support Tillie's interests. We also see an instance of Ruth coming to harm through her convulsions. Because the medical reason for these convulsions is withheld from the audience, and because Beatrice's actions cause the most severe of the attacks, the audience is led to place the blame for the convulsions on the mother.

While Beatrice is abusive and cold, Ruth shows herself to be her mother's match. She calls her mother "Betty the Loon," a childhood nickname used to taunt Beatrice. When Ruth calls her mother this, Beatrice refuses to attend the awards assembly and "*breaks into tears that shudder her body*" (Zindel 91). Clearly Ruth is able to attack her mother with the same vitriol Beatrice uses to attack Ruth.

However, even with Ruth's unkind behavior towards her mother, neither daughter is even remotely as cruel or as abusive as their mother. When Ruth asks, "Why are you ashamed of me?" Beatrice answers, "I've been seen with a lot worse than you. I don't even know why I'm going tonight, do you know that? Do you think I give one goddam about the whole thing?" (Zindel 85). These are harsh words for Tillie's great achievement. Towards the pet rabbit the

girls love, Beatrice offers to “suffocate the bastard” (Zindel 59). Such warnings are borne out at the end of the play, when she kills the rabbit while the girls are going to the awards assembly.

Such instances of Beatrice’s abusive treatment of her daughters paint the character as an over-the-top monstrous mother. Though she occasionally feels bad about her treatment of Tillie, and takes care of Ruth after a convulsion by telling her a story, the overall thread of Beatrice’s character is that she is bitter and callous to anyone with whom she comes into contact. The only other person present in body in the play that can testify to this is Nanny, the elderly woman Beatrice cares for to earn money for her family.

Towards Nanny Beatrice appears somewhat kinder than towards her children. Though Beatrice has little respect or patience for the silent elderly woman, she is not directly cruel to her. Instead, Beatrice talks about Nanny to her daughters right in front of the elderly woman, secure in the knowledge that Nanny is too senile to understand: “Nanny’s quite a little cross to bear now aren’t you, Nanny dear? But you’re a little better than Mr. Mayo was—with the tumor on his brain—or Miss Marion Minto with her cancer, or Mr. Brougham...what was his first name?” (Zindel 31).

Beatrice’s attitude towards the elderly people she is supposed to be caring for is one of strained tolerance and veiled hostility. These people are little more than meal tickets to Beatrice, who sees little value in caring for the elderly. As if the audience did not have enough reasons to hate Beatrice, they are given a character that is abusive to children, animals, and the elderly.

Ironically, Beatrice has very strong opinions about the proper relationship between mother and daughter, which she relates in her comments on Nanny’s own daughter. Elsewhere Beatrice had berated her daughters for not properly respecting their mother. However, it is in her

comments about Nanny's daughter that Beatrice's attitudes toward the mother-daughter relationship become clear. Beatrice says:

You should have seen her daughter bring her here last week...I could have used you that day...She came in pretending she was Miss Career Women of the Year. She said she was in real estate and such a busy little women, such a busy little woman—she just couldn't give all the love and care and affection her little momsy needed anymore... (Zindel 33).

Here Beatrice shows a clear distaste for a woman who would hire a stranger to care for her mother, rather than do so herself. In Beatrice's opinion, a daughter has a duty to care for her mother with devotion and affection. Despite the type of mother Nanny had been towards her daughter, which is never discussed or described, Nanny's daughter has a clear duty to care for her mother, in Beatrice's opinion. Adding to the offense of this woman is that she has chosen her career over caring for her senile mother. To Beatrice, this is wrong. She sees the caring for the mother as the daughter's primary responsibility. This corresponds with her attitude towards her own daughters. She never considers whether or not she is deserving of her daughter's devotion and affection, but comes to demand it nonetheless.

Zindel attempts to complicate the one-dimensionality of Beatrice by including information on Beatrice's own unhappy past. Beatrice herself gives an account of this past to her daughters:

Do you know what I'd be now if it wasn't for this mud pool I got sucked into? I'd probably be a dancer. Miss Betty Frank, The Best Dancer of the Class of 19...something. One minute I'm the best dancer in school—smart as a whip—the head of the whole crowd! And the next minute...One mistake. That's how it starts. Marry the wrong man and before you know it he's got you tied down with two stones around your neck for the rest of your life. When I was in that lousy high school I was one of the most respected kids you ever saw. I used to wonder why people always said, "Why, just yesterday...why, just yesterday...why, just yesterday..." (Zindel 34-35)

Beatrice was raised largely by her father, with whom she worked selling produce. Beatrice married her daughters' father before her own father died, so that she could prove to her father she had someone to take care of her in his place. She occasionally speaks of failed attempts to enter real estate courses, or careers she nearly went into, but nothing worked out. Upon hearing Beatrice's version of her past, the audience is led to a measure of sympathy for the woman whose dreams have failed to materialize so many times. However, Ruth learns of a different version of Beatrice's past from a teacher who went to high school with Beatrice, a version that contradicts Beatrice's own: "Miss Hanley said she was crazy and she always has been crazy and she can't wait to see what she looks like after all these years. Miss Hanley said her nickname used to be *Betty the Loon* [...] She was just like you and everybody thought she was a big weirdo" (Zindel 75). Upon learning this information, the audience is forced to amend its opinion of Beatrice. Besides being an abusive, cruel mother, Beatrice is a pathetic woman, clinging to a pretend past to define her life in happier times.

Beatrice is also monstrous because she fights against patriarchal norms. As a single mother, Beatrice lives outside the direct supervision of a husband or father figure. She is a loose cannon, a woman who does not need to answer to any man, teaching her daughters that it is acceptable to live independent from men. Beatrice's ability to live in this position of resistance to patriarchal standards does not, in the end, truly show resistance to patriarchy. Instead, Beatrice's opposition teaches the lesson that a woman without a man to control her devolves into a monstrous mother. To combat her mother's anti-patriarchal ways, Tillie becomes a daughter who embraces the patriarchy and turns toward it as her deliverance. Though Tillie lives in a house full of women, she looks towards men, in particular her science teacher, as a savior.

Through several voice-overs, Tillie describes her science teacher as a nearly godlike figure. In the first such voice-over, she never mentions her science teacher's name, and he becomes the godlike "He:"

He told me to look at my hand, for a part of it came from a star that exploded too long ago to imagine. This part of me was formed from a tongue of fire that screamed through the heavens until there was our sun. And this part of me—this tiny part of me—was on the sun when it itself exploded and whirled in a great storm until the planets came to be. (Zindel 1)

From this speech, it is clear that Tillie looks to this "He" with a religious reverence. He possesses knowledge that he imparts to Tillie, which she uses to retreat from her unhappy family life into a world of wonder. In further voice-overs, Tillie continues to refer to this man as "He," which keeps him a figure detached from the real world. As an unseen, disembodied figure, "He" remains above human concerns. Tillie clearly prefers the male world as it is represented by Mr. Goodman, whose name describes what role he plays for her. He is a "good man," and also serves to create for Tillie the equation "Good = man." While her home is the world of women, a place of chaos, violence, and bodily dysfunction in the characters of Ruth and Nanny, the world of Mr. Goodman and men is a world of wonder and intellect, in which the body is overlooked in favor of the mind. In *The Effect of Gamma Rays*, Beatrice has created a world for her daughters that is unpleasant and filled with strife. Tillie, however, is saved from succumbing to this disastrous family through the intervention of a good man, a lesson that serves the patriarchy, for it shows how valuable the patriarchy is in cleaning up the apparent mess women make for their children. Like Electra, Tillie learns that loyalty to the patriarchy will bring her fulfillment, a fulfillment that can only come if a daughter turns away from a monstrous mother.

In all the plays I have analyzed thus far as representatives of the monstrous mother trope,

the focus is on the daughter as victim, though each allows the mother a brief moment to voice her own frustrations and difficulties. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Christine Mannon attempts to explain to her daughter that her forced marriage and powerlessness in the face of conjugal rape caused her coldness and monstrous motherhood. In *The Little Foxes*, Regina's ambitions to lead the family business are thwarted because she is a woman and her participation in commerce is considered improper. Her brothers are condescending to Regina, and she chafes under their disrespect. Beatrice, the monstrous mother in *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, is frustrated in her ambitions by her responsibilities toward her daughters, for whom she is the sole means of support. The descriptions of these mothers' frustrations, though contained within each play, are given little attention. The focus of these plays is not on the mother as a victim of circumstance, forced to be a monstrous mother by their situations, but rather on the daughter as victim of the mother's monstrosity.

Another perspective on these mothers' disappointments is possible, however. By focusing on the mother as a victim of the same trope, some authors have attempted to undermine the lessons that uphold the patriarchy and use the trope to instruct about the danger of curtailing women's ambition. In such resistant readings, the monstrous mother can be reclaimed and used as a tool to focus attention on the mother in different ways, to look at the pressures and contradictions working on the mothers who become monstrous. One such author who attempted to use the trope toward this end was Susan Glaspell in her 1921 work, *The Verge*.

In *The Verge*, a monstrous mother is plainly shown as cold and uncaring toward her daughter, but she is also shown as a sympathetic character whose life goals have been thwarted. Claire Archer is a horticulturist married to Harry. She is passionate about her plants, even going

as far as to divert heat from her home to heat her greenhouse. During the few days of the play, the Archers are entertaining Tom and Dick as guests in their home. Dick is a man with whom Claire has had a sexual affair in her past, while Tom is a man she believes to be her soul mate. During these days, Claire is also visited by her sister Adelaide, as well as her daughter Elizabeth. Elizabeth lives with her aunt Adelaide instead of her mother for most of the year. At this time, Claire is awaiting the blooming of a flower she calls “the Breath of Life.” This flower is one she has created herself through careful breeding. She is hoping to continue to breed the plant until she can add fragrance to it. Claire becomes increasingly agitated throughout the play as the frustrations of her life and work compound, culminating when she murders Tom.

The greatest change over the course of the play occurs in the character of Claire. She begins the play as an energetic woman, flirting with her guests and caring for her plants. Though Claire is somewhat selfish and self-centered, she is also charming and earnest in passions. As the play progresses, however, it becomes clear that Claire is deeply troubled. She is deeply dissatisfied with her options in life, a dissatisfaction that comes from high goals she has set for herself, the limitations placed upon her by her social position and gender, and the demands of her daughter, husband, and friends.

Claire’s moods change rapidly throughout the play. When the audience first sees her, she is angry that her husband and houseguests are invading the greenhouse, upsetting the carefully monitored temperature and environment. She instantly becomes depressed when her husband comments that Claire sees only what she wishes. The stage directions describe her sudden change in temperament. “She is disturbed—that troubled thing which rises from within, from deep, and takes Claire” (Glaspell 61). Moments later, she is flirting with Dick over their affair,

asking, “Was I a fascinating hostess last night, Dick?” (Glaspell 62).

To today’s audience, Claire would seem to be suffering from a serious psychiatric illness. Her depression and mood swings appear to call for medical intervention. However, it would be a mistake to discount Claire’s troubles as entirely the result of pathology. Glaspell’s play wants the audience to see these problems as symptoms of Claire’s great frustration with her life. She is supremely disappointed in the men in her life, with society, and most of all with her own inabilities to cause the changes she wants to see in the world.

Claire attempts to explain to Tom, Dick, and Harry the cause of her dissatisfaction and depression, but these men misunderstand her pronouncements. When Harry attempts to calm her down from her excited mania, she replies, “But it *can* be done! We need not be held in forms moulded for us. There is outness—and otherness” (Glaspell 64). Unfortunately, Claire lacks the words to fully express to her husband and friends why she feels compelled to extend her talents into developing new plant species. She wants to break out of the constraints of the roles allotted to her. Linda Ben-Zvi describes Claire’s motivations:

Her work with plants is a dramatic correlative for the struggle to free herself from those customs, traditions, and expectations that similarly fix women in place, a theme [Glaspell] had touched on repeatedly in her earlier plays and fiction but never so directly and forcefully as in this, her most daring and experimental work. (239)

Claire is concerned with rejecting “imprisoning patterns of being” (Nelligan 97). Those imprisoning patterns surround the various ways she is expected to behave as a middle-class woman in New England. Ben-Zvi describes Claire’s resistance to these roles. “She recognizes that to exist as merely the fulfillment of others’ dreams and wishes is to cease to exist for oneself. She, therefore, rebels against the stereotypical roles she is required to perform—wife,

mother, hostess, sister, good citizen—parts she is expected to play as written, leaving no room for interpretation or improvisation” (240).

Claire seeks relationships that will fulfill her without falling back on traditional patterns, but each relationship she has forged thus far has been disappointing. She describes her first marriage, to Elizabeth’s father, as a mistake. Her second marriage, to Harry, has been no more rewarding. She has had a sexual relationship with Dick, and while this has been a non-traditional relationship, Claire was not satisfied. Dick only wanted the excitement of sex with a married woman, not an emotional entanglement. Her relationship with Tom seems much more promising for Claire’s goals, but when he finally seems to understand her, Tom wants a traditional relationship, a disappointment which inspires Claire to kill him.

Claire’s role as a mother has been another letdown for her. She has had two children. Elizabeth is now seventeen years old, and Claire feels both unqualified and disinclined to mother her daughter. Claire’s son died when he was four years old. At the time of the play, he has been dead for many years. Though towards Elizabeth she is a monstrous mother, Claire’s reminiscences of her son show that it is not because she is incapable of warmth, but because she is unable to find a way to achieve her goals of living away from traditional constraints while still mothering. In speaking about her son, Claire presents herself as a loving mother:

I’ve known a few moments that were life. Why don’t they help me now? One was in the air. I was up with Harry—flying—high. It was about four months before David was born—the doctor was furious—pregnant women are supposed to keep to earth. We were going fast—I was flying—I had left the earth. And then—within me, movement, for the first time—stirred to life far in air—movement within. The man unborn, he too, would fly. And so—I always loved him. He was movement—and wonder. In his short life there were many flights. (Glaspell 87)

Claire is able to love her son because he exists mostly in imagination. He died before he

developed into a person who would follow the rules and regulations of society. David always exists in Claire's mind as a person of pure potential, not even touching the earth. She is unable to love Elizabeth in the same way because Elizabeth grew up and out of childhood's liminal space. While David lives only in Claire's memory, and so is able to be perfect, Elizabeth's presence prevents her from achieving the same sort of perfection.

The imminent arrival of Claire's daughter Elizabeth is introduced to the play towards the end of the first act. Elizabeth lives with her aunt, so Claire rarely sees her daughter. About Elizabeth's upcoming visit, Claire says, "A daughter is being delivered unto me this morning. I have a feeling it will be more painful than the original delivery. She has been, as they quaintly say, educated; prepared for her place in life" (Glaspell 70). Claire rejects her daughter because Elizabeth has been socialized into upper class New England society. She cannot accept a daughter whose outlook on life is so unlike her own. Makowsky comments on Glaspell's approach to this mother-daughter relationship:

Glaspell not only presents a heroine who rejects her assigned role as man's plaything, but challenges an even more basic cultural assumption, the unwavering, self-sacrificial devotion of a mother for her child. In an ironic reversal of the usual intergenerational scene, Claire rejects Elizabeth, her daughter from a previous marriage, because she is *not* a rebel. (79)

When Elizabeth visits her mother, she shares a story with the group that illustrates Claire's unsuitability as a mother. When Elizabeth was a child, dressing up a doll, Claire took the doll from Elizabeth and tore the clothes off the doll. "Claire is authoritarian in her denial of Elizabeth's play, conventional though the child's game may be. She does not explain her reasons to Elizabeth, but remains inarticulately violent and destructive, caring more about her own sense of appropriateness than about her daughter's treasured doll clothes" (Makowsky 79).

The violence of Claire's actions toward her child's toy shows a capacity for destruction that could easily have been turned on Elizabeth. Though Elizabeth is hurt by her mother's rejection, it is possible that in sending her to be raised by her sister, Claire saved her daughter from living a life with an abusive mother.

During the course of the second act of *The Verge*, in which Elizabeth visits her mother, she makes several overtures to repair their relationship, overtures which are rejected by Claire. When Elizabeth attempts to embrace her mother, Claire holds her at bay with a box. Claire also rejects Elizabeth's offers to help her with her greenhouse and botanical projects. Though she initially attempts to assuage Elizabeth's desire for a relationship by suggesting they spend some leisure time together, Claire's interaction with her daughter culminates at the end of the first act with an outburst toward her daughter. Claire expresses a great dissatisfaction with the plant she has created, the Edge Vine, which leads her to tear up the vine, a destruction of her creation that she follows with an attack on Elizabeth: "I'm not mad. I'm—too sane! (*pointing to ELIZABETH—and the words come from mighty roots*) To think that object ever moved my belly and sucked my breast!" (Glaspell 78).

These actions seem to sever her relationship with her daughter for good. When the second act opened, Claire was visited by her sister Adelaide, who came to discuss Elizabeth. Claire showed she is completely uninterested with Elizabeth, and feels no need to be other than a monstrous mother:

Adelaide: [...] Just what is the matter with Elizabeth?

Claire: Nothing is the matter with her. She is a tower that is a tower.

Adelaide: Well, is that anything against her?

Claire: She's just like one of her father's portraits. They never interested me. Nor does she.

Adelaide: A mother cannot cast off her own child simply because she does not

interest her!

Claire: Why can't she?

Adelaide: Because it would be monstrous!

Claire: And why can't she be monstrous—if she has to be? (Glaspell 79)

Claire isn't specifically defending herself to Adelaide with these words, but it is clear that she wishes to, in part. Claire is one of the mothers who has to be monstrous. She sees no other way for her to be true to herself. She does not want to mother, and doesn't particularly like Elizabeth, and doesn't feel the need to dissemble over these facts. She freely admits that she is not a good mother, an admission that horrifies Adelaide, who says, "A mother who does not love her own child! You are an unnatural woman, Claire" (Glaspell 84).

Claire's rejection of both her daughter and mothering does not prevent her from participating in creation, however. She is obsessed with creating new forms of plant life, which she insists must be better than older forms, but also must be completely separate from what has come before. Her obsession makes her husband and friends uneasy.

Harry: It would be all right if she'd just do what she did in the beginning—make the flowers as good as possible of their kind. That's an awfully nice thing for a woman to do—raise flowers. But there's something about this—changing things into other things—putting together and making queer new things—this—

Dick: Creating?

Harry: Give it any name you want it to have—it's unsettling for a woman. (Glaspell 65)

In the final act, as the rest of the house party are convinced Claire is losing her touch with reality and summon a psychiatrist to see her, Claire begins to speak in verse to the Breath of Life. "A thousand years from now, when you are but a form too long repeated, /Perhaps the madness that gave you birth will burst again, /And from the prison that is you will leap pent queernesses/To make a form that hasn't been—/To make a person new" (Glaspell 96).

Claire's opinion of creation is that as she creates new life, she is recreating herself. In the

final act, Claire is dissatisfied with her creation, because it has not sufficiently changed her own life. She looks to her creation for fulfillment, but ultimately does not receive what she seeks.

The uneasiness Claire creates in Dick and Harry over her work begins the theme of Claire usurping creation from its divine source. In creating new forms of life, Claire has gone beyond the bounds of motherly creation to another level of creation altogether. She is attempting to create things that are wholly original, and is trying to improve upon God's own plants. This theme is brought to the fore in the final moments of the play, as Claire brokenly sings the hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee." She has become nearer to God via her work, but it has not made Claire contented. Her failure to put her energies into creating her daughter makes Claire an object of aversion to her sister and friends, and putting those energies instead into the work of a masculine creator-God is doubly insulting to their sensibilities.

The relationship of *The Verge* to other depictions of monstrous mothers is one that shows significant differences in the treatment of the trope in Glaspell's work compared to the treatment in other works. In Glaspell's treatment, the focus is on Claire, the monstrous mother herself, as opposed to a focus on the daughter and her unfortunate experiences. This leads the audience to sympathize with Claire rather than Elizabeth, since Claire is the audience's entrée to the story unfolding on stage. She is the main character, and the audience is led to be much more concerned with Claire's troubled thoughts and frustrated dreams than it is with Elizabeth's desire to have a closer relationship with her mother. While Elizabeth is by no means an unsympathetic character, she is not the primary focus of the audience's emotional energy. Though Claire is not always warm and considerate, the audience's emotions are focused on her concerns and difficulties.

Much like other monstrous mothers, Claire is honest that she does not feel herself equipped to mother a daughter. Whereas Regina Hubbard speaks of not having the right temperament to mother her daughter, Claire acts. She removes her daughter from a situation in which Elizabeth would be exposed to that same disinclination to mother by sending her away to be raised by a woman who wished to mother. On the one hand, Claire's actions are selfish, as she follows her own inclinations and desires with little concern for the feelings of her sister or daughter, but on the other hand, she is responsible in her selfishness by making a space for her daughter to be raised by another mother.

In the end, the audience sees that Claire's life is much more tragic than her daughter's. While Elizabeth's pain is palpable, Claire's is more vigorous and corporeal than her daughter's. Claire is suffering deeply from frustrations over her life's course, frustrations much more intense than those her daughter expresses over not being allowed to participate in her mother's pursuits. Claire's suffering is caused by the restraints society places upon her as a woman, compared to her need to express herself through creation and the scientific development of new forms of life.

The final lesson that *The Verge* gives the audience, which is far different than other manifestations of the monstrous mother trope, is that a woman who is a monstrous mother is not necessarily a monstrous person. Claire has redeeming qualities, like her passion for her work and her care for her friends. Her negative treatment of her daughter is only one of many characteristics that define Claire. Glaspell's work calls the audience to remember that a mother, even a monstrous one, is a woman with a separate identity before she becomes a mother, and even after. Claire has pressures working upon her that impact all aspects of her life, pressures Glaspell asks the audience to consider before they judge her.

Glaspell's sympathetic perspective on a monstrous mother resists the version of the trope that other plays have embraced. In the other plays examined in this chapter, the motivations of the monstrous mother have been of little concern, though the mothers themselves have been allowed brief attempts to justify themselves. By and large, the monstrous mother trope has been used to support patriarchal beliefs about women and mothers, beliefs that are ultimately used to pressure women into conforming to patriarchal standards as mothers.

Mourning Becomes Electra disseminates the patriarchal belief that mothers are apt to turn against their children when they are dissatisfied with their lives. Christine Mannon represents a monstrous mother who is an adulteress and a murderess, as well as incestuously attracted to her son. Toward her daughter, she is cold and competitive, seeing her as a rival for the affections of Orin and Brant. Christine openly admits she does not love her daughter, an ambivalence Lavinia returns.

O'Neill's vision of the monstrous mother is that she is created through a woman's selfish desire for a romantic relationship over a dutiful marriage. Christine associates her daughter with the enforced marriage and rape that led to Lavinia's birth. She is still not a sympathetic character, however. Lavinia cannot forgive her mother for her coldness, so actively plots her death. When Lavinia is haunted by her mother's memory to the point that Lavinia dresses and acts like Christine, the audience learns that mother and daughter are destined to remain in eternal conflict, even beyond the grave.

The Little Foxes dramatizes a likewise unsympathetic mother. Regina Hubbard Giddens is a woman motivated by power and wealth. She sees her daughter Alexandra as a means to an end, specifically wresting control of the family business from her brothers. Regina deeply

resents her father's will, which left her with no money and power in the family. In her quest to gain that power, she kills her husband and permanently destroys her relationship with her daughter.

The audience of *The Little Foxes* learns that a woman who shows an interest in finances and economic power is a woman destined to be a monstrous mother. Her desire to be involved in the family business leads Regina to make decisions in service of that goal that are contrary to the best interests of her daughter. Hellman's play criticizes the ambitions of Regina by showing such ambition as damaging to future generations.

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds dramatizes a mother whose aspirations have been thwarted by her single motherhood. Beatrice is insulting and denigrating to her daughters, going as far as to kill their only pet as retaliation for Tillie's success at the science fair. Beatrice is deeply disappointed by life and overburdened by her responsibilities as a single mother. These feelings have transformed into extreme resentment and anger towards her daughters, who she sees as the cause of such feelings.

Beatrice represents a monstrous mother who is as ambitious as Regina Hubbard, but unable to find any outlet for those desires. She does not have the resources to break out of her situation. Without economic advancement, Beatrice cannot move out of her run-down building. She has no upward movement, of which Beatrice is fully aware. Beatrice's mothering is a cautionary tale that a mother with unrealistic ambitions will attempt to devour her own daughters. The only salvation for those daughters is to turn toward a male figure, like Tillie's teacher, who can lead them away from the world of their mothers into one of patriarchal control.

In contrast to these versions of the monstrous mother that reinforce patriarchal beliefs,

Susan Glaspell calls the audience to reconsider the monstrous mother. Glaspell demonstrates there are many ways to see the monstrous mother. Adrienne Rich describes one way:

As her sons have seen her: the Mother in patriarchy: controlling, erotic, castrating, heart-suffering, guilt-ridden, and guilt-provoking; a marble brow, a huge breast, an avid cave; between her legs snakes, swamp-grass, or teeth; on her lap a helpless infant or a martyred son. She exists for one purpose: to bear and nourish the son. (Rich 186)

In this version of the monstrous mother, she is a figure to be feared and controlled, with no redeeming qualities and the power to destroy. This view of mothers, and the disgust it initiates, is only a surface description, however. The monstrous mother trope disguises the motivations behind its own creation, but does not preclude counter-readings of monstrous mothers. Glaspell proves there is room from within the trope to fight against the blaming of mothers and the monolithic view of monstrous mothers as organically evil. Her work suggests a resistant reading that asks where monstrous mothers come from. Caplan likewise asks for such a re-visioning:

Blaming our mothers is so easy that we rarely stop to consider whether anyone else might be to blame, or even that no one is to blame. For us mothers, understanding how mother-blaming operates can lighten our load. After all, untapped energy is bound up not only in the daughter's mother-blaming but also in the mother's self-blame and self-hate. (Caplan 128)

The monstrous mother trope undermines women's status in the United States by suggesting women are prone to abuse the power they have over their children. Representations of such mothers call for audiences to control the dissemination of power to women, lest the monstrosity of their motherhood find its way into other walks of life. The theatrical representations of this trope are some of the most memorable monstrous mothers in American literature, and are frequently revived for modern audiences. The monstrous mother continues to have traction with American audiences who frequently witness stories that describe how mothers

who value their own needs over those of their families can be devastating.

Such harm toward American women and mothers need not be the final outcome of the monstrous mother trope, however. There is room for this trope to be examined and used for the benefit of the same people it has mostly injured. In examples such as *The Verge*, the monstrous mother herself becomes a figure of sympathy, a woman abused by the social rules governing her sex. Through such representations, the powerful figure of the monstrous mother can use her power for the betterment of both mothers and daughters.

CHAPTER THREE: MIRRORING MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

The Mirroring Mother is a trope of the mother-daughter relationship that is deeply entangled with theories and beliefs about women's subjectivity and how it is developed through relationships between mothers and their children. It is founded on a basic belief that women are predisposed to fight and conflict with one another for power and control over their relationship. Such conflicts are the result of deep psychological processes by which mothers and daughters negotiate their relationship and identities. The most salient characteristic of this relationship is entangling subjectivities between mother and daughter, which blur the boundaries between their identities. These entangling subjectivities result in many deep feelings of guilt, responsibility, devotion, confusion, affection, and anger. The psychoanalytic community has at times, characterized this trope as pathological and medically problematic. In addition, the trope also focuses on the narcissism of the mother, a woman who is frequently shown to be using the methods and aims of mirroring to create a daughter in her own image. Many feminist critics simultaneously disavow the mirroring model because they would rather see a model of this relationship in which both mother and daughter are full and healthy subjects.

There are other sides to this trope, however. Though it can seem to be infantilizing to women and condescending to women's abilities of cognition, it can also be experienced by women themselves as comforting and intimate. Those who support this belief are in the minority, however, because the vast majority of psychoanalytic and feminist theorists do not support this model of motherhood as a healthy one. For this reason, most of the artistic representations of the mirroring mother-daughter relationship look upon this model as suspect, if

not downright harmful.

Psychoanalysts of the twentieth century did not invent this model, though they did bring it to the forefront of mothering discourses. There are models of mirroring mothers and daughters in Ancient Greece, as well as advice writing that supported the mother-daughter mirroring model in seventeenth-century France. The writings that give this trope the title “mirroring” were published by Francois De Grenaille in 1639. Michelle Farrell explains his model:

Thus the mother’s responsibility is to display herself to her daughter, and to elicit from her the desired reflection of herself. Hence she, the mother, apprehends herself in the image she succeeds in projecting onto the daughter, her mirror. Social identity of both mother and daughter, then, is reciprocally deferred onto the other and leaves them equally dependent on each other for their sense of self.
(97)

Far from inventing this model of motherhood, Grenaille was articulating a model long present in Western consciousness, which continues to be a strong one for mothers and daughters to this day. Over time, this model has developed into an ideology of motherhood that dissects the psyches of mothers and daughters, an ideology that frequently finds its way into representations, including dramatic performance.

The basic characteristic of mirroring mother-daughter relationships is interrelated subjectivities. Mother and daughter often become intensely identified with one another, sometimes to the point where they have little or no appreciable boundary between selves. This chapter shall examine how the recurring theme of the “mirroring” mother-daughter relationship is demonstrated in *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, *Gypsy* by Jules Styne, *‘night, Mother* by Marsha Norman, and *Lu Ann Hampton Laverdy Oberlander* by Preston Jones. That several of these plays are canonical texts shows the degree to which this trope is still acceptable to modern audiences. We are comfortable with the mother-daughter pathology represented in

these plays even though most of us aren't versed in psychoanalytic theory.

The classical myth that serves as a paradigm of this model is the myth of Demeter and Persephone, a myth from Ancient Greece that was eventually transformed into an annual performance known as the Eleusinian Mysteries. The myth tells the story of Demeter and her daughter Persephone. With the consent of Zeus, Hades, king of the underworld, seizes Persephone against her will and drags her to his domain to suffer rape and enforced marriage. Demeter's response to her separation from Persephone is "insatiable anger" and "terrible and brutal grief" (Foley 6). In her sorrow, Demeter wanders to Eleusis, the site of the later rites that would commemorate this reunion of mother and daughter. Demeter then blights the earth, preventing all crops from growing until she is reunited with her child. The gods are forced to comply with Demeter's demands, and the two women are brought together, with the caveat that Persephone must return for a portion of each year to her husband in the underworld, during which time her mother will again prevent the fertility of the earth.

In the lyric epic that recounts this myth, the reunion of the two women is a touching scene of emotional and physical intimacy:

Then all day long, *their minds at one*, they soothed
each other's heart and soul in many ways,
embracing fondly, and their spirits abandoned grief,
as they gave and received joy between them. (Foley 24, my emphasis)

This description of the reunion of Demeter and Persephone shows how the ideal relationship of mother and daughter was a dyad. Though they are two bodies, when together, the women form an interdependent subject, "their minds at one." The *Hymn* describes the bond of mother and daughter as so intense and intimate they effectively form a single entity.

Though it could be said that the myth shows a mother with an unusually high dependence

on her daughter for self-identification, it also shows love between women as nurturing and powerful. The *Hymn* refrains from judging Demeter as a hysterical mother, incapable of letting go of her daughter, as later depictions of mother-daughter separation would. The *Hymn* recognizes, in a fashion that seems at times rather modern, that a mother's love can be a powerful force, worthy of respect, as commented by Marianne Hirsch:

The 'Hymn to Demeter' does grant voice and legitimacy not only to the daughter's but also to the mother's story. Nowhere, for example, does the poem question Demeter's right to be angry. Zeus's compromise and the Elusian mysteries which celebrate the cyclic reunion of mother and daughter do recognize the needs of the mother as well as those of the child. (36)

Though the separation of Demeter and Persephone seems tragic and unnecessary, to the ancients it would have been clear that the two women would have had to separate at some point. The tragedy of Demeter, her separation from her beloved daughter, is a theme many women of both ancient and modern times can identify with, as marriage leads the daughter away from home and the intimacy of the mother-daughter relationship. The universality of this loss has led Adrienne Rich to write, "The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (237).

Another formal feature of the Demeter-Persephone myth, which has come to be associated with feminist poetics, is the cycle. Linear time is often associated with male-centered representations and writings, whereas the cycles are thought to be more indicative of the female cycle of menstruation, as well as the cycle of daughter becoming mother who has a daughter in her turn. Persephone's path of living in the underworld and on the earth is an endless cycle: "Loss is presented as inevitable, part of the natural sequence of growth, but, since time is cyclical, mother-daughter reunion forms part of the cycle" (Hirsch 5). Cycles within the story

were echoed in the creation of the ritual performances at Eleusis, which occurred cyclically every year. Such cycles find their way to the dramas that include this trope through the use of repetition, in particular the mother's life being repeated by the daughter.

The togetherness of mother and daughter in this myth is shown here in a mostly positive light. In their state of symbiosis, Demeter and Persephone experience a *jouissance* of love and intimacy. Their separation would not have had the impact of tragedy if such *jouissance* had not existed, for the division would not have felt like the destruction of something so purely loving. The bond is shown in this myth as so attractive and sensual that it seems unlikely the two women would ever have willingly separated, thus, the separation is devastating. Hirsch comments on this feature of the myth:

Demeter and Persephone's tale is told from the perspective of a bereaved Demeter, searching for her daughter, mourning her departure, and effecting her return through her own divine power. A breach caused by rape and death is undone by the mother's power to fulfill a mutual desire for connection.
(Hirsch 5)

This connection is always temporary, however, for Demeter and Persephone would have lived with the knowledge that one day their union would be disrupted by Persephone's marriage and child-bearing, and in the time that followed their initial division, the two would have known that each time they were reunited, it was only to be parted again. This initial parting, however, is where the impact of tragedy is greatest, and where Demeter displays the power of maternal anger: "Maternal anger, maternal responses to the process of mother-child separation, to the loss of a child, are represented as terribly threatening in this story" (Hirsch 37). This "terribly threatening" anger, which cannot help but be a source of anxiety for the patriarchy, is seen by Rich as a source of women's power:

Each daughter, even in the millennia before Christ, must have longed for a mother whose love for her and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back from death. And every mother must have longed for the power of Demeter, the efficacy of her anger, the reconciliation with her lost self. (240)

The power of this maternal anger is not, however, enough to entirely assuage maternal guilt, which is a universal feature of motherhood, according to Rich: “The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children” (223). Though Demeter is powerful enough to pull her daughter back from the inescapable underworld, she was not able to prevent her daughter’s abduction and rape in the first place. This culture of guilt surrounding mothers makes Demeter’s lamentations all the more pathetic, for though she has the power to blight the earth, she was unable to prevent harm to the only entity she wished to protect: her daughter.

The myth of Demeter and Persephone is a paradigm of the mirroring mother-daughter relationship because in the myth, mother and daughter are constantly revolving around one another. Every action Demeter takes is in relation to her daughter’s absence. She is obsessed with reuniting with Persephone, and is willing to take any action, whether good or ill, to achieve this goal. Mirroring mothers and daughters are characterized by this kind of intense identification. They are inextricably linked as a couple, constantly separated by the intrusion of heterosexuality.

Mirroring is not, however, unto itself a wholly negative thing. From a perspective other than that of psychoanalysis, that of myth, for example, one could say the mirroring model is justified by its outcome. If the mother and daughter are made happy by the model, as are Demeter and Persephone, then it is a healthy and legitimate model of a mother-daughter relationship. As the myth thematizes, the closeness mother and daughter often achieve through

mirroring can be nurturing and emotionally rewarding. There is a degree of this closeness, however, that some psychoanalysts find to be harmful and dangerous to psychological health.

Medical and psychological establishments pathologize the mirroring mother-daughter relationship more than any other model. When the mother and daughter become so close that they gain all their emotional energy from one another instead of from a heterosexual involvement with a male figure, it goes against the psychoanalytic focus on heterosexual relations as the most important objective in women's lives. Because psychoanalysis has become, throughout the twentieth century, a significant methodology in discussing personal interactions, many representations of mothers and daughters have been influenced by psychoanalysis. Since the world of psychoanalysis does not often support the positive elements of a mirroring mother-daughter relationship, most twentieth-century representations of this type of mother-daughter relationship are more negative than not. Authors and playwrights often accept the psychoanalytical view that an extremely close mother-daughter relationship leads to negative outcomes.

In some psychoanalytic formulations, the mother and daughter become emotionally fused into one entity when the narcissistic mother sees her female child as an extension of herself. When the daughter prefers emotional closeness with the mother, then her sexual desire for her father is thwarted. Though psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic theorists disagree on how the fusing of mother and daughter comes about³, they almost universally accept that it does happen, and should only be a temporary state for the sake of the daughter's eventual development into heterosexual maturity.

While psychoanalysis often professes to be universal, it is historically embedded. It has only been since the Industrial Revolution that such a dyad was considered acceptable: “The exclusivity of the mother-child dyad and the incessant duties of motherhood emerged beginning in the 1830s as givens in American child-rearing manuals and other prescriptive writings aimed at the middle class” (Margolis 12). The idea of a mother spending her time and energy exclusively on the work of mothering was not a popular, nor a realistic one, until the economic changes of the Industrial Revolution resulted in changes in women’s participation in the economic life of Western countries.

Prior to that, the majority of middle- and working-class mothers took care of children while working in the family business. Mothering was an activity they did as they participated in the economic life of their families, an activity woven into their lives but not given preference over their other work. The Industrial Revolution made such home-based businesses unprofitable, resulting in the increased dependence on factories and industrial manufacture. With the change in methods of production, these women began moving out of their home-based businesses to compete with men for factory jobs.

In order to prevent such competition, and to keep men in control of economic resources, patriarchal forces changed what was acceptable in mother-child relationships. According to Margolis, in order to stop such competition, women were given the occupation of taking care of children full-time. In order to encourage women to participate in this change and accept their new lack of economic power, they were encouraged to believe that they were naturally designed to bond emotionally with their children. Increasingly, women were turned to motherhood and

³ For a review of twentieth-century psychoanalytic’ writings on motherhood, see Doane and Hodges’ *From Klein to*

family life as the only outlets for their energies. Representations of mothers became increasingly committed to showing mothers devoted to the care of her children. Thus, economic realities played a part in the development of the belief in the universality of the mother-daughter dyad.

The emotionally bonded mother-child relationship, though fairly modern, has come to be seen as a largely natural, rather than social, phenomenon, which is not unique to the United States, according to Margolis:

What we have come to think of as inevitable and biologically necessary is in great measure a consequence of our society's particular social and economic system. We are certainly not unique in believing that our brand of mother-child relationship is natural and normal. People in every culture firmly believe that their child-rearing practices stem from nature itself. (16)

The West became increasingly invested in the primacy of the nuclear family as it became “naturalized” in the way Margolis describes. As the nuclear family rose to prominence, a mother's investment in her children, particularly her daughters, became pathological. The over-identification of mother with daughter resulted in narcissism. When viewing her daughter as a narcissistic extension of herself, a mother often sets herself and her daughter up for a variety of problems. In the dramatic representations of such mothers I use to illustrate this trope, the mother either sets herself up for a climactic rejection when the daughter reaches sexual maturity and subjectivity, or she completely suffocates the daughter, leaving her sexually immature and completely dependent.

As if this mother-daughter relationship weren't complicated enough, patriarchal structures, as in the myth of Demeter and Persephone, demand the separation of daughter from mother through the daughter's heterosexuality.

Kristeva: The Search for the Good-Enough Mother.

The partnership of mother and daughter was, however, made to be broken, as mothers in the West have lived with an ideology that demands separation from their daughters for the sake of patriarchal development. Irigaray comments on both the necessity of this break and the ideology that claims it to be necessary:

The bond between mother and daughter, daughter and mother, must be broken so that the daughter can become woman. Female genealogy must be suppressed, in favor of the relation son-Father, of the idealization of the father and the husband as patriarchs. (Irigaray *Ethique*, 106)

This break does not come from within the relationship of mother and daughter, according to most psychoanalytic theory. Rather, the break comes in the form of an intrusion, most likely in the form of a heterosexual partner for the daughter. Freud himself popularized this belief: “As Freud envisions the story of female development, the mother-daughter bond must be abandoned in favor of a strong attachment to the father which, in turn, must be superseded by the adult love of another man and the conception of a child, preferably male” (Hirsch 99).

Rich believes that only social pressures could be prevailed upon to cause the rift in the mother-daughter bond, for the mother and daughter would, in all likelihood, not surrender their emotional cathexis willingly: “Institutionalized heterosexuality and institutionalized motherhood demand that the girl-child transfer those first feelings of dependency, eroticism, mutuality, from her first woman to a man, if she is to become what is defined as a “normal” woman—that is, a woman whose most intense psychic and physical energies are directed towards men” (Rich 218-219).

The mother’s proper role in the process of her daughter’s subject-formation is not only to surrender her intimacy with her daughter, but to allow her own subjectivity to be altered as her

daughter disengages with their mutual identification: “The woman who is a mother was a subject as a daughter. But as a mother, her subjectivity is under pressure; during the process of her daughter’s accession to subjectivity, she is told to recede into the background, to be replaced” (Hirsch 170). This need to deny her own subjectivity encourages the mother all the more to identify with and live vicariously through her daughter, often seeking to control her in order to fulfill the mother’s own desire and ambition.

It has only been recently that the mother’s own subjectivity has been considered as worthy of note in this process:

It must be acknowledged that we have only just begun to think about the mother as a subject in her own right, principally because of contemporary feminism, which made us aware of the disastrous results for women of being reduced to the mere extension of a two-month-old. Psychology in general and psychoanalysis in particular too often partake of this distorted view of the mother, which is so deeply embedded in the culture as a whole. (Benjamin 23)

In the psychoanalytic tradition, the mother develops subjecthood, but loses it again. She has presumably achieved subjectivity when she separated from her own mother, but later loses that subjecthood when she binds with her own daughter and becomes dependent on that daughter for identity. If she has many children, she will gain and lose and gain subjecthood many times throughout her life. The “distortion” to which Benjamin refers is this belief that women can so easily lose their identities when they have children.

The development of modern psychoanalytic views which described a mother’s loss of identity began with the first great name in that field, Sigmund Freud. In Freud’s original theories, he found that a young girl develops feelings of inferiority and inadequacy when she discovers her lack of a penis, around the age of three. This girl in turn feels contempt for all those who lack penises, including her mother, who the daughter blames for her castrated state.

This blame of the mother leads the girl to turn away from her mother, who had been her first love object, to her father, who is in possession of a penis and can make up for his daughter's lack. Eventually the girl changes from wanting a penis from her father to wanting children from him. This sexual desire for the father leads the girl to become a rival of her mother's, for the mother has sexual access to the father, whereas the daughter does not. Through this process the daughter becomes oriented toward heterosexuality.

Freud later amended his theories to take into account the pre-oedipal stage of a girl's development. In the pre-oedipal stage, a girl child becomes passionately and intensely identified with her mother. The boundaries between mother and daughter become blurred. As the daughter ages, it becomes imperative that she develop into the oedipal stage and beyond, or else become trapped as a narcissistic extension of her mother's.

Many feminist psychoanalysts have revised the theories of Freud to show the mother as an important agent in the development of children, beyond being the figure against which the child must struggle. One such theorist is Nancy Chodorow, who has focused on the pre-oedipal stage as the time during which children, particularly daughters, learn what it means to be a woman:

For Chodorow, the basis of female identity, then, lies not in the oedipal but in the pre-oedipal period; here mother-daughter bonding, not phallic lack, connection, not castration, characterize female identity; here closeness to the mother and not shift of allegiance to the father defines the process of women's development in culture. (Hirsch 132)

In the theories of Chodorow, the daughter still identifies strongly with her mother in early life. "That is," Chodorow says, "a daughter acts as if she is and feels herself unconsciously one with her mother" (136). "Chodorow does acknowledge that merging may produce an obstacle for the

girl's proper individuation, autonomy, independence: indeed, she accounts for the girl's turn toward the father as a means for her to escape the mother" (Kaplan 39).

A feminist psychoanalytic theorist who has responded to the theory of pre-oedipal fusion and mother-daughter mirroring with a completely new concept of subject-formation and identity is Jessica Benjamin. Instead of a mother and daughter looking to each other for an identity, Benjamin believes mother and daughter look to each other for recognition of themselves as separate subjects. For Benjamin, mother and child always begin as separate subjects who require support from each other.

What I call mutual recognition includes a number of experiences commonly described in the research on mother-infant interaction: emotional attunement, mutual influence, affective mutuality, sharing states of mind. The idea of mutual recognition seems to me an ever more crucial category of early experience. Increasingly, research reveals infants to be active participants who help shape the responses of their environment, and 'create' their own objects" (Benjamin 16)

This "mutual recognition" can only be given to a child by a mother who possesses a full subjectivity: "The recognition a child seeks is something the mother is able to give only by virtue of her independent identity" (Benjamin 24).

Benjamin's theories have new implications for the mother-daughter relationship: "Once we accept the idea that infants do not begin life as part of an undifferentiated unity, the issue is not only how we separate from oneness, but also how we connect to and recognize others; the issue is not how we become free of the other, but how we actively engage and make ourselves known in relationship to the other" (18). For Benjamin, the intimacy of mother and child results from double self-assertion. A mother and her child never see themselves as an undifferentiated union, but know from the start that they are individual subjects, a knowledge that is the basis for their intimacy. With her theory of mutual recognition, Benjamin offers mothers and daughters a

model of psychological intimacy that rejects the mirroring model and its pitfalls.

Benjamin's theory is not yet popular, however. Though a more liberating model of mother-daughter relations, our cultural investment in the mirroring model continues to make mirroring a more common approach to representing mothers and daughters on the stage. The mother-daughter plays of twentieth-century America generally ascribe to the mirroring model and show it as normal and pathological. These plays use psychoanalytic theories that describe and prescribe mother-daughter fusion and mirroring as standard.

The first play I shall examine in light of the mirroring model of motherhood is Tennessee Williams' play, *The Glass Menagerie*. First produced in 1945, this play has become an American classic. It is a version of events told as the memory of one character's perspective, and as such it has a dreamlike, lyric quality to which audiences are attracted. Williams' work has become one of the most frequently performed plays by community theaters around the country. As such, audiences are very comfortable with this work and the form of mother-daughter relationship it represents. In *The Glass Menagerie*, both mother and daughter fail to thrive in a story told through lyric imagery and nostalgic memory of Tom, the narrator of the piece and son of the Wingfield family.

When *The Glass Menagerie* was first produced, psychoanalytic theory was making great strides in American thought. Freud's theories were increasingly being used to support new methods of mothering and understandings of motherhood. The year after *Menagerie*'s debut, Dr. Benjamin Spock published his instructional book for mothers for the first time, reinforcing the idea that psychological processes are at work through much of a mother's connection to her children. In his choice of format for his drama, Williams embraces the fashion for highlighting

the thought processes and formative memories in dramatic performance.

The Glass Menagerie, which is told through the memory of Tom, the narrator and son/brother figure of the play, tells the story of the most important night of his sister's life. Laura, the sister, is shy and fragile, and due to a limp, horribly self-conscious. She is unable to interact easily with strangers, and so knows very few people. Laura's fragility is symbolized by her collection of glass animals, the menagerie of the title. Benjamin Nelson characterizes Laura: "The girl in glass is a shadow girl whose dilemma motivates much of the thought and action of those around her, but who never emerges as a human being in her own right" (87). Because she never achieves the status of "human being in her own right," Laura remains an extension of the people around her, either an extension of her brother's memory, or her mother's sense of self.

When it becomes clear that Laura is not cut out for the working world, Amanda, Laura's mother, decides the only answer is to have Laura marry. Amanda's situation here is difficult. She is fully knowledgeable that her daughter is unable to live independently, yet is aware of the dearth of options open to Laura. Amanda tries to explain the dangers of being totally dependent to her daughter.

So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling? [...] We won't have a business career—we've given that up because it gave us nervous indigestion! What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position.
(Williams 977)

Amanda has become so invested in her daughter that she uses the terms "we" and "ourselves" when she discusses things unique to Laura. She is concerned for both herself and her daughter in their dearth of viable options for their future security. The options outlined by Amanda also show how confined Laura is to what is socially acceptable. Such options Walters sees as

common to representations of daughters: “The options presented to these fictional daughters are to sink even further into the domestic and nonsexual world of their mothers or to fly bravely from the maternal nest into the waiting arms of a strong man” (21). Unable to “fly bravely away” from the apartment she shares with her mother and brother, Laura can only continue on in the domestic world of her mother.

Amanda’s last desperate answer to her daughter’s plight is to attach Laura to a husband. Tom explains Amanda’s obsession with fulfilling this goal: “The idea of getting a gentleman caller for Laura began to play a more and more important part in Mother’s calculations. It became an obsession...An evening at home rarely passed without some allusion to this image, this specter, this hope” (Williams 978). Towards this goal, Tom brings home a friend from work as a “gentleman caller” for Laura. While Laura briefly blooms under this man’s attention, any further relationship is doomed, because he is engaged to another woman.

Signi Falk describes Amanda’s character: “Amanda ignores present reality. Overanxious to have her daughter, Laura, securely married, she refuses to recognize the girl’s painful shyness or to admit to her slightly crippled leg. She insists that Laura not refer to herself as a cripple, that she speak only of a “little defect,” and that she distract attraction from it by developing charm and vivacity” (81). When she becomes obsessed with her own hopes for a gentleman caller, Amanda loses track of the reality of her daughter. She doesn’t realize the depths of Laura’s social incapacities, nor her extreme self-consciousness, and instead believes the solution to Laura’s difficulties is to create Laura into her own youthful image. Amanda’s answer to Laura’s problems is a narcissistic one. To Amanda, Laura would be successful in the heterosexual economy if only she were able to display the image of her mother. Amanda’s attempt to provide

for Laura, while also reliving her girlhood, is beautiful as well as agonizing to the audience. “If we did not laugh at Amanda, I suspect we should cry, for there is a certain pathetic heroism in her efforts to provide for her children—her daughter, especially” (Da Ponte 264).

Amanda, who clings to the characteristics of a defunct southern aristocracy, frequently reminisces about the afternoon she received seventeen gentleman callers.⁴ Amanda herself did not marry any of these callers; instead she married a man who worked for the telephone company, who eventually left the family. She wants to give her own past to her daughter. In doing so, she can hope that her daughter will make a better decision about her gentleman callers than Amanda herself made. Amanda is, in the words of Nelson, “attempting to relive a wasted life” (90).

The evening Amanda plans for her daughter fulfills her desire to help her daughter find security, but also allows Amanda to feel pleasure over helping her daughter, as de Beauvoir explains: “Like the woman in love, the mother is delighted to feel herself necessary; her existence is justified by the wants she supplies; but what gives mother love its difficulty and its grandeur is the fact that it implies no reciprocity” (573). It is clear that Amanda feels this pleasure in her preparations for Laura’s big evening. On the evening of the gentleman caller’s visit, Amanda is giddy with anticipation, enhancing her daughter’s looks by padding her bosom, and saying, “This is the prettiest you will ever be! I’ve got to fix myself now! You’re going to be surprised by your mother’s appearance!” (1052). Amanda has become her own project through Laura, attempting to re-create her own youth in her daughter.

What happens next is a sign of the absurd degree of denial of reality in which Amanda is

⁴ “One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain—your mother received—seventeen!—gentlemen callers! Why, sometimes there weren’t chairs enough to accommodate them all” (Williams, 975).

engaged. She appears for the evening dressed, not as a respectable older woman with grown children, but in an old dress from her childhood. The script describes: “She wears a girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash. She carries a bunch of jonquils—the legend of her youth is nearly revived. Now she speaks feverishly” (Williams, 1053). Amanda’s words describe her outfit: “This is the dress in which I led the cotillion. Won the cakewalk twice at Sunset Hill, wore one Spring to the Governor’s Ball in Jackson! See how I sashayed around the ballroom, Laura?” (1053).

Here Amanda shows how much she wishes she were in Laura’s place. She desires to return to her days of youth, when she had her life ahead of her, and decisions about life to make. In this instance, Amanda is “getting gratification through exercising control over the child” (Kaplan 47). Amanda is simultaneously acting as a mother by padding her daughter’s bosom, and acting like a daughter by dressing in a thirty-year-old dress and demanding approval from Laura.

With so dominating a mother, Laura could never be prepared to separate herself from her mother’s influence. She is wholly dependent on her mother and brother to care for her, because Laura cannot bear to work outside the home, as evidenced by her failure to complete her typing course, or to hold a job. She is unable to split from her mother, having never learned that such a separation was a possibility due to the absence of any such model. Laura’s inability to separate from Amanda is demonstrated in her lack of sexual maturity. Laura’s status as “old maid” is shown elsewhere in the play:

Laura’s asexual nature is revealed by the fact that Amanda and Tom refer to her as “sister,” which is the traditional address for a nun. In addition to this, Laura’s celibacy is emphasized by her referral to herself as “an old maid”—the eternal virgin—and by the mythical unicorn, the “emblem of chastity and the lover of

virgins.” (Bauer-Brinski 34)

Laura is unable to exist as a fully formed, independent adult, while Amanda wishes she could retreat into her own past and make a better choice of mate than she had in Tom and Laura’s father. That Laura has this inability to interact with the outside world could be a result of her mother’s desire to retreat and live perpetually in a world of youth. Some critics have made this connection, and blamed Laura’s incapability of existing in the real world on her mother: “Laura Wingfield has learned to be maladjusted from her mother, Amanda. [...] Amanda’s husband and son have long since deserted her, but Laura, who has been crippled since birth, has no escape open to her. She must adjust to her mother who is so unrealistic that she denies that Laura is crippled.... Indeed, the only way Laura can survive is to retreat into her own delusions” (Blackwell 245).

Such criticism may be too harsh. While Amanda’s fixation on her nostalgic past may or may not have adversely affected her daughter, Amanda is herself caught in what Walters calls a double bind: “The intersection of this problematic double bind for mothers of daughters is how to empower them to think that life is not only wife and motherhood, yet make them fully understand that they will be somehow freakish or pitiful if they do not become wives and mothers” (79). This double bind reveals a point of conflict between women and patriarchy. Entrapped in such a double bind, Amanda does what is socially acceptable at the time to help her daughter. In her speech to her daughter about the lack of options for Laura, it is clear that Amanda understands the choices for solving Laura’s difficulties are few, but she does whatever she can to help her daughter, even if it means fully grasping a course which is doomed from the beginning because of Laura’s painful shyness. While Amanda confuses her daughter’s present

and her own past, she begins the events of the evening with a desire to marry Laura off.

Another play that explores the mirroring trope of motherhood, in particular a daughter taking on aspects of her mother's personality is the musical *Gypsy*. Since it was first performed on Broadway in 1959, this musical has been frequently revived in theatres throughout the country, and translated into two films. Audiences have proven themselves to be highly comfortable with this story. Many of the musical's songs have developed into popular standards. The reasons for the attraction to *Gypsy* are multiple. There is a level of erotic fascination with the story, because it is about one of the most famous striptease artists in U.S. history. On another level, audiences are fascinated with the story of a mother who is so luxuriously bossy and strident in her devouring of everyone around her. As a character, Mama Rose is larger than life, seemingly a woman that could only exist on the stage, though she is based on a historical woman.

Gypsy is deceptive in its title. It is really the story of Gypsy's mother, Mama Rose. Rose, whose dreams of stage stardom have been thwarted, pours all her energy into the career of her daughter June. After Rose is disappointed in June's loyalty, she propels her less-talented daughter, Louise, to stardom. Rose's demands on Louise climax when she pressures Louise to become a stripper. The musical ends with Louise as the famed Gypsy Rose Lee. While many would characterize Rose as belonging to the trope of the "monstrous mother," rather than the "mirroring," this relationship has many characteristics that associate it with the mirroring model, such as inter-dependent subjectivities and a high degree of psychoanalytical detail.

A significant aspect of Rose's mothering is the degree to which she over-identifies with her daughters, a classic characteristic of the mirroring trope. Rose is unwilling to let her

daughters grow into independent subjects of their own. She defines her identity by her daughters. Even Rose refers to herself as “Mama,” clearly identifying herself by that role. If her daughters should grow into subjects, Rose’s understanding of her own identity would be thrown into turmoil. The temptation of a mother to over-identify with her children is a phenomenon much remarked upon in psychoanalytic accounts of mothering. Beauvoir writes of the conflict that must inevitably come from such an over-identification: “The relation of mother to child becomes more and more complex: the child is a double, an alter ego, into whom the mother is sometimes tempted to project herself entirely, but [the child] is an independent subject and therefore rebellious” (572). This state of over-identification cannot continue indefinitely. Therefore, *Gypsy* becomes the story of a climactic break waiting to occur.

Mama Rose embodies the most negative characteristics of the over-identifying stage mother. She wants her daughters to identify their mother as the center of their world, the one who controls and guides every aspect of their lives. Rose needs to feel the attention and love of her daughters. She is what Freud would call a “narcissistic woman.” Sarah Kofman describes such women: “Strictly speaking, it is only themselves that such women love with an intensity comparable to that of the man’s love for them. Nor does their need lie in the direction of loving, but of being loved, and the man who fulfills this condition is the one who finds favour with them” (51). In Rose’s case, her children are much more capable than a man of returning the absolute love and devotion she needs as a narcissistic woman. They become the primary libidinal love of her life, making Rose incapable of embarking on a meaningful relationship with her erstwhile boyfriend, Herbie.

Rose encourages her daughters to turn to the audience as a libidinal partner, which they

do rather than embark on the heterosexual economy psychoanalysis would declare to be the most valuable site in a women's development. The mothering Rose has given her daughters places herself in a position which interferes with her daughters' development to such a degree that both daughters eventually seek out the audience's gaze as their primary love object, placing heterosexuality far back in their priorities.

Rose employs various techniques to alter the progression of her daughters' development so that she can remain in the position of primary love object and prevent her daughters from achieving a subjectivity of their own. One technique Mama Rose employs is to approach their gender and sexuality in repressive ways. Baby June is encouraged to become a narcissistic woman like her mother. She can love only her mother, because her mother is the source for adulation and praise. Mama Rose has created a specific stage persona for Baby June, which she expects June to replicate in real life. June dresses as a young girl even into her adolescence, with blonde corkscrew curls and short dresses and jackets. June has no identity separate from her on-stage persona of "Baby June," keeping June perpetually a "baby," even as she ages. June becomes reliant on Mama Rose for the perpetuation of her identity, for it is Rose who created that persona, and consistently reflects it back to her daughter.

Louise is socialized in a very different way from June. As the less talented daughter, Louise has no on-stage persona, and is often overlooked by her mother. Louise, like June, is kept perpetually young. At one point in the musical, the young Louise sings, on her birthday, of not knowing her own age. Cast members exclaim of her birthday cake, "There are only eight candles!" knowing full well that Louise is much older than that. Mama Rose remarks, "As long as this act continues, none of you are older than eight!" In order to keep control over the cast

members and over the act, Mama Rose keeps the actors in a perpetual childhood and prevents the psychological development and sexual maturity that would lead to their subjectivity. Such developments would cause the young troupe members to assert their subjectivity against Rose, thereby breaking up Rose's central control of the act.

Mama Rose also effaces Louise's identity. In the second act of the musical, after June's defection, Louise becomes the de facto star of the show, though she shows no talent for such. Rose insists Louise perform while wearing a platinum-blond wig of curls, which was June's trademark. This signifies that Rose has no use or interest in Louise as a person. Rose's desire is to recreate Baby June, the girl whose identity reflected back to Rose her own narcissism. Louise protests the use of the wig, showing the audience that her relationship with Rose is different than that of June and Rose. While June was content to act the part of "Baby June" at all times, Louise insists on her own identity. Louise is not the perfect mirror for Rose, a characteristic that will cause even greater tension as the musical continues.

These techniques of Rose's, all employed to prevent the achievement of a full subjectivity, come from a desire to retain power, according to the traditional psychoanalytic view outlined by Beauvoir:

Real conflicts arise when the girl grows older; as we have seen, she wishes to establish her independence from her mother. This seems to the mother a mark of hateful ingratitude; she tries obstinately to checkmate the girl's will to escape; she cannot bear to have her double become an other. The pleasure of feeling absolutely superior—which men feel in regard to women—can be enjoyed by woman only in regard to her children, especially her daughters; she feels frustrated as she has to renounce her privilege, her authority. (579)

Rose's reliance on her daughters to place her in the subject position by which she defines her identity becomes problematic when one of her daughters, June, rebels against Rose's control

over her career and her life. June secretly marries a young man from the troupe and runs away with him to seek fame on Broadway. Rose sees this as abandonment and betrayal. She declares that her daughter June is dead to her from that moment onward. The offense against Rose that June has committed is to interfere with Rose's subject position as reflected back to her by June. As long as June is "Baby June," the youthful gamine of the vaudeville stage, she can effectively reflect back Rose as "Mama Rose," the person who inhabits the strongest and most important position in June's life. As "Mama Rose" and "Baby June," the mother becomes the daughter's universe and the two define each other's role in society. When June breaks up this dyad by abandoning the intense mother-child identification in favor of a heterosexual man-woman identification, she commits what Rose sees as an unpardonable act of violence against Rose's identity. Beauvoir illuminates such feelings of betrayal: "In her daughter the mother does not hail a member of the superior caste; in her she seeks a double. She projects upon her daughter all the ambiguity of her relation with herself; and when the otherness, the alterity, of this alter ego comes to be affirmed, the mother feels herself betrayed" (577).

When June removes herself from the reflective relationship between herself and her mother, Rose is left floundering without an identity or role to play. This is why, at that moment, Rose must turn to her other daughter, one whom she has left mostly ignored thus far in her life. Without June to give Rose the reflection of "Mama Rose," the mother must turn to Louise in order to have her identity reflected back to her. Rose's turn from one daughter to the other as the preferred child reveals how delicate Rose's self-identification is, and how much it is dependent on others to place her in the subject position to which she has become accustomed.

The climactic scene in Louise's subjectivity comes at the moment she becomes Gypsy

Rose Lee, a stage name that shows how much Louise considers her stripping career the result of her mother's influence. The career of Gypsy begins in a burlesque house where Rose's troupe has been booked for two weeks. Rose declares that the troupe will retire after the burlesque performances. However, on their last day in the house of burlesque, one of the strippers who entertain the overwhelmingly male audience is missing. Rose encourages Louise to fill the vacancy, though Louise herself is resistant. The change into Gypsy occurs when Louise dresses in the satin dress of one of the strippers and looks at herself in the mirror. This gazing at herself dramatically changes Louise's identity. She sees herself for the first time as a sexual being, declaring to the mirror, "I'm pretty." From the moment Louise recognizes herself as a sexual object, she has a new subjectivity. The androgynous and awkward Louise is replaced by Gypsy Rose Lee, newly-born narcissistic woman.

In *Gypsy*, Louise constructs an on-stage persona quite different from herself. Gypsy Rose Lee torments the men of her audience while simultaneously making herself an object for their consumption. She is what Helene Cixous calls a "good woman" under traditional patriarchal psychoanalysis:

A good woman, therefore, is the one who "resists" long enough for him to feel both his power over her and his desire, and not too much, to give him the pleasure of enjoying, without too many obstacles, the return to himself which he, grown greater—reassured in his own eyes, is making...And plenty of women, sensing what is at stake there, cuntsent to play the part of object..." (*Sorties* 79-80)

Gypsy makes of herself an object, while simultaneously finding subjectivity from knowledge of the gaze economy, and her power to use it for her own financial success. She has achieved a level of narcissism comparable to her mother, wherein her primary love object is reflected by the audience for whom she enacts this dynamic.

Just as June's identity became infused with her character, Louise comes to be Gypsy both on stage and off. The audience of *Gypsy* sees this clearly in Louise's interactions with her mother backstage. Mama Rose's relationship to Louise changes drastically after Louise creates the performance persona of Gypsy. Gypsy bars her mother from being backstage during performances, and no longer allows her mother to control her act or guide her life. Rose becomes a member of Gypsy's entourage, a supporting actor to her daughter's starring role. Though she had always professed to have as a primary goal the theatrical success of one of her daughters, we learn that Rose isn't happy with the way things have turned out for her in relation to Gypsy. She resents the loss of power. She had always believed her daughter's success would be her own success. However, she learns that Gypsy's newfound subjectivity has had the same effect as June's abandonment. Rose is forced to confront that she is a separate subject from her daughters, and come to terms with her failure to be a star.

The climax of the musical surrounds the singing of "Rose's Turn," a medley of songs from the musical during which Rose realizes that her role as "stage mother" has been for her own benefit, not her daughters'. Rose learns that her own needs and desires have been paramount in her quest for stardom for her daughters. "Rose's Turn" begins with Rose declaring to her absent daughter, "I made you!" and announcing during the song that "Mama's gotta let go," and about her daughters, "One quick look as each one leaves you," a poignant reminder that Rose was abandoned by her mother, as well. After the song, which Meryle Secrest calls a "moment when [Rose] would realize that her need for fame was a chimera that had destroyed her life" (3), Rose finally comes to a realization about her quest for fame for her daughters. She says, "I did do it for me," a line which Secrest calls, "the climax of the whole evening" (4). This self-recognition

is a profound moment which changes Rose's heretofore unconscious over-identification with her daughters. She realizes there is a "me" separate from her daughters, for whom her energies have been expended. This marks the achievement of subjectivity for Rose, delayed because of her dependence on her daughters for her identity, but finally achieved after the trials of losing both daughters to heterosexuality.

To all concerned, Mama Rose would have been a highly over-identified woman who had caused tremendous psychological damage to her daughters. There was little sympathy with Mama Rose's psychological needs, though her character was by far the most famous, as the actresses who played her were often given higher billing than those of *Gypsy*'s title character. This musical has been revived constantly since its inception, into the twenty-first century. Not only do such revivals show that modern audiences are comfortable with the mirroring mother trope, they show an active support of its representation in the musical *Gypsy*.

One of the most famous plays of the 1980s was Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*. Award winning and almost immediately canonized, *'night, Mother* is a powerful two-character play that dramatizes the last night in the life of the main character, Jessie Cates. Though critics have disagreed over whether *'night, Mother* is truly radical or just another domestic drama, Jill Dolan sees it as radical, in part, for bringing the mother-daughter relationship to a domain where the norm is to examine more male-centered topics: "The radical element of Norman's play was not that it was written by a woman about a mother/daughter relationship, but that it was performed in a space historically reserved for male playwrights to address father/son relationships" (21).

At the beginning of the play, Jessie informs her mother she is going to kill herself that

night. The resulting dialogue surrounds Jessie's attempts to prepare her mother for living alone, her mother Thelma's attempts to prevent her daughter's suicide, and the two women working out the events and unresolved feelings of their past.

Sally Browder connects the maternal mirroring relationship to *'night, Mother:*

If female early development is characterized by a sense of being connected to and identified with one's mother, then this type of mirroring creates in the growing daughter both an ambivalence about separation and a deep emotional bond, for good or ill, that is never fully relinquished...At some point, most mothers and daughters recognize that they are pitted in an ageless struggle by their mutual efforts to maintain their relationship in its earliest form or to alter it. (111)

The mother-daughter relationship between Jessie and Thelma is characterized by an intense ambivalence. These women greatly love each other, but also resent many things about their relationship and enforced closeness. There are jealousies about Jessie's relationship with her father and acrimonies over Thelma's role in arranging a marriage between Jessie and her estranged husband. Jessie suffers from epilepsy, and only Thelma can care for her daughter as she recovers from seizures. Jessie's condition keeps her dependent on her mother, and prevents her from forming strong attachments to other people. For this reason, Jessie's epilepsy is the cause for much of her present unhappiness, and thus her suicide.

A good portion of Jessie and Thelma's conversation is about the men in their lives. The most important man in their lives was Thelma's husband and Jessie's father, simply referred to as "Daddy." A good deal of the focus of this part of their talk is the jealousy and conflict between the two women that resulted from Daddy's indifference to his wife and attention for his daughter. In this way the Jessie-Thelma relationship seems to orbit around the central figure of the father.

Jessie's character reinforces what Adrienne Rich has written about the struggle between

love for the mother and love for the father: “It is a painful fact that a nurturing father, who replaces rather than complements a mother, must be loved at the mother’s expense” (245). She continues, “A man often lends his daughter the ego-support he denies his wife; he may use his daughter as stalking-horse against his wife; he may simply feel less threatened by a daughter’s power, especially if she adores him” (246). For Rich, the decision of a daughter to identify primarily with her father is an act that damages the potential relationship that a daughter could have with her mother.

As Chodorow explains, Jessie’s identification with her father could also be the result of an escape from her mother’s smothering influence:

According to Freud and other analysts, a girl usually turns from the exclusive relationship with her mother to her father as an object of primary libidinal interest. When we look at the kinds of explanations put forth for this turning, however, we find that they testify to the strength of a girl’s ongoing relationship to her mother as much as to the importance of her relationship to her father. (115)

Chodorow continues, “A girl’s father is likely to become a symbol of freedom from this dependence and merging. A girl is likely to turn to him, regardless of his gender or sexual orientation, as the most available person who can help her to get away from her mother” (121). Seen through this lens, Jessie’s relationship with her father had a great deal to do with her relationship with Thelma. Jessie’s dependence on her mother, due to her epilepsy, has caused Jessie to identify her mother with both the embarrassment and discomfort of the condition.

Another man Jessie and Thelma discuss is Cecil, Jessie’s estranged husband. Jessie’s marriage to Cecil was a result of Thelma’s interference. Thelma conspired to unite Jessie with Cecil, stating for her reasons, “I wanted you to have a husband” (1223). It is curious that Thelma was so keen on Jessie’s having a husband when her own marriage was such a disappointment for

her. However, such a seemingly contradictory action has clear antecedents in the mirroring model of motherhood. In this model, it is Thelma's responsibility to raise her daughter to embrace heterosexuality. As previously discussed, a daughter's entrance into a heterosexual relationship is traditionally seen as the moment of breaking between mother and daughter. It is the time when a daughter leaves her mother's side. If Jessie fails to enter into such a relationship, it reflects badly onto Thelma as a mother who failed to fully integrate her daughter into this world, and who has not successfully created a child in her own image.

Jessie's failure to enter into heterosexuality has the possible consequence of making Thelma appear to be lacking, herself, in fully attaining that state. For, if Jessie identifies with her mother but does not marry, it could be seen as resulting from Thelma's own deficiency in regard to a heterosexual relationship. Thelma's interests in this matter are narcissistic in that she attempts to form Jessie's life into the same pattern as her own, seeing this as the answer to Jessie's difficulties. Thelma is unable to understand Jessie's needs on Jessie's terms, so must recast Jessie in her own image.

The sense of jealousy and ownership Thelma expresses towards Jessie is not surprising considering the amount of work and personal investment a mother must make to mold her daughter into her own image. The daughter is traditionally supposed to reflect the qualities of her mother. All too frequently in our society a mother is blamed if her daughter acts contrary to popular social norms. Thus, the mother has a personal need for the daughter to toe the line of social convention. Thelma has a vested interest in having Jessie marry so the mother can be seen to fulfill society's maternal role.

Jessie's decision to kill herself interferes with the mirroring relationship. Thelma, whose

identity is dependent on Jessie because of their mirroring relationship, is determined to prevent the suicide for Jessie's sake and her own. If Jessie destroys herself, Thelma will have no one to reflect back her identity, or she will, but an identity as a destroyed and absent person. Thelma's final lesson about her daughter in *'night, Mother* is that Jessie has finally broken away from the mirroring relationship and subsequently come into her own subjectivity. This subjectivity is a point of contention between the two women for much of the play. Thelma continuously believes that Jessie's planned suicide is somehow a result of her faulty mothering. She says to Jessie, "It has to be me that's the matter here. You wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't. I didn't tell you things or I married you off to the wrong man or I took you in and let your life get away from you or all of it put together. I don't know what I did, but I did it, I know. This is all my fault, Jessie, but I don't know what to do about it now!" (1226). To which Jessie replies, "It doesn't have anything to do with you!" (1226).

With her irreversible decision, Jessie permanently alters the course of her life to diverge from the course her mother had planned for Jessie. Thelma's last line of *'night, Mother* reflects that Thelma has finally learned Jessie does not belong to her and is not her mirror. After she hears the gunshot that signals Jessie has killed herself, Thelma says, "Jessie, Jessie, child...Forgive me. I thought you were mine" (1229). Now when it is too late, Thelma seems to grasp that Jessie had her own subjectivity.

In *'night, Mother*, Marsha Norman creates a relationship between two women in which the only way to break into one's own subjectivity, to be more than simply a reflection of another person, is to permanently sever their relationship. The relationship between Jessie and Thelma is the most entrapping kind of mirroring mother-daughter bond. Jessie Cates has decided to break

out of the life she currently has and to seize control of her destiny. Her final act changes Jessie from a person with little or no subjectivity into a woman who has taken herself as the final prize, just as she pulls the trigger. Browder sees this final act as having everything to do with Jessie's relationship with Thelma: "Jessie's decision is a repudiation of her mother's choices" (110).

This situation is highly pitiable. Thelma's feelings of responsibility are not uncommon for mothers, however. Browder comments: "In the end, whatever this particular mother did would have been wrong, just as whatever any mother does is wrong. As long as she is made to feel ultimately responsible for her daughter's well-being, a mother is thrust into unyielding, conflicting expectations" (Browder 112). The audience cannot help but sympathize with Thelma as a mother, being told at the beginning of the evening that her daughter is about to kill herself. Jessie's very act of telling her mother seems to indicate to Thelma, and perhaps the audience as well, that she is willing to be talked out of her course of action by her mother. The audience knows the only person who can stand in the way of Jessie and the gun is Thelma, and Thelma is expected to be this barrier. However, the expectations placed on Thelma are beyond her ability to meet. She cannot convince a daughter who refuses to be convinced. Jessie's announcement to her mother is cruel in that she puts Thelma into an untenable, yet unavoidable, situation. Thelma is destined to fail and destined to bear the blame for that failure.

In performance, the means of the stage help to highlight certain aspects of Thelma and Jessie's relationship. The setting for *'night, Mother* clearly shows the world the two women inhabit as enclosed and claustrophobic. Norman describes the setting:

The play takes place in a relatively new house built way out on a country road, with a living room and connecting kitchen, and a center hall that leads off to the bedrooms...One of these bedrooms opens directly onto the hall, and its entry should be visible to everyone in the audience. It should be, in fact, the focal point

of the entire set, and the lighting should make it disappear completely at times and draw the entire set into it at others. It is a point of both threat and promise. It is an ordinary door that opens onto absolute nothingness. That door is the point of all the action, and the utmost care should be given to its design and construction. (1491)

In the world created by this setting, Thelma and Jessie are isolated. While there is a brief phone call from Jessie's brother, references to those beyond the immediate relationship of mother and daughter remain indistinct. The front door never opens, and it appears the women are trapped in this space like fish in a bowl, unable to leave. The only escape from this enclosed world is the open door of the bedroom, the site of Jessie's death.

That such a set is so threatening is somewhat ironic. It is the basic box-set interior that is so common for all realistic plays in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In other plays, this box-set is not as threatening or evocative of claustrophobia as it is in *'night, Mother*, but because Jessie's feelings of entrapment perfectly mirror the space, the audience cannot help but see the set in this newly enclosed way. This characterizes the mother-daughter relationship as enclosed, forcing these women into such close physical and emotional proximity that Jessie cannot escape the house by any other means than suicide. In this version of the mirroring mother-daughter relationship, there is no joy, no escape, and only false hope.

This darkest view of the mother-daughter relationship came just as America was going into the 1980s, a time when the second wave of feminism seemed stalled and women everywhere were called upon to be "supermoms," excelling in both work and motherhood. It was a decade in which more was demanded of American women than ever before, and yet this wasn't the result of great feminist advancements. Though much was demanded of American women, there was little new understanding of the underlying discourses at work in governing women's

experiences. *'night, Mother* reflects a lack of hope present in many other aspects of the decade, and shows women to be unable to find peaceful ways of coexistence. In this play, the mother and daughter must separate for their own good, just as the larger American cultural context at the time required women to abandon women-centered feminism in favor of success in patriarchal commerce.

A play which embraces the mirroring trope but recasts it from a more forgiving point of view is *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*, part of Preston Jones' *Texas Trilogy*. Though this play is not specifically about the mother-daughter relationship, it has similarities with plays of the mirroring model type, which help demonstrate some of the characteristics present in the plays that establish the mirroring model as a trope.

Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander dramatizes the life of the title character from her last year of high school until she has a daughter of approximately the same age. Lu Ann marries at the age of eighteen to one of her brother's army buddies from the Korean War. With him she has a daughter, Charmaine, before the marriage ends in divorce. Ten years after her first marriage, Lu Ann marries again, though that marriage ends with Lu Ann's widowhood. The play ends with Lu Ann living in her mother's house, with a mother who is now incapacitated from a stroke, as Lu Ann cares for both her mother and her daughter.

In the final act, *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* is very similar to *'night, Mother*, in that it dramatizes a grown daughter forced, through circumstances she cannot avoid, to live with her older mother. However, in this case, it is Claudine, Lu Ann's mother, who requires her daughter's care, rather than the mother caring for the daughter, as in Norman's play. Another similarity is the daughter's break away from the mother-daughter dyad and entrance into the

world of heterosexual relationships with men. Chodorow comments on the processes at work in Lu Ann's adolescent interest in boyfriends: "During early puberty, a girl usually moves from preoccupations with her relationship to her mother to concern with her father and males. This period is characterized by bisexual wavering and indecisiveness about the relative importance to the girl of females (mother/girl friends) and males (father/boys)" (138). Lu Ann follows a traditional heterosexual pattern, but this is not framed as anything but one pattern among many that she might have followed. Lu Ann, though she chooses to marry young and have a child, embraces that path as a choice instead of an unavoidable destiny.

Claudine closely monitors Lu Ann's sexual development and social interactions with other young people. She regales Lu Ann with questions: "Billy Bob Wortman walk you home? [...] Kiss him good night? [...] Well, ah'm glad your daddy never lived to see the day when his only little girl would be standin' on the front porch smoochin' with one of them worthless Wortman boys" (Jones 130). Claudine attempts to prevent her daughter from being too precocious in her interactions with boys. However, she also wants her daughter to embrace her youth and the popularity she enjoys in high school: "Mah, mah, well, you best enjoy yourself while you can, honey, remember that your schoolin' days are the happiest days of your life" (Jones 134).

The interactions between mother and daughter are not particularly close in the first Act. Lu Ann sees her mother mostly as a woman who serves as a role model for what she doesn't want to be: "Ah *know* ah don't want to be stuck all mah life in a little old dried-up West Texas town, emptyin' bedpans at the god-damned hospital, like somebody ah *know*!!" (Jones 139). Lu Ann sees her mother's nagging as interference, not an attempt to be involved and informed about

her daughter's life. The mirror of Lu Ann and her mother is not clear when Lu Ann is a child. Rather, that mirroring comes later in life when Lu Ann sees how much like her mother she has become. The acknowledgment of the mirroring is not restrictive or stifling, but instead brings Lu Ann to a new understanding of her mother and a closeness between the herself and her mother.

During Lu Ann's adolescence, boyfriends are her primary concern. However, twenty years later, in Act 3, when a former boyfriend returns to visit Lu Ann, she is no longer fixated upon men. As she has grown and become a mother and caregiver, Lu Ann is no longer turned towards men and heterosexuality for recognition, but rather towards her ailing mother and her own adolescent daughter. Lu Ann's relationships with men are impermanent, while those with her mother and daughter are more long lasting. This shows a mirroring relationship that reflects an unbreakable bond of love and concern between mothers and daughters, rather than a bond of strife and conflict, as is usually shown in plays of this trope.

One of the major themes of *Lu Ann* is the degree to which the mother-daughter relationship, particularly in its mirroring mode, is repeated in subsequent generations. Whereas Jessie did not have a daughter, and so did not propagate her own relationship with Thelma onto another generation, Lu Ann herself grows into the role her mother occupied in Act 1. This repetition is made clear in Jones' stage directions, which describe Lu Ann's daughter as, "the ACT 1 image of Lu Ann" (200).

Hirsch comments on this cycle: "Whether in the role of daughter or of mother, women continue to repeat the mother/daughter relationship throughout their lives" (Discourse, 72). In the final act of *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*, Lu Ann herself even puts together a connection between her mother in the first act and herself in the third: "It's a funny thing, but

ah'm about the same age mah mama was when you and me was in high school. My god, ain't that somethin'? It's like ah was her and Charmaine was me and ever'body around us got old and different lookin'" (Jones 227). The play ends with Lu Ann finally coming to appreciate her mother, now that her mother is in a vegetative state. She declares, "Them doctors told me that Mama would be a vegetable for the rest of her life—can you imagine that? A vegetable! Hell, my mama ain't no vegetable, she's a flower, a great old big pretty flower" (Jones 229).

In the corpus of plays that represent the mirroring trope of motherhood, extremes of emotion and consequence are most often embodied. Because *Lu Ann Hampton Laverdy Oberlander* does not represent such extremes, it stands out as an example of a different way of envisioning the mirroring mother-daughter relationship. These plays are all similar, however, in that they all examine the degree to which mothers and daughters become entangled with each other and eventually enter into a cyclical relationship. Though these plays may appear dissimilar when one first looks at them, when examining the degree to which they embrace similar understandings of the mother-daughter relationship, it becomes clear that they belong to a common group. Each is concerned with psychological processes at work between mother and daughter, and the degree to which male influence is important in resolving conflicts that arise from these processes.

The ideology these representations reflect and help perpetuate is one that sees the mother-daughter relationship as inherently ridden with strife. Whether that strife comes from a mother's unwillingness or inability to let go of her daughter as her daughter grows into an independent adult, or whether that conflict comes from competition over entangling subjectivities, the strife is never resolved between the women except when a patriarchal figure interferes to repair the strife.

Walters describes the implications of such an ideology:

We live in a society that, through both the mass media and the more traditional agents of socialization (family, church, education, politics), compresses the mother-daughter relationship into the narrow vision of psychology, framing it within the dichotomous boundaries of “bonding” and “separation” and thus actively constructing a relationship to be inherently conflictual, forcing women apart, and rendering this prophesy self-fulfilling. (16)

The mirroring model of motherhood, which I have described above, has many implications for representations of the mother-daughter relationship. It has the power to influence the audience’s view of the mother-daughter relationship. By showing cynical relationships, the theater shows audience members that mothers and daughters have a difficult time getting along, and are often harmful to one another. There is also the possibility of the theater showing a different perspective on this relationship, however. Representations can show the audience that this model need not be as monolithic as it can appear at first. There are ways of seeing the mirroring mother-daughter relationship as one that can lead to intimacy and closeness between mother and daughter, and one that is perhaps not as absolute in its tenets as psychoanalysts have theorized. One of the clearest benefits of this form of mothering is an intense emotional closeness between mother and daughter, as well as an intimacy of body and sensuality. Adrienne Rich comments on the benefits of this intimacy: “The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother” (218). Though Rich’s words are nostalgic and romantic in their tone, her optimism in her approach to the mother-daughter bond demonstrates a desire to reclaim those bonds that embrace an intense emotional connection between mothers and daughters.

Hirsch is hopeful in her outlook on mothers and daughters.

To study the relationship between mother and daughter is not to study the

relationship between two separate differentiated individuals, but to plunge into a network of complex ties, to attempt to untangle the strands of a double self, a continuous multiple being of monstrous proportions stretched across generations, parts of which try desperately to separate and delineate their own boundaries. It is to find continuity and relationship where one expects to find difference and autonomy. This basic and continued relatedness and multiplicity, this mirroring which seems to be unique to women have to be factors in any study of female development in fiction. (Hirsch, *Discourse* 73)

To Hirsch, the ability of mothers and daughters to engage in a mirroring relationship makes them exceptionally interesting. Though mothers and daughters may potentially be more likely to be psychologically harmed by intense intimacy, they are also uniquely able to connect psychologically with one another. The social demands placed on mothers in conjunction with their connection to their daughters often far outweigh the benefits of a particularly intimate relationship. Beginning with *The Glass Menagerie*, a mother is shown forced to devote her energy to finding a husband for her daughter instead of using it to forge her own relationship with that daughter.

The mirroring mother-daughter relationship allows for little deviation from social norms. Those mothers who choose to mother their daughters outside of a conventional nuclear family are attacked because they are not following the prescribed social methods of mothering. We see this in *Gypsy* when Mama Rose becomes a figure of distrust and repulsion because she has forced her daughter to grow up without a stable home life. There is little attention given to the idea that nontraditional home lives can be highly beneficial and gratifying to some people. There is no guarantee that a child in a nuclear family will have an easier or better life than one in a less traditional family structure.

The most cynical view of mothers and daughters through a mirroring approach is demonstrated in *'night, Mother*, as mother and daughter are shown to be completely unable to

coexist with one another after years of blame and recriminations. The majority of plays that feature a mirroring mother-daughter relationship approach the relationship as a negative thing. The preponderance of negativity in mirroring mother-daughter relationships can make it appear as though this model of relationship is negative by definition.

This need not be so, as seen in *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*. There, we see a mirroring mother-daughter relationship that is cyclical in nature, but is not wholly harmful to mother and daughter. Instead, mirroring allows mother and daughter to understand each other in a more intimate, nurturing manner. Among the plays examined here that use the mirroring trope to examine mother-daughter relationships, *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* is the only one to use the trope to explore a nurturing, intimate relationship between mother and daughter. The other plays are far more pessimistic about mother-daughter relationships. The unhappiness each mother-daughter pair demonstrates is a result of their inability to understand each other as separate women with unique needs and desires. However, the cynical plays are far more commercially successful, leading to the conclusion that audiences prefer the cynical view of mother-daughter relationships to a more positive view of their nurturance and understanding.

CHAPTER FOUR: SAINTS AND MARTYRS OF MOTHERHOOD

The trope of the saintly or martyred mother, a maternal figure so perfect she will sacrifice everything for the sake of her children, is one that encourages impossible standards of perfection for mothers. The saintly mother is characterized by her willingness to suffer for her children. These women are often defined, by themselves and others, through their role as mother rather than as women with multiple demands and conflicting interests. Such mothers often achieve fame for their perfection. Many of the plays examined in this chapter are criticized for being melodramatically romantic in their depictions of perfect, blameless women. As teaching tools, saintly mothers are examples for audience members to emulate, however, the example of a woman who never makes a mistake is impossible to truly emulate. Real-world mothers are often plagued with far more conflicting demands that make it impossible to be all things to all people. Perfect, saintly mothers can only exist in the controlled conditions of artistic representation, but this does not prevent real-world women from feeling pressured to measure up to their example.

The daughter has a different relationship to a saintly mother than does a son, because the daughter is supposed to emulate the self-sacrifice and suffering of her mother. Part of a saintly mother's responsibility is to model a type of selfless motherhood that will be learned by the daughter so that she can become a saintly mother in turn, and model that saintliness to her own daughters. The trope of the saintly mother is one that spills from one generation into the next.

In the West, the saintly mother is intimately bound up with Christianity, specifically the figure of Mary, the mother of Christ. Her example has become the Christian ideal of motherhood, an ideal to which Western women are expected to aspire. In relating the close ties

of the trope of the perfect mother with the Virgin, Elisabeth Badinter writes, “The natural patron saint of the mother was the Virgin Mary, whose whole life bespoke her devotion to her child” (190).

As Christianity spread through the West, the Virgin Mary became the strongest representative of the ideal, saintly, mother.⁵ Her characteristics came to define good mothering behavior. Mary allegedly remained a virgin throughout her life, giving birth only after a miraculous impregnation. She cared nothing for worldly goods and comfort and devoted her time to her divine son. Mary lived only to promote her child, and was eventually rewarded for her efforts. Instead of dying, she was subsumed into heaven directly from life. She embodied a life lived wholly for her child: “The Blessed Virgin was so pure, so self-abnegating, so nurturing, and so ecstatic in the performance of her tasks that she made humility and submissiveness look good” (Thurer 83).

Mary’s perfection became an ideal to which ordinary, non-divine women were subject, though there was no chance they could possibly meet it. “Extreme conceptions of the divine mother as perfect are hard acts for mortals to follow, and they obscure an inevitable and essential component of mothers--imperfection” (Thurer 32). Mary’s saintliness threw the non-saintliness of real-world mothers into stark relief. The disparity between Mary’s life of self-sacrifice and ordinary women is extreme. Thurer sees in Mary’s myth a darker side that asks women to repress their subjecthood in favor of being defined by the function “mother.” She writes, “There is an underside to Mary’s selflessness if we consider that Mary has no self. She has no needs of her own. The only female biological function permitted her is the act of nursing. She is modest

⁵For an analysis of Mary’s development alongside Christianity, see Thurer, Chapter 4.

to the point of prudery, servile, pious, entirely self-erasing, a primeval co-dependent. Whose dream is she, anyway?" (Thurer 83).

Two of Mary's strongest characteristics, that she remain eternally chaste and that she suffer for her child, have served to define her for future generations, and continue to be the most difficult of her characteristics for real-world mothers to emulate. Mary's eternal virginity, which became a cult of its own throughout the Middle Ages and into modernity, has greatly influenced the Western perception of female sexuality. Rich writes: "The divisions of labor and allocations of power in patriarchy demand not merely a suffering Mother, but one divested of sexuality: the Virgin Mary, *virgo intacta*, perfectly chaste" (Rich 183).

Mary's second major characteristic, her capacity for suffering, has been treated frequently in artistic representations. The image of Mary holding the dead body of her son has become such an iconic artistic motif that it has its own label, the *pieta*. Mary's suffering, however artistically powerful, has its own implications for the trope of the saintly mother. Shari Thurer describes:

What unmet need was filled by this weeping mother [...]? Why should mother suffer? Perhaps her agony gratified an unconscious wish for a mother who feels as we do, for a mother who hears our sorrow, who, above all, understands our pain. And tears are water, after all. Water washes. Perhaps she satisfies the hunger in us not only for empathy, but for cleansing, for purification. (114)

According to Mary's example, a mother who wishes to become saintly should expect to suffer for her child. Such suffering contributes to the child's well being because it allows her to know she is not alone in her suffering. Her mother is suffering along with her.

While Mary's suffering and sacrifice were not passed directly to a daughter, she has still

modeled such behavior to thousands of “daughters of Mary.”⁶ Though she was unable to make a direct link from mother to daughter in spreading the qualities of the saintly mother, Mary has managed to far beyond the generation after her own. Two thousand years after her death, she is a constant maternal presence in the lives of over one billion Catholics worldwide, known by names such as “Mother Most Admirable” and “Mother most Amiable.” To Catholic women, Mary remains not only the patron saint of motherhood, but also the model to which they must aspire. Though she is not their direct biological mother, Mary passes on the traits of saintly motherhood to today’s women by interceding on their behalf whenever they pray to her for guidance.

The character of Mary maintains a great deal of influence on modern visions of perfection as a mother. Her claim to fame is that she is a divine mother, and this fame is spread throughout modern popular culture. Recent films, in particular *The Passion of the Christ*, spend a great deal of time treating the character of Mary as the mother who suffers for her child. She has appeared on numerous postage stamps and magazine covers, most recently the December 2005 issue of *Time Magazine*. The power of Mary as the representation of the perfect, saintly mother exists strongly in American culture, and is not confined to those of a religious bent.

A myth of such dimensions cannot but exercise a sway over our unconscious lives. Whether we revere her or not, whether we are churched or not, we are in her thrall. Though many of us have never given her a second thought and would regard sightings of her as utterly preposterous, her brand of motherhood is embedded in our psyche. The Virgin's way of nurturing has become the maternal ideal, the pinnacle of feminine ambition. Her bond with her Son, her inalienable, irreducible, indestructible love for her Baby, now defines the parameters of mother love. (Thurer 82)

Mary’s nurturance and maternal devotion have been used to define women in general, in particular to support the belief that all women are predisposed to mother. While it is true that

⁶ “Daughters of Mary” is the named of a large non-profit organization for Catholic women, as well as the title of

many women choose to mother and gain great personal satisfaction from it, to call this a natural inclination discounts the degree to which many mothers occasionally feel ambivalent or even hostile towards their children.

Cultural feminists have encouraged the belief that women are naturally good at mothering, seeing this as a characteristic of women that makes them worthy of greater respect and power in society. However, other feminists have been quick to point out that the belief in naturally nurturing women ultimately undermines mothers. “The idea that women are naturally nurturing brings its own downside, its own notion of the good mother” (Ladd-Taylor 15).

The belief in the always-nurturing mother leads to the expectation that such behavior will always show itself. Like the icon of the Virgin Mary, the prospect of the naturally nurturing mother is an ideal real-world mothers cannot hope to meet. For, as soon as a mother complains about her lack of sleep, the incessant demands on her time and attention, or her aching body, she has become in an instant “non-nurturing,” and, hence, non-saintly. Polatnick ascribes the myth of the naturally nurturing mother to a male desire to keep women in the position of caring for those children: “By propagating the belief that women are the ones who really desire children, men can then invoke a ‘principle of least interest’: that is, because women are ‘most interested’ in children, they must make most of the accommodations and sacrifices required to rear them” (27).

These two constructions of saintly mothers, the Virgin Mary and the naturally nurturing maternal woman, point out clearly how much the notion of a “good mother” is a social product. The ideal of good mothering has changed over the years, according to Thurer:

All this casts serious doubts on the validity of our current image of ideal mother.

several different congregations of Catholic nuns.

Perhaps she needn't be all-empathic, after all. Perhaps she can be personally ambitious without damaging her child. Perhaps she does not have unlimited power in the shaping of her offspring. Good mothering, history reminds us, is a cultural invention--something that is man-made, not a lawful force of nature. (300)

During the twentieth century, American society had its own constructed ideal of the saintly mother. Beginning in the nineteenth century and carrying on into the twentieth, a good mother came to be defined by how much she could follow the rules laid out by child-rearing experts of the day. Good mothering was defined and outlined by these experts, and it becomes increasingly clear through their writings how much patriarchal standards are revealed in these advice manuals.

Often the advice manuals were confusing and contradictory. "The experts in a given era don't agree on the measures of "good" parenting" (Ladd-Taylor 5). Because of their definitions of how women should behave in their acts of mothering, Margolis has declared mothering advice manuals to be part of "prescriptive history," that is, "historical and contemporary books, manuals, and other popular writings that have advised women how to act, thus informing them what their roles are or ought to be" (7).

These advice manuals led mothers to be hyper-concerned with the minutiae of their children's lives in ways they never had been before. This focus meant mothers were expected to work harder at gratifying their children's every need, under the threat that the failure to do so would be permanently harmful to the child. Margolis describes this attitude in the middle of the twentieth century: "The ideal mother of the postwar decades was completely fulfilled by carrying out all the minute and often tedious tasks of child care, fulfillment that came naturally from her maternal instinct" (Margolis 70). Thurer concurs: "Mother's job was to respond to

baby's emotional needs (in effect, to read baby's mind), gratify its wants, tolerate its regressions, stimulate its cognitive development, and, above all, to feel personally fulfilled in carrying this out. The overriding emotion was (and is) empathy" (Thurer 248).

The most notable difference between the mothering advice given during the twentieth century and that of previous centuries was the new focus on a child's psyche, a focus brought on in the United States by the increasing influence of the work of Sigmund Freud. Beginning with the end of World War II, Freud's writings about motherhood and the psychological pitfalls of children were used in both motherhood advice writing and medical practice. These writings wholly supported the notion of the naturally nurturing mother. "In accordance with Freud (and his predecessors, from Aristotle to Darwin), women were supposed to want babies. It was a part of the natural order. And she was supposed to find her own fulfillment in raising them" (Thurer 246).

The most famous of child care advice-givers in the twentieth century was Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* appeared first in 1945, directly as the baby boom began. Spock constructs a relationship between mother and child that is loving and idealistic, but his sympathies lie more with children than with mothers. While his advice is often more practical than ideological, in the end, "He constructs a 'good' mother who is ever-present, all-providing, inexhaustibly patient and tactful, and who anticipates her child's every need. Mother has become baby's servant" (Thurer 258).

As the United States evolved from the Second World War until the end of the twentieth century, Spock's book remained to guide mothers through the early years of their children's lives. However, his advice changed through consecutive editions, the eighth published in 2004.

Spock's book has remained a mixture of liberal thinking and conservative beliefs. For instance, in the 1946 edition of the book, Spock begins with "A Letter to the Mother and Father." His specific inclusion of the father in his address gives the impression that Spock will demand that both parents be equally involved in raising their children. However, he writes, "Of course, I don't mean that the father has to give just as many bottles or change just as many diapers as the mother. But it's fine for him to do these things occasionally. He might make the formula on Sunday" (2nd ed. 15).

One of the most remarkable changes over time occurs in Spock's discussion of the working mother. He begins the section discussing working mothers in his 1946 text with, "To work or not to work? Some mothers *have* to work to make a living. Usually their children turn out all right, because some reasonably good arrangement is made for their care. But others grow up neglected and maladjusted" (author's emphasis 484). While advocating that the government give a stipend to women who work at home as mothers, and writing that unhappy mothers "can't bring up very happy children," overall he believes it is best for mothers to forgo careers to take care of their children. "It doesn't make sense to let mothers go to work making dresses in factories or tapping typewriters in offices, and have them pay other people to do a poorer job of bring up their children" (484).

Spock's prejudice that mothers will naturally care better for their children than child-care workers or fathers supports his claim that it "doesn't make *sense* to let mothers go to work" when their career efforts are so meaningless compared to child raising (my emphasis). Spock here idealizes a mother's ability to know, instinctively, how best to care for her children, while reiterating the necessity for good care early in a child's life: "If a mother realizes clearly how

vital this kind of care is to a small child, it may make it easier for her to decide that the extra money she might earn, or the satisfaction she might receive from an outside job, is not so important after all” (484). To Spock in 1946, a mother’s need or desire for economic autonomy and personal satisfaction are trifles in comparison with a child’s need to have a mother’s unceasing attention.

In looking at later editions of Spock’s work, however, it becomes clear that his advice is not absolute. It changes as the country changes, and as women’s visibility in the work force has changed. While his discussion of working women was placed in his earlier editions under the chapter “Special Problems,” the 1992 edition⁷ of the book addresses not only second wave feminism, but directs many demands to men. Spock and Rothenberg, a doctor who collaborated on Spock’s later editions, exhort men to embrace family instead of careers, though they don’t shy away from making blanket statements about women:

How much better it would have been (though it never would have happened) if men had had the good sense, in 1970, to raise *their* own consciousness and see that women have been wise in seeing–through the centuries–that family and feelings, participation in the community, interest in the arts, are the values that have given the deepest and longest lasting gratification to most people [...]” (Authors’ emphasis 6th ed. 34)

The belief that women are naturally fulfilled by family relationships is accepted throughout the book, though in this edition that belief is held up for men to emulate. After the impassioned plea to fathers to turn away from materialism and toward family life, the authors go on to state, “Parents who know that they need a career or a certain kind of work for fulfillment should not

⁷I have chosen to use the 1992 edition of Spock’s work, as it was the last version of his book to be published before his death in 1998. Two editions have appeared after his death. The eighth edition, updated and revised by Robert Needlman, contains no reference to the women’s liberation movement, nor the need of fathers to take on a woman’s natural inclination to family and feelings.

simply give it up for the sake of their children” (6th ed. 35).

This advice is found in the sub-section entitled, “The Changing Roles of Women and Men,” which contains the sub-headings, “Discrimination is Still Rampant,” “The Subordination of Women is Brought About by Countless Small Acts,” and “Men Need Liberating, Too.” The feminist bent of such headings is born out in writings on how one can help one’s daughter succeed by refusing to ascribe her to traditional gender roles through chores and toys. The authors denounce sexual stereotyping as harmful to children. It becomes clear that in the later edition of Spock’s work, the authors are making a concerted effort to address feminism, as well as attitudes taken by the book in previous incarnations. However, there is a clear irony that the authors write against sexual stereotyping for daughters, while they themselves sexually stereotype mothers as naturally nurturing women who always already know the importance of family and feelings.

One section that remains constant from the first to the most recent printing is that which commands the reader to “Enjoy Your Baby.” A comparison between the 1946 edition and that from 1992 shows a remarkable similarity in this section. Here, the reader is commanded to show no fear of the baby, to enjoy the child, and to accept that babies aren’t frail. The sentence “Your baby is born to be a reasonable, friendly human being,” appears in 1992 as it did in 1946. The authors of both versions accept that the enjoyment of a baby can be commanded. While the reinforcement that babies aren’t going to fall apart or spontaneously break is intended to be supportive of anxious new parents, this section also contributes to the ideology of the saintly mother. In effect, it says that if you aren’t enjoying your baby, if you have allowed yourself to feel ambivalence or downright displeasure, you have strayed from the path of good motherhood.

Spock's work has had a lasting impact on American motherhood through the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. "The popularity of Spock's book spawned a how-to-raise-baby industry that is still thriving" (Thurer 260). The advice he gave began a trend that has had both positive and negative repercussions for mothers. While mothers have largely embraced Spock's writings in their desire to find some method to the confusing and difficult job of child rearing, and though Spock's work also raised the level of power perceived in mothers to create happy, healthy humans, it still had drawbacks. All too often the advice given created impossible standards of perfection in mothers and undermined mothers' confidence by inundating them with the consequences of bad mothering. This advice also gave the ultimate authority of motherhood to the largely male experts of the day, rather than to those engaged in the actual practice of motherhood.

The reward for following the experts' advice turned out to be ephemeral. Though a mother might feel the satisfaction of raising a child while adhering to expert advice, she would receive little or no corporeal benefit. "Performing well at the job of childrearer may be a source of feminine credentials, but it is not a source of power or status" (Polatnick 31).

Amidst this culture of mid-century advice John Van Druten's *I Remember Mama* first appeared on the stage. The play appeared one year before Spock's book, in September of 1944. While the world was embroiled in a violent and bloody war, Broadway presented a nostalgic domestic drama about happy, contented immigrants who cheerfully accept life's difficulties. As the country was torn by tensions over the war's outcome and the loss of many young men, American audiences could take comfort in the conservative, traditional portrait of America espoused by Van Druten's play. *I Remember Mama* hearkened back to a nation at peace, in

which gender roles were on solid footing and rarely questioned. As women around the country worked in occupations traditionally held by men, filling roles vacated by soldiers, American gender roles were in a state of flux. The gender roles in Van Druten's play would have seemed like a return to comfortable, if conservative times. The fantasy of *I Remember Mama* was a much-needed daydream for American audiences in 1944.

I Remember Mama begins with a voice-over by Katrin, a daughter of the Hanson family who serves as a narrator throughout the play.

For as long as I could remember, the house on Steiner Street had been home. Papa and Mama had both been born in Norway, but they came to San Francisco because Mama's sisters were here. All of us were born here. Nels, the oldest and only boy—my sister Christine—and the littlest sister, Dagmar [...] But first and foremost, I remember Mama. (Van Druten 4)

This begins the story of the Hanson family. Mama and Papa, who are referred to by those names throughout the piece, have four children: Nels, Christine, Katrin, and Dagmar. Mama's three sisters also live in San Francisco, and during the course of the play Mama's sister Trina marries a local undertaker, Peter Thorkelson. Mama's uncle Chris also lives in California, and frequently visits the family. To signify their status as immigrants, Mama, Papa, the aunts, and Uncle Chris speak in broken English with varying degrees of Norwegian accents.

As the play begins, Mama receives the money Papa has made that week and shows the children how the money will be divided up for the family's needs. It is clear in this scene that the family is not wealthy. Nels asks to be allowed to go to high school, but the family does not have the money. So, to allow Nels to go to school, the family makes several sacrifices, including a warm coat for Mama and tobacco for Papa.

Over the course of this play, Mama's identity is inextricably bound up with the role of

mother, and as a mother she is saintly. However, the audience learns little about Mama other than that she is a mother. We learn that her first child died before she immigrated to America, but the circumstances are not revealed. The audience learns nothing about Mama's aspirations or interests beyond her work as a mother. Every action she takes in the course of this play is motivated by that role, either directly or indirectly.

One of Mama's forays outside of her apartment demonstrates this very well. In order to help her daughter Katrin become a good writer, which Mama sees as vital to her daughter's happiness, Mama ventures out to see a published author, Mrs. Moorhead, to have the author critique Katrin's writing. In order to buy this woman's assistance, Mama pays the author, a known epicurean, with a recipe for Kjödboller, which she describes: "I have a special recipe for Kjödboller...my mother give me. She was best cook I ever knew. Never have I told this recipe, not even to my own sisters, because they are not good cooks" (Van Druten 165). Mama trades something of great value to herself in order to assist her daughter. This legacy, a gift from her deceased mother, is sacrificed for the sake of her daughter's future success.

This example of self-sacrifice shows a key characteristic of Mama throughout the play, as she sacrifices many things for the good of her children. The first thing we learn Mama has sacrificed, which becomes a recurring item throughout the play, is a warm coat for herself. Katrin says, "Mama was always going to buy herself a warm coat [...] when there was enough, only there never was" (Van Druten 14). Over the course of the play, Mama's children often hearken back to the fantasy coat they'd like to buy their mother if they had the money, a fantasy that remains just that. Though Mama runs the household and the family, her comfort remains low on the family's priority, and Mama seems only too happy to continue to sacrifice her needs

for those of her children.

Another notable sacrifice is Mama's solje, a brooch given to her by her own mother. Mama had intended to gift Katrin with the brooch to signify her graduation, but Katrin instead wanted an expensive celluloid dresser set she had seen in a store window. To grant Katrin's wish, Mama trades her brooch for the dresser set. When she learns of this, Katrin trades it back to the storeowner for Mama's brooch. Mama accepts the brooch back, and rewards Katrin by allowing her to drink coffee with the adults, something Mama had told Katrin she could only do once she was grown.

In this scene, we see another example of Mama willing to part with her own heritage in order to further her daughter's ends. Katrin's desire for the dresser set is entirely selfish on her part. The family can ill afford such a luxury, yet she demands it anyway. Rather than teach her daughter about what the family can and cannot afford, Mama trades the one thing of value she has, an heirloom brooch that is one of her few ties to her homeland. Mama's willingness to part with something she holds in such high value combines with her continuing lack of a warm coat to show that Mama is, in a sense, being stripped naked by her family. Mama will sacrifice anything of her own if called upon to do so in order to keep her children happy and well. While this may seem a noble characteristic, and it often is, Mama gives up her precious solje in order to buy for her daughter an item that is not essential. She is not asked to sell her solje in order to buy food or medical care when Dagmar needs it, but she is required to do so in order to provide Katrin with the luxury she demands.

Her willing sacrifice shows how much the character of Mama is bound up with ideals of perfect mothers. Mama gives of herself by giving up her own items. She never asks for

anything from others, and never expects anyone to do anything for her. In fact, she gets angry with Christine for telling Katrin about the brooch. When Katrin regains the solje for her mother, she ruins Mama's perfect self-sacrifice. Mama can only live up to the ideal of maternal perfection if she suffers for her children. In doing so, she models self-sacrifice for her daughter. In Katrin's case, the daughter has clearly learned to emulate this characteristic, as she sacrifices her desired possession. In learning the lesson of self-sacrifice, Katrin gains the approval of her parents. Mama can see in Katrin's sacrifice the seeds of a saintly mother, so Mama can congratulate herself in raising a daughter who will transmit the trope into future generations.

In the course of *I Remember Mama*, Mama is confronted with several obstacles to the ultimate happiness and peace of her family. The most threatening of these occurs when her youngest daughter's health becomes imperiled due to an infected mastoid. Dagmar is rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery. After the surgery, Mama is not allowed to see her daughter. The doctor tells Mama, "You see, for the first twenty-four hours, clinic patients aren't allowed to see visitors. The wards must be kept quiet" (Van Druten 69). To the hospital, Mama has no status in her daughter's care beyond that of any other visitor. Mama's pleas to be allowed to see Dagmar are rebuffed. The rules in the hospital are to be obeyed.

Mama is upset by the hospital's ruling on this matter. She tells the nurse with anger, "Am not visitor. I am her Mama" (Van Druten 71), and says to her son Nels, "If I don't see her today how will I know that all is well with her? What can I tell Papa when he comes home from work?" (71). Mama returns to the Hanson household and becomes worried about the time. She says, "Three hours till Papa come" (75). Mama's continued reference to Papa's response to the situation is instructive toward how Mama views her responsibilities as a mother. Mama sees it

as her responsibility to be fully conscious of how her children are faring, a responsibility that is supervised by her husband. She is insulted when she is compared to an ordinary visitor, and believes her status as Dagmar's mother should allow her access to her daughter. She is agitated that she will not have information to give Lars when he learns of Dagmar's plight. If Mama cannot access Dagmar, she cannot complete one of her responsibilities of motherhood, that of knowing about her children. She does not want to have to admit to her husband that she has failed in checking in on their daughter. In order to prevent such a situation, Mama disguises herself as a cleaning woman and sneaks into Dagmar's hospital room.

When Dagmar returns from the hospital, she returns to a stressful situation in the Hanson household. Dagmar's cat, Uncle Elizabeth, is gravely injured. Dagmar is terribly upset by her pet's condition and refuses to hear any suggestions that the cat be euthanized. She declares that her mother can repair the cat: "Mama can. Mama can do everything. Make him live, Mama. Make him well again. *Please!*" (Van Druten 100). However, Mama decides to kill the cat by chloroform. She sends her son to the drug store to buy the supplies, puts the cat in a box with a rag soaked in the liquid, and expects the cat to die overnight. In the morning, the cat is still alive. Dagmar is overjoyed at her pet's recovery, and gives Mama credit for the apparent miracle: "He's well. Oh, Mama, I *knew* you'd fix him" (Van Druten 112).

Mama is uncomfortable with allowing Dagmar to believe she can work miracles, though her husband convinces her to allow Dagmar's fantasy:

Mama: But, Lars, we must tell her. Is not good to let her grow up believing I can fix *everything!*

Papa: Is best thing in the world for her to believe. (*He chuckles*) Besides, I know exactly how she feels. (*He lays his hand on hers*). (Van Druten 113)

Mama's desire to be truthful with her daughter is overcome by her husband's desire to let his wife be an object of awe to her children. Though his belief in Mama's abilities is meant as a compliment to her resourcefulness and skills, Papa's words show how much pressure Mama is under in her family. She must shoulder the burden of their faith. If Dagmar's cat had died, not only would Dagmar be saddened by the cat's demise, she would be disappointed that her mother could not fix the situation. Thus, Mama had to shoulder the burden of the cat's health.

The play begins with the counting of Lars' salary and instruction to the children about money. Mama speaks of an account she has at the bank, with money to help the family if their finances should become too tight. However, the audience learns at the end of the play that Mama does not have a bank account. She never did. Her reference to a bank account was a ruse to prevent the children from knowing how little money the family really had. They were living from paycheck to paycheck, but Mama did not want her children to know this: "Is not good for little ones to be afraid...to not feel secure" (Van Druten 174).

This describes Mama's theory of motherhood. It is her responsibility to shoulder the burdens of the family, without allowing her children to know of that burden. She sees her role in the family as that of official martyr. Mama makes sure she's the one undergoing the most consistent self-sacrifice, and while Papa also gives up comforts, the play focuses mainly on the things Mama gives up, like her warm coat, recipes, and solje.

Mama's characteristics make her a perfect example of the "saintly mother" trope. By giving up her personal possessions and her own peace of mind, Mama demonstrates that she humbly considers herself the least important member of the family, though she in fact is the member of the family upon whom every other member relies. Mama's sacrifice is done at the

expense of her own subjectivity. “Marta Hanson” is effaced in favor of the identity “Mama.” We never learn much about Mama’s sufferings over her family’s financial struggles, or any frustrations about her children. Rather, Mama never expresses anything but patience and warm care for her children. Mama never shows any negative sides of motherhood, and is never discontent with her lot and her status as “Mama.”

The fantasy of *I Remember Mama* gave way in the next decade to different interpretations of maternal figures, as the nostalgia for simpler times faded. A decade and a half after Van Druten’s play, Lorraine Hansberry created another type of saintly mother in her classic work *A Raisin in the Sun*. Though a domestic drama like *I Remember Mama*, Hansberry’s work also branched into an examination of the social impact of racism on an African-American family.

In 1959, when *A Raisin in the Sun* premiered, America had changed dramatically from the country that first saw *I Remember Mama*. The country had altered as a consequence of the G.I. Bill, resulting in the spread of American cities into the suburbs and an economic growth the likes of which the country had never seen. In the context of such unprecedented growth, Hansberry shows the unique difficulties an African-American family encounters when they attempt to use a recent inheritance to make a similar move away from the city into the suburbs.

The saintly mother of *A Raisin in the Sun* is Lena Younger, the matriarch of the Younger family. Her husband has died, and it is the central concern of the play to decide what to do with the life insurance money coming to Lena. Lena lives in an apartment with her grown children, Beneatha and Walter, as well as Walter’s wife Ruth and their son Travis. The title of the play comes from a Langston Hughes poem that compares “dreams deferred” to a raisin that dries up in the sun. In the play, it is largely Lena’s dream that has been deferred. Her greatest desire is to

move away from the cramped apartment in which she has lived for ten years with her family, into a house in the suburbs. Other members of the family do not share this dream, however, and conflicts arise over how best to spend the money. In the end, Lena's dream is realized, though her family must contend with disappointment and racism along the way.

Lisa M. Anderson sees Lena Younger, often referred to as "Mama," as a figure that has room for resistant readings, rather than as a woman who is overpowered by the forces around her. "While Mama often was and sometimes still is seen as the embodiment of the mammy type who rules the roost, it is evident that Lena Younger is a 1959 reality-based example of the nurturing, protecting, and fighting black woman" (33). Lena fights to save her family from the enclosure of the city, which she sees as a danger to their health and happiness. Unlike Marta Hanson, she never appears passive or perpetually cheerful. Lena is an example of a saintly mother who is more than nostalgia or fantasy, and as such shows that there is room within the saintly mother trope for many different types of saintly mothers.

Lena has mother-daughter relationships with two women: her daughter Beneatha, and her daughter-in-law Ruth. Her saintliness is located in her unquestioned willingness to sacrifice herself and take on the suffering of others as her own. Lena devotes herself to her family and to her husband, Old Walter, who, though dead, is constantly resurrected by Lena.

That Lena is the head of the Younger family is not disputed, though it appears Walter would like to fill that role himself. He wants Lena to give the money over to his keeping, so that Walter can invest it in a liquor store scheme with a friend. Though Lena resists this use of the money, she trusts Walter with it, only to have him lose it when it is stolen by this same friend. In many productions of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter has been made the focus, a shift that Anderson

finds detrimental to the play's meaning:

In the original Broadway production and the filmed version, much of the focus of the play was pulled away from the women of the play, and focused instead on Walter Younger and his dreams. When the center of the play is shifted to Walter, his goals and dreams become the most important, and Mama, Beneatha, and Ruth then become [...] domineering and oppressive to the men of the house. (33)

It is because of this lens, the focusing on Walter's story, that Lena has so often been portrayed as an overbearing, dominating mother, the figure that gave way to satire in *The Colored Museum*.

While Lena is definitely strong, and occasionally overbearing, these episodes are interspersed with periods of extreme caring and tenderness towards her daughter and daughter-in-law. When Beneatha tells her mother that she had broken off her relationship with George Murchison, a wealthy young man Lena had earlier supported, Lena accepts her daughter's decision, for which Beneatha is grateful:

Beneatha: Mama—
Mama: Yes, baby—
Beneatha: Thank you.
Mama: For what?
Beneatha: For understanding me this time. (Hansberry 82)

Here, Beneatha's gratitude shows that, though Lena may not always understand and support her daughter, she successfully reinforces her daughter when it is most important. She suppresses any urges she may have to give her daughter advice in favor of allowing her daughter's needs to come to the fore.

Lena's actions towards Ruth are no less comforting and warm. When Ruth tells Lena she is pregnant with a child she is not sure the family can support, Lena understands Ruth's fear and depression when she explains to Beneatha, "She be all right. Women gets right depressed sometimes when they get her way. (*Speaking softly, expertly, rapidly.*) Now you just relax.

That's right...just lean back, don't think 'bout nothing at all...nothing at all--" (Hansberry 44).

That Lena clearly understands Ruth's crisis shows that she is in tune with the conflicting needs and desires of each member of her family. After this scene of comforting Ruth, the stage

directions portray Lena as literally bearing Ruth's weight as she helps her out of the room.

Lena's saintliness shows through here strongly as she takes on the problems of Ruth as her own.

She is able to empathize strongly with her daughter-in-law, suffering as Ruth suffers, making Ruth's needs paramount.

Because Lena so clearly wants each member of her family to be happy and successful, and wants none of them to be forced to defer their dreams as she did, it is not hard to see why Lena belongs to the trope of mothers who are supremely self-sacrificing. Anderson concurs:

The money that comes into the family does technically belong to Lena, as it is insurance money from her husband's death. She could have used all of the money on herself, as Ruth suggests early in the play, but she chooses to give part of it to her children to help make their lives easier. In this, she embodies the self-sacrificing mother figure. (34)

Though she is self-sacrificing, she has failed to pass this same characteristic on to either Beneatha or Ruth. While these women are not self-seeking, they do not embrace humility and self-denial for the good of others. Beneatha is concerned with achieving her own life goals, and Ruth is strict with her son, refusing to give him money when he asks for it. Because saintliness has failed to transmit from one generation to the next, Lena is the only saintly mother in the Younger family. As such, she stands in contrast to the other women. Ruth and Beneatha look comparatively selfish next to the saintly Lena.

Her self-sacrifice puts Lena clearly in relation to Marta Hanson, as the two are collectively willing to give up any wealth they have for the good of their children. Lena,

however, is granted more power in her family structure, serving as she does as the lone matriarch. Like Marta, Lena is also referred to almost exclusively as “Mama” in the course of the play. She is defined by that role. The audience does not see Lena outside the role of maternal figure. She is not seen doing anything specifically for herself or by herself. However, Mama is able to find her power within the patriarchal family structure around her. Though a male no longer heads her family, Lena rules the household in the place of her dearly departed husband. Her custody of the family is only temporary, however. She holds power only until she deems her son to have risen to the level of maturity wherein she can hand over the reins. She does so at the end of the play, when Walter rejects the money the white developers attempt to give the family to convince them to stay where they are and not buy the home in the suburbs. Lena compares Walter’s actions there as worthy of her husband, and, in doing so, passes the power over the family to her son. Thus, Lena perpetuates the patriarchal family structure.

Several decades later, the theme of maternal suffering and devotion was taken up in Robert Harling’s 1987 play *Steel Magnolias*, which garnered much critical and popular success before being transformed into a motion picture. Harling’s work celebrated strong Southern women when strong women were the fashion of the day. In politics, Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush made themselves known throughout political circles not only as the wives of the president and vice-president of the United States, but as women who influenced the cultural and social movements of the day. Though these women had strong personalities and beliefs, they still celebrated their domesticity and motherhood. Rather than highlight their status as working women with successful careers, Reagan and Bush emphasized their home and family lives. As some of the most famous American women of the 1980s, Reagan and Bush were the models for

other American women. They were socially active with strong beliefs, but emphasized the domestic sphere over the career sphere in showing their power and influence. With these two women as the day's most famous strong women, Harling created a group of women with the same traits. Though successful career women, the women of *Steel Magnolias* focus mainly on their family and domestic problems.

Steel Magnolias is the story of six women who live in a small Southern town and attend the same beauty shop, run by Truvy Jones. These women are all either mothers as the play begins, or become mothers during the play. Among these many mothers is M'Lynn, a prominent career woman whose daughter, Shelby, is on her way to her wedding as the play opens. The relationship between M'Lynn and Shelby fuels the play as their dynamics change according to Shelby's choices.

In the first scene, the women gather to prepare for Shelby's wedding. In the course of this gathering, Shelby suffers a diabetic seizure, and the audience learns the severity of Shelby's medical condition. In the second act, which takes place several months after the wedding, Shelby informs her mother that she is pregnant, information M'Lynn is not keen to hear, because she has been told throughout Shelby's life that a pregnancy would be life-threatening to her daughter. In the next scene, when Shelby's son is over a year old, the women learn of and discuss Shelby's upcoming kidney transplant, an organ donated by M'Lynn. The final scene takes place after Shelby's funeral. The transplant was unsuccessful, leading to a coma and death for Shelby.

The play begins with the symbolic division of mother and daughter for M'Lynn and Shelby. Traditionally, a daughter's wedding symbolizes an end of the mother-daughter

relationship as one of deep intimacy, in favor of a new loyalty to the husband on the part of the daughter. The cycle of Shelby's life after her division from her mother's home is a short one. One can see in the plot of this play a cautionary tale about dividing oneself from the mother. Shelby's move away from her mother precipitates her death, because as soon as she marries, she enters into a relationship that gives her the impetus to be a mother, a desire that kills her.

M'Lynn's desire to be a good mother and to follow the advice and rules laid down by doctors for Shelby's health are strong. M'Lynn clings to what she has been told by medical professionals, hoping that following this advice will be best for her daughter, making her a good mother. When Shelby informs M'Lynn about her pregnancy, M'Lynn's first instinct is to blame Shelby's husband, disgusted that he hasn't insisted Shelby follow doctors' advice as M'Lynn had: "But does he ever listen? I mean when doctors and specialists give you advice. I know you never listen, but does he? I guess since he doesn't have to carry the baby, it doesn't really concern him" (Harling 33). She goes on to declare, "Your poor body has been through so much" (Harling 34).

Here we see that M'Lynn values Shelby's life over the potential lives of Shelby's future children. M'Lynn's desire is to keep alive her relationship with Shelby, and she is not willing to sacrifice her for future generations. Shelby's blithe willingness to take the risk of pregnancy against the advice of doctors flies in the face of her mother's beliefs. M'Lynn accepts the doctor's pronouncements as law. She has put a great deal of stock in their dire predictions about Shelby's ability to survive after giving birth. While she might hope the doctors are over-stating the case, she does not wish to take any chances with her daughter's life.

M'Lynn's approach to saintly motherhood is strongly bound up with following these

doctors' advice. Shelby has a different version of saintly motherhood, one that makes a strong connection between the worth of her life and her ability to give birth. She is insistent that she give birth to her child, romanticizing motherhood as her greatest ambition:

Mama. I don't know why you have to make everything so difficult. I look at having this baby as the opportunity of a lifetime. Sure, there may be some risk involved. That's true for anybody. But you get through it and life goes on. And when it's all said and done there'll be a little piece of immortality with Jackson's looks and my sense of style...I hope. Mama, please. I need your support. I would rather have thirty minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special.
(Harling 35)

Shelby is deeply invested in the ideology of motherhood that says a woman is defined by the role of mother. Without children, her entire life is summed up as "nothing special." This dismisses her many relationships with friends and family as unimportant in the long run. To Shelby, a woman's life is not worthwhile without children. Thus, the risk of her life to have a child is an acceptable one for Shelby. If she dies for the sake of a child, she will have at least tried to make her life worthwhile. If she doesn't take the risk, she will eternally remain "nothing special."

Shelby is clearly willing to suffer for her child, risking death in order to be a mother. M'Lynn has modeled self-sacrifice clearly to her daughter. In order to save Shelby's life, M'Lynn literally gives a piece of her own body to her daughter. The strain of her child's birth has damaged Shelby's kidneys too much for them to effectively work, so M'Lynn offers one of her own. When mother and daughter share the news of the upcoming surgery with their friends at the beauty parlor, shock and concern for Shelby is their first response. But M'Lynn's surgery is far more treacherous, according to Shelby: "My operation's simple. Mama's is awful. They basically have to saw her in half to get the kidney. It's major, *major* surgery for her" (Harling 59). The focus of sympathy switches to M'Lynn, both for the painful and life-threatening

surgery she is about to undergo for the sake of her daughter, and for the anxious concern she is experiencing regarding her daughter's continued health problems.

M'Lynn's response to her friends' sympathy is to stoically declare that it is her privilege to be able to suffer thus for her daughter:

I'm happy. Look at the opportunity I have. Most mothers only get the chance to give their child life once. I get a chance to do it twice. I think it's neat. And Shelby needs her health to chase after that rambunctious kid of hers. I've got two kidneys and I only need one. I'm just glad we can get it over with before it gets too hot. (Harling 59)

M'Lynn focuses on the higher meaning behind her upcoming physical suffering. It is done not only for her daughter, but also for the sake of motherhood itself. By giving up a piece of her own body, M'Lynn not only gets to save her daughter, preserving their mother-daughter bond and symbolically reenacting her daughter's birth, she also has the opportunity to preserve her daughter's motherhood. The donation of her kidney thus serves the greater purpose of saving motherhood itself in M'Lynn's family.

M'Lynn's suffering does not end with her physical pain, but through the loss of her daughter to death. In this way, her relationship to the Madonna paradigm becomes very clear. As the Virgin lost her only son as a martyr, M'Lynn loses her daughter as a martyr to motherhood. Shelby believes that the outcome is justified because she has been a mother: "I have my baby. I'm very happy. If this is part of the price I have to pay, then I have to pay it. I can deal with that" (Harling 60). Shelby is not afraid of death because she has been a mother and therefore completed the main goal of her life, in the same way that Christ accepted his own death as a necessary part of the greater good he wished to serve.

M'Lynn has successfully modeled the role of saintly mother for her daughter, who in turn

has become a saintly mother. In fact, one could say Shelby has successfully outperformed her mother in saintliness. While M'Lynn gave up a part of her body for her daughter, Shelby gives up her life for her son. M'Lynn has also effectively reproduced in her daughter the joy of suffering for motherhood. While M'Lynn feels joy over giving up her kidney, Shelby feels joy over the prospect of becoming a mother and measuring her life's worth by her child.

M'Lynn's role as witness to her daughter's death is another parallel with the Madonna. In the final scene of the play, M'Lynn describes Shelby's last moments of life in a verbal aria that recalls images of the pieta:

But finally we realized there was no hope. At that point I panicked. I was very afraid that I would not survive the next few minutes while they turned off the machines. Drum couldn't take it. He left. Jackson couldn't take it. He left. It struck me as amusing. Men are supposed to be made of steel or something. But I could not leave. I just sat there...holding Shelby's hand while the sounds got softer and the beeps got farther apart until all was quiet. There was no noise, no tremble...just peace. I realized as a woman how lucky I was. I was there when this wonderful person drifted into my world and I was there when she drifted out. It was the most precious moment of my life thus far. (Harling 67)

This speech again reflects Madonna-Christ imagery. The suffering M'Lynn goes through for her daughter is transcendent. Instead of dwelling on the tragedy of her daughter's death, it becomes for M'Lynn the defining moment of their relationship. The moment of Shelby's death is a moment for mother and daughter, which supplants Shelby's birth as the most precious moment of their mother-daughter relationship.

Though *Steel Magnolias* takes place in the world of women, it still upholds the patriarchy. Through Shelby's death, the audience is delivered the message that dying for maternity is ultimately a worthwhile sacrifice. At no point does anyone in the play suggest that Shelby's life was more important than that of her child. It is a given that the child is more

important than the mother. Such a belief is never questioned. In the end, the patriarchal advice-givers are upheld as correct. It was the doctors who had told Shelby that having a child would kill her, and these men were proven right in her death. Though Shelby feels the sacrifice is worthwhile, she is still not allowed to be right about her own body. Rather, the doctors are proven to be more knowledgeable about Shelby's body than she is. One of the morals of this story is that this tragedy could have been prevented if Shelby had obeyed the advice and instruction of doctors, as her mother so desperately wanted her to do.

In contrast to the saintly mothers of Marta Hanson, M'Lynn Eatonton, and Lena Younger, Rachel Crothers' *He and She* delivers a different message about patriarchy and the saintly mother. Written in 1911 before the culture of mothering advice began in earnest in the United States, Crothers' work embodies both the advice-givers and those most severely impacted by that advice. *He and She* portrays a mother-daughter relationship that is fraught with struggle and self-sacrifice. The play tells the story of the Herfords, Tom and Ann, a married couple who both work as sculptors. They have a sixteen-year-old daughter, Millicent, and are surrounded by their assistants and relations. At the opening of the play Tom and his assistant Keith are finishing a sculpture that Tom is entering into a competition. The prize for the competition is a large fee and the chance to sculpt the piece on a large scale for public consumption. Keith is engaged to Ruth, a friend of Ann's, and discusses with Tom the problems of having a fiancé who wishes to keep her career after marriage. The troubled relationship of Keith and Ruth is complicated by the figure of Daisy, Tom's sister, who is secretly in love with Keith.

When Ann sees Tom's entry into the competition, she is disappointed. She had hoped for a more dynamic piece from her husband. After her suggestions are condescendingly rebuffed,

she enters the competition herself, and is congratulated as a fellow competitor by her husband.

In the second act, the audience witnesses a debate on the merits of working women and the trouble they cause by Dr. Remington, Daisy, Keith, and Ruth. Ruth is a decidedly modern woman who wishes to work. Daisy, though a working woman, wishes to work only until marriage. Keith wants to marry a woman who works only in the home, and whose main concern is his care. Dr. Remington believes that work only complicates women's lives, and that they should be happy and content to work only as mothers and homemakers.

The great event of the second act is the result of the competition. Ann wins, and her husband is upset by the outcome. Ann wishes her husband to be as happy for her as she would have been for him, but he demands that she give up the prize so that their domestic life can continue on peacefully. While the couple argues over this development, Millicent returns home. She has left school, declaring that she will marry the school chauffeur. Seeing Millicent's behavior, Ann decides she needs to spend time with Millicent to try and convince her to give up the plan to marry at her young age. Towards this end, Ann gives up the prize and the chance to develop her creation so that she may mother full time.

Ann's sacrifice is unique among the saintly mothers discussed here. Because she is financially secure and professionally ambitious, she does not sacrifice a physical thing for her daughter, like possessions, money, or a part of her body. Instead, Ann is asked to sacrifice her own dream. Each of the saintly mothers examined in this chapter was forced to give up something particularly dear. In the cases of Marta Hanson and Lena Younger, they sacrificed possessions and money, things particularly precious to them because they were financially poor. M'Lynn gave up a part of her body because she was financially stable, and not particularly

identified with her career, so had to give up something particularly valuable to her, such as her own bodily health. By contrast, Ann is asked to give up what these other women may have seen as a luxury—her artistic aspirations. Such aspirations are not a luxury to Ann, however. They are deeply important to how she sees herself. In giving up the sculpture competition, she has given up a piece of what she uses to identify herself. As such, her sacrifice may be even more serious than those of the other women, because she cannot happily embrace the saintly mother identity she will gain in place of her old one.

Crothers' play serves as an encapsulation of the debate about the place of women in society, particularly in relation to work and home life. Towards this end, she includes many different perspectives and attitudes towards women and work. Keith is the first to touch on the subject by asking Tom, "Have you ever been sorry that Mrs. Herford is a sculptor—instead of just your wife?" (Crothers 897). Tom's response shows what appears to be a man much more committed to women's equality. He indicates that he does not believe a woman cannot be both a wife and a worker if she wishes it. However, Tom's apparent liberality in this matter is tested later in the play when he responds to his wife's win in a manner very close to the attitude of Keith.

Keith also espouses the belief that, as a woman, Ann's sculpting cannot be considered as good as her husband's: "She does beautiful work for a woman—but ye gods—she's not in *this* class [...] How could she be? She's a woman" (Crothers 902). Keith's beliefs in the inherent inferiority of women's work contributes to his belief that Ruth would be happier after their marriage to give up working so she can work full time at maintaining a home for the two of them.

Ruth responds to Keith's opinions with a plea that if they believe in their ability to have an equal marriage and work as partners, they will be happy:

Love—love makes a home—not table and chairs. We can afford more if I work, too. We can pay some one to do the stuff you think I ought to do. And you'll go on climbing up in your work and I'll go on in mine and we'll both grow to something and be somebody and have something to give each other. It will be fair—we'll be pulling together—pals and lovers like Tom and Ann. That's why they're so ideally happy. (Crothers 903)

Here, Crothers lets Ruth's words speak for the New Woman of her day, who wished to have a career outside the home, but did not want to abandon the hopes of a domestic family life. Ruth looks to Ann and Tom as a model for this kind of relationship and harmony. She has seen the two support each other's careers with respect and caring.

Another view on women and work comes from Dr. Remington, whose opinions reflect those of the late-nineteenth century patriarchy, still very much present in Crothers' day. Dr. Remington associates his beliefs about working women with motherhood. He sees motherhood as women's primary career, and anticipates trouble for any woman who attempts to take away vital energy from her primary career to serve a second one:

A woman of genius puts in her work the same fierce love she puts into her child or her man. That's where her fight is—for one or the other of 'em has got to be the stronger in her. It isn't a question of her right to do things—nor her ability—God knows—plenty of 'em are beating men at their own jobs now. Why, I sometimes think she'll go so far that the great battle of the future will be between the sexes for supremacy. But I tell you—she has tragedies ahead of her—the tragedy of choice between the two sides of her nature. (905)

In allowing such views as Dr. Remington's full expression in her drama, Crothers shows how much the debate over women working was also tied up with notions of motherhood. Because definitions of woman have traditionally been so closely tied up with definitions of mother,

discussions of women working cannot help but also have consequences for the ideology of motherhood.

Though Dr. Remington's opinions are portrayed as regressive, they are still given full weight in the context of this play. Crothers does not condemn Dr. Remington's view, and by giving it her attention, she shows elements of Dr. Remington's beliefs that, while not being precisely feminist, do communicate cooperation with feminist thought in the discussion of women being torn in multiple directions. By giving Dr. Remington voice, Crothers allows a fairly regressive, patriarchal opinion to be shown to have points of intersection with other, more progressive beliefs. In doing this, Crothers shows that her desire to interrogate the demands of work and motherhood is not at the expense of preventing dialogue and debate.

As the crisis with Millicent grows in the end of the second act and throughout the third, the discussion about women and work leads more strongly into a discussion of the role of mothers and motherhood in women's lives. "The idealization of motherhood and its dominant place in woman's identity, are, finally, the most powerful arguments in the play. These arguments were not only unassailable weapons in the antifeminist arsenal but were used by feminists as well [...]" (Gottlieb 55-56).

The first opinion on how to deal with Millicent's crisis comes from Dr. Remington, who tells Tom to assume control of the decisions about his daughter, taking that power away from Ann, to whom it had been previously assigned. Their conversation illuminates these men's attitudes about their responsibilities towards parenting:

Remington: If you think she ought not to go back to school, say so. Tell Ann those are your orders.

Tom: I don't give orders to Ann.

Remington: The devil you don't. She'd like it. A woman—a dog and a walnut

tree—the more you beat ‘em, the better they be. (Crothers 923)

To Remington, Tom should not only order the mothering of his daughter, but should include his wife with the group over which he has control. Though Tom declares himself uncomfortable with the idea of ordering his wife, this is ironic considering he had just finished doing so at the end of the second act by telling his wife she had to give up her commission.

Ann is not inclined to give much attention to her daughter’s dramatics: “This is only a caprice—and it would be the worst thing in the world to give in to her” (Crothers 924). Dr. Remington counters this idea by putting Madonna imagery into Ann’s mind, so that she will lean towards idealistic images of motherhood, instead of demanding that her daughter exercise mature decision-making skills: “Ann, I put her in you arms first—and the look that came into your eyes then was as near divinity as we ever get. Oh, my daughter—don’t let the new restlessness and strife of the world about you blind you to the old things—the real things” (Crothers 924).

Here, Remington is pressuring Ann to take on the guise of the maternal saint, a guise that, up to this point in the play, exists entirely in Remington’s head. Until Remington’s pressure, Ann had shown every indication of living a complicated life in which the “perfect mother” was as artificial as one of her own sculptures. The image of the perfect glowing mother, unconcerned with her own dreams, is used as patriarchal ammunition against Ann. Until this moment, Ann had shown no inclinations of holding herself to the ideal of maternal saint, but it is clear in Remington’s speech that the patriarchy, represented by Remington, still holds Ann to that standard.

After Remington’s speech, Ann speaks with her daughter and learns about Millicent’s supposed engagement. Millicent lays the blame for this occurrence squarely on her mother’s

shoulders, declaring that if her mother had let Millicent return home from school when she had asked, this would never have happened: “He knew how lonely I was and he—we got engaged that vacation. You wouldn’t let me come home” (Crothers 926).

Ann is bothered that she did not know sooner of Millicent’s inclinations, and attempts to bolster her relationship with her daughter: “I’m your mother. No one on earth is so close to you—or loves you so much—or cares so much for your happiness—and understands so well” (Crothers 926). Her intimate talk with Millicent leads Ann to make the decision to abandon her sculpture so that she can spend the summer with Millicent, attempting to make her daughter change her mind about the marriage. She sees herself being forced to make a choice between her daughter and her work. The last scene portrays how much Ann is willing to sacrifice for her daughter, and the degree to which even Ann understands that giving up her work will not be a happy outcome. “It’s my job. She is what I’ve given to life. If I fail her now—my whole life’s a failure. [...] And I’ll hate you because you’re doing it—and I’ll hate myself because I gave it up—and I’ll almost—hate—her. [...] There isn’t any choice, Tom—she’s part of my body—part of my soul” (Crothers 928). Ann expresses a deep internal conflict over her best course of action. She weighs her desire to express her creative genius through her sculpture, versus her role as a mother. Her choice, to give up the sculpture in favor of full-time mothering, is a choice that Ann herself sees as full of ambivalence and conflict. Ann seems the only person whose wishes are not fulfilled in the decision she makes. While her husband gets to take over the execution of her commission, Millicent gets the attention she wants, and Dr. Remington gets to see his daughter as a full-time mother, the only positive outcome for Ann is that she gets the social praise for sacrificing her career for her daughter.

The ending of the play leaves the audience in doubt about its meaning. While the play certainly doesn't end in great happiness, it is only a tragedy for the character of Ann, who has herself made the decisions that led to this ending. The hopelessness of the ending is what gives the play a powerful message, according to Sally Burke:

He and She is decidedly more feminist than is usually recognized. Ann bows to the patriarchal vision of what makes woman valuable and lovable: her ability to serve, to submit, to sacrifice. The ending illuminates the wastefulness of her action, for by concluding her drama in darkness Crothers shows that the opposite of Ann's healthy self-interest (branded selfishness by the men) is a bleak self-lessness. (49)

While the patriarchy is ultimately served by Ann's action, this same patriarchal success is what makes the ending unpleasant for audiences. The lesson Crothers leads the audience to is that the service of social demands, in this case motherhood, is a tragic end when it means a selfish child's whim decimates the career of a brilliant artist.

However, the degree to which critics and audiences fully grasped the complexity of Crothers' lesson is questionable. "*He and She* was generally misunderstood by both the public and the reviewers" (Murphy 92). Many thought Crothers espoused the elevation of motherhood above that of a woman's career, or that she accepted that a woman could be either a worker or a mother, but not both. Such conflicting responses show how subtle Crothers' message was, and how the American theatrical milieu of the time was not ready to see the strong social statement being made.

Though it becomes clear that Crothers places the audience's sympathies with Ann, this does not prevent Crothers from presenting the opinions of Dr. Remington, Keith, or Tom in a respectful, reasonable light. Crothers does not counter their opinions about women, work, and

motherhood by engaging in a dynamic fight. Rather, she shows, by Ann's onstage presence and the many people around her, pulling her in different directions, that no one considers what is best for Ann. Though the debate about women and work rages around her, the men see Ann only through their own lenses of patriarchal privilege. In the end, Ann is trapped by that same lack of privilege. She does not have the option, as Tom does, to foist the work of motherhood off onto someone else. She is the only one in the family who is willing to mother, so it is her art, which she can give to Tom, which must be sacrificed.

Lois Gottlieb sums up the overall message:

What the play implies most strongly is the great distance still to be traveled before America would provide a hospitable climate for women's freedom, and before American women would defeat the fears and guilt about freedom that lurked in their natures. Crothers focuses on the struggle of a woman to survive as an artist in a social milieu that erects barriers, both open and subtle, before talented women. (51)

Crothers' *He and She* subverts the trope of the maternal saint by showing that Ann's actions, which adhere to the demands of a patriarchal society, do not make a happy ending. Instead, the demands of the patriarchy constrain Ann and limit her ability to achieve her dreams. Rather than strengthen the demands of the ideology of perfect maternity on women, Crothers' use of the trope weakens those demands. Her play shows that when a mother acts in accordance with the demands of those who dictate maternal choices, these choices are not made without cost. In the case of Ann Hereford, the cost is not only to herself, but also to the society that will never get to experience Ann's sculptures, because her artistic career was restrained by the demands of being the perfect mother.

Ann Hereford's sacrifice eloquently underscores the drawbacks of the perfect, saintly

mother. In following the demands of the trope, a mother is asked to give up her own goals and aspirations. While acts of self-sacrifice are not necessarily harmful things, in the trope of the saintly mother, a mother is asked to consistently subsume her wants and desires to the demands of motherhood. The mother herself is never as important as the role of mother. As a woman, her only importance is found in the function she can fulfill for her children.

The trope of the saintly mother also does a disservice to American women by encouraging several beliefs about women that undermine women's attempts to move away from patriarchal gender roles. The first belief supported by the saintly mother trope is that of the naturally nurturing woman. The belief that all women are naturally inclined to desire children and motherhood has left many women feeling pressured to have children who may not feel that desire. Women who resist this pressure can then be looked on with scorn and ridicule as women who are unnatural and unfeminine.

There is an even more pernicious and insidious reason for the patriarchy to sustain the trope of the perfect, saintly mother. By encouraging women to pursue an unachievable goal, the patriarchy keeps women focused on a Sisyphean task instead of working on changing gender norms and power dynamics. The saintly mother, then, becomes a figure used against women to keep them in a lower social status as compared to men.

I Remember Mama does this by showing a mother joyously sacrificing her most prized possessions and her own personal comfort, in order to serve the desires of her children. Even when these children's desires are selfish, as are Katrin's, her self-sacrifice is still celebrated. Mama's identity as a woman separate from her role as a mother is completely overshadowed by her motherhood. In Van Druten's play, Mama never gets the chance to express her own desires

and ambitions. There is no time or energy for Mama to work to change the circumstances of her life. She is too busy filling the tasks of a perfect mother. She remains eternally “Mama,” a woman remembered in the title of the play only by her mothering role, never as Marta Hanson.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lena Younger rises to a level of power in her family that makes her far different from Marta Hanson. She fills the role of family matriarch, deciding how she will spend the money from her husband’s life insurance. Though she ultimately decides to use the money for the betterment of her entire family, that she is allowed to make the decision herself shows she has far more autonomy than Marta Hanson.

Lena’s power in the family is ultimately usurped by her son, a change in the family that Lena wholeheartedly encourages. In this, she is a good servant of the patriarchy. She is willing to take over the power in her family because her husband’s death requires it, but she only holds that power temporarily, until her son has matured to the point where he can take it back. Lena works toward establishing a patriarchal line from father to son.

Steel Magnolias shows a mother-daughter pair who are both self-sacrificing mothers. M’Lynn has successfully modeled the saintly mother trope to her daughter, who becomes a saintly mother in turn, ultimately dying for the sake of motherhood. M’Lynn is arguably the most successful of the saintly mothers examined here, because not only does she reproduce a saintly mother in her daughter, she has produced a daughter whose saintliness exceeds her own. When Shelby dies as a result of her choice to have a child, she makes the ultimate sacrifice for motherhood. In doing so, she upholds the underlying message of all saintly mothers: the child is more important than the mother. Whatever potential good Shelby could have done throughout her life is sacrificed so that she may become a mother. As Shelby herself states, her life is

meaningless unless she is a mother, a belief encouraged by the patriarchal forces that encourage women to work toward an impossible ideal of perfection.

He and She takes a completely different perspective on the saintly mother. Instead of celebrating the sacrifice and perfection of saintly mothers, *He and She* criticizes that sacrifice as an empty gesture that destroys the dreams of a mother while serving the whim of an undeserving daughter. For Rachel Crothers, the ambitions and dreams of Ann Hereford are more important than her daughter's tantrum. Crothers dramatizes a self-sacrifice very similar to that of other saintly mothers, but in a way that makes the sacrifice appear pointless and hollow. *He and She* resists giving the audience a satisfying closure. Ann's decision to abandon her artwork is a tragic waste of her passion and talent, even though she does this for the sake of motherhood. For Crothers, Ann is valuable as a woman, outside of her work as a mother. When Ann must sacrifice one part of herself on the altar of saintly motherhood, she undercuts the trope, casting it as destructive and harmful.

It is unfortunate that more non-mothers cannot be valued for their work and contributions as people, without any consideration of their ability to bear children or not. However, all too often, women who choose to remain without children live with the constant pressure exerted by the belief in the naturally nurturing, saintly mother. As a figure, the saintly mother pressures women to sacrifice what they hold dear for the sake of their children, even when that sacrifice is ultimately without merit. This trope serves the patriarchy by turning the energies and ambitions of women solely toward mothering and away from the fulfillment of their own dreams.

CHAPTER FIVE: ABSENT MOTHERS

When the mother-daughter relationship is disrupted because of the absence of the mother, a unique trope is created. Another trope is created by the absence of the mother in the mother-daughter relationship. While representations of motherless children often garner the sympathy of audiences, the absence of a mother in mother-daughter representations comes with special difficulties for the daughter. Without a mother, the daughter has no figure to serve as a model for her own growth into maturity, leading to difficulties along the way. In this trope, the mother-daughter relationship is unbalanced and isolated.

The characteristics of this trope rely strongly on the competing degrees of presence and absence. The daughter is present while the mother is absent, but the mother's absence is never total. Though physically absent, the mother's presence is re-created through allusions and insinuations on the part of the daughter. As the mother's absence is made more and more conspicuous, she becomes more and more present in the minds of the audience members. As presence and absence are negotiated, the relationship between mother and daughter is demonstrated to be quite strong.

The absence of the mother impacts the ability of the mirroring relationship to develop and influence the daughter's upbringing and entrance into the heterosexual economy. When a mother is absent there is no one to mirror and teach the daughter how to be a functioning part of the heterosexual economy. There is no one to instill the goal of motherhood into the daughter's life, threatening the continuation of the cycle. Representations of the absent mother trope are divided on whether or not such an interruption of the mirroring relationship is a good or bad

thing. On the one hand, the interruption disrupts the heterosexual development of the daughter. On the other hand, the daughter can ultimately be better off for not going through the mirroring relationship, having no experience of the tensions created there.

The disruption of a daughter's development into the heterosexual economy can be a high-anxiety issue for the supporters of patriarchal authority. As such, representations of daughters living without mothers often show the daughters with unhealthy or perverted sexual lives. There is a strong correlation between an absent mother and a daughter with the inability to grow into healthy heterosexual relationships. Without the intervention of a third party, the daughter is often shown to be stunted in her growth towards romantic and sexual relationships.

It is often shown to be possible to avert such a disaster with the intervention of a savior figure, usually a man. Such saviors often show they can mother a daughter better than a woman could. However, showing men as effective mothers plays into another patriarchal anxiety. One of the key anxieties surrounding the absent mother is that if women absent themselves from mothering, men will be forced to take over the role. If men were forced to give up their current life pursuits in favor of full-time parenthood, they would quickly lose their dominance of the world's resources. While some men may embrace this change, many may feel threatened by the idea of a change in the status quo. Full-time parenthood does not leave time to run the rest of the world. Women are needed to fill the role of mothers so that the current balance of power can stay as it is.

It has become a naturalized belief in America that a daughter without a mother is a tragic figure. While many real-world daughters can experience great difficulty and pain as a result of an absent mother, this is not true of all. Some daughters are happy to be apart from their abusive

or neglectful mothers. It is more common to see representations of this trope focus on tragedy, however. Audiences are clearly more comfortable with the vision of a daughter harmed by her mother's absence than one who celebrates her freedoms from maternal control. As such, the plays that I will examine later in this chapter primarily focus on the daughters as tragic heroines, suffering greatly because of their absent mothers. In these plays the absent mother becomes symbolic of a larger lesson: women cannot be complete unless they are mothers or the daughters of fully attentive and present mothers. By showing the results of the break up of this relationship, absent mother tales are cautionary stories about why women should resist the call of independence from the mother-daughter dyad.

Though the break-up of a mother-daughter relationship is often represented as painful and tragic, representations of the absent mother trope often demonstrate that, in the end, daughters are better off without their mothers. The complexity of the trope lies in how the tragedy turns into a source of opportunity for the daughter. The plays that embrace this trope each focus on the pain and difficulty of solitary daughters, but ultimately end happily, even though the mother does not return. In some cases, the daughters work through their difficulties on their own, while in others, a man steps in to fill the void. The daughter's happy ending undercuts the tragedy of the absent mother, suggesting that her absence is ultimately inconsequential. The importance of the mother in her daughter's life is undercut.

The supposed tragedy under which the daughter suffers is likewise undercut by the genre of the plays. In the majority of the plays used here to illustrate the trope, the overall mood is comedic. While each takes time to describe the pain of the daughter, laughter and games abound for those same daughters, each of whom ends the play happier than when the play began. In

many cases, the daughter is in a position that would not have been possible if her mother had been present. The repetition of the comedic tone reinforces the complexity of this trope, which oscillates between tragedy and comedy with ease.

Though the trope of the absent mother often uses absence as a characteristic of a woman who is a bad mother, some theorists look at absence and abandonment from unconventional perspectives. Gould reexamines abandonment in a way that alleviates the exceptionality of the absent mother while implicating all mothers in abandonment.

Abandonment is the most terrible act a woman can perform, because it wounds those she ought to shelter, and yet she does it. Every woman does it--not permanently, as a rule, and not with a slam of the door like Nora Helmer, but in snatches of time filched from her children, absentee minutes, lapses of consciousness every single day. (250-251)

She goes on to describe that abandonment is everyone's birthright, an experience necessary and endemic to the human condition:

Abandonment is our first experience of the world, prompting our first cry when we find ourselves thrust from the sheltering womb into thin, cold air, while the sustenance that has streamed into us until this moment is cut off with a knife. From everything, we are pushed into nothing. As Genesis tells us, it's our birthright to be dispossessed. (Gould 298)

As a birthright, people are born to be abandoned and to abandon in return. Women cannot help but become absent mothers in some fashion and degree. They are destined to be abandoned and abandon themselves, always already guilty. The abandonment Gould describes is one that leaves us all with an aversion to abandonment, as it leaves us dispossessed and cold. This broader definition of abandonment is key to understanding how the trope of the absent mother in particular is used as a criticism for real-world mothers.

By criticizing and demonizing women who physically abandon their children, the trope

implicitly criticizes mothers who are absent from their children through flashes of independence and autonomy throughout the day. It is not only a mother leaving her daughter or a daughter leaving a mother that is at stake for this trope. Instead, it is wrapped up in keeping a mother's attention focused entirely on the act of mothering and not on personal or economic concerns. For mothers who aspire to more autonomy than motherhood may allow them, cautionary absent mother stories can keep them in line through criticism of their ambitions.

The proliferation of the absent mother trope is remarkable for its stealth. American audiences are particularly inured to the absent mother, and her whereabouts are largely ignored.

Maternal absence is a plot device familiar in periods before and after the Victorian. From the birth of Athena full-blown from the head of Zeus to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Pericles*, from Burney's *Evelina* and Austen's *Persuasion* to Disney's *Bambi*, *Cinderella*, and *Snow White*, to television situation comedies that revel in the exploits of bumbling single fathers, maternal absence, often so normative as to go unnoted, is a sign that something is different--and perhaps amiss--within the individual, the home, and the world. (Dever 22)

As suggested by Dever's examples, one of the most paradigmatic forms of the absent mother trope is the Western fairy tale. Though thousands of such stories exist, the ones most commonly told in twentieth-century America are alike in that they tell the stories of young women without mothers, such as the stories of Cinderella, Snow White, or Beauty and the Beast.

Warner provides a definition of the fairy tale that indicates the degree to which such stories exist in the crux of competing impulses, and how they came to be closely associated with women.

Fairy tale, as a derogatory term, implies fantasy, escapism, invention, the unreliable consolations of romance. But the utopian impulse is driven by dreams; alternative ways of sifting right and wrong require different guides, ones perhaps discredited or neglected. The struggle between folk wisdom and elite learning is joined over the fairy tale, where the operations of magic branded it as childish, primitive, fit for women, servants, and babies. (15)

Warner goes on to ask what for her is one of the most salient questions regarding mothers in fairy tales: “Above all, why are the female characters so cruel and is the mother so often dead at the start of the story?” (26). She continues, “The absence of the mother from the tale is often declared at the start, without explanation, as if none were required” (Warner 27).

The absent mother is never fully gone from the story, however. It is part of the trope of the absent mother that presence remains after physical separation. Cashdan comments on this recurrence:

The death of the mother is a common occurrence in fairy tales: *Snow White*, *Donkeyskin*, and *Cinderella* all begin with the mother’s demise. Other children’s stories--*Bambi*, for example--also feature this traumatic and transforming event, but its occurrence in fairy tales is especially poignant: the dying mother usually attempts to protect the child after she is gone. (41)

For these fairy tales, the absent mother often gives rise to the entire story. It is the absence of the mother in both the cases of *Cinderella* and *Snow White* that allow an usurping step-mother to take control of the family. In the face of the step-mother’s cruelty, the spirit of the deceased mother is often called upon for aid to resist that cruelty.

The fairy tale paradigm of the absent mother is one that has been used as a teaching tool for generations. Though fairy tales exist in all cultures in various forms, they are alike in that each is indicative of the culture from which it sprang. “Fairytale, no matter how alike they seem, refract the circumstances where they arose, in a complicated sequence of mirrors, in which the personality of the authors and recorders, their sources, their social and historical circumstances reflect back and forth to make a layered, composite image” (Warner 27). Because mothers are often absent in the fairy tales we most frequently tell today, it is clear that the absent

mother carries a great deal of symbolic weight for modern society. The frequent re-telling of such stories to children demonstrates that modern society wants to circulate and pass on the lessons from these stories to future generations.

The anxiety over the absent mother has not abated in the centuries over which these stories have developed. As shown by the repetitions of these tales, there has continually been a fear that the absent mother could upset the gendered power balance in the West. The potential of the absent mother to create havoc makes her a figure that threatens to disrupt patriarchal control. Because of this, cautionary tales must be created that punish potential absent mothers by showing them how vulnerable their daughters will be, and how inevitable the life-threatening danger is for such motherless girls. The absent mother's resistance to patriarchal proscription makes her one of the most dangerous figures for the patriarchy, because the absent mother proves that resistance is indeed possible. The mother's potential for resistance is undercut, however. Her efforts at resistance are sabotaged by the way the trope supports the belief that daughters will be better off without mothers or don't really need them at all.

The use of fairy tales as tools toward alleviating such anxieties makes them appear misogynistic. Western fairy tales often show women as the worst enemies to other women. Mothers are most often absent and when there are mother figures in the stories they are often wicked step-mothers. "The misogyny of fairytales engages women as participants, not just victims; the antagonisms and sufferings the stories recount connect to the world of female experience, and when they claim to speak in a woman's voice (the storyteller, Mother Goose), it is worth examining the truth and implications of that claim" (Warner 9).

Warner's analysis of the use of the woman's voice in telling fairy tales brings to light the

degree to which much of their misogynistic power comes from attributing them to feminine sources. As in Warner's previously mentioned definition of fairy tales, the stories are often considered frivolous, and are associated more with women than men. However, women are also the tellers of the stories and consequently the speakers of the message. Thus, women are cast as the performers and audience of the stories, most of which are about women. This close association between women and fairy tales makes them even more powerful as patriarchal tools. "Attributing to women testimony about women's wrongs and wrongdoing gives them added value: men might be expected to find women flighty, rapacious, self-seeking, cruel and lustful, but if women say such things about themselves, then the matter is settled. What some women say against others can be usefully turned against all of them" (Warner 16).

However, the degree to which the stories we know today were actually created by women or a real-life "Mother Goose" is debatable. Even if women did create such stories, those who collected the folk stories for publication, such as the Brothers Grimm, were not the original creators or tellers of the tales. The stories we know today may have little to do with the stories as they were originally known. Thus, it is debatable whether or not the mothers in various fairy tales were absent in their original incarnations, or if that characteristic came later.

Despite these variables, we do know that in today's tellings, the fairy tales told in the United States feature many absent mothers. It is worth asking what, besides a reinforcement of gender norms and patriarchal power, we get from fairy tales that keep us coming back to them time and again. In the absent mother, one can find a characteristic that cannot be found in real-life or even present mothers: she can be perfect. In her absence, particularly if that absence is brought about by death, she can rise into the realm of fantasy, and can evolve into a perfect mother. After all, there can be no earthly mother who can be as perfect as Cinderella's dead

mother, who is able to send assistance to her daughter from beyond the grave, and can never be blamed for anything, as death is beyond her control.

The creation of this fantasy absent mother is a recent adaptation of these tales. In collecting and editing the stories they gathered, the Grimms are largely responsible for creating the vogue for the absent and ideal mother.

The disappearance here of the biological mother forms a response to the harshness of the material: in their romantic idealism, the Grimms literally could not bear her presence to be equivocal, or dangerous, and preferred to banish her altogether. Mothers had to disappear in order for the ideal to survive and allow Mother to flourish as symbol of the eternal feminine, the motherland, and the family itself as the highest social desideratum. (Warner 30)

Gould agrees that the Grimms were largely responsible for fairy tales as we now know them:

In every story of abandonment, one parent voices qualms about the monstrous solution proposed by the other, but mother is more often allotted the blame. No, not mother, the brothers Grimm decided--that would be an unbearable possibility for children to take to bed after the family story hour. By the fourth edition of their book, the hard-hearted parent had been replaced by a stepmother, just as the Queen mother in "Snow White" tactfully changed into a stepmother for later audiences. (299)

This blame on the brothers Grimm for partially expunging mothers from fairy tales highlights how much the power for changing fairy tales lies in the hands of the recorders. While fairy tales were largely an oral medium, the stories changed constantly, reflecting social changes and the personal preferences of the tellers. When the stories were recorded and commodified as published books, their fluidity became more solid. Thus, in the twentieth century, when the Walt Disney Company created animated cinematic versions of the fairy tales, they were even more solidified.⁸ This solidification kept the stories from undergoing much change at all during the twentieth century, leaving them in their motherless states, largely as a result of the tellers who

⁸For a detailed analysis of the Disney company's excision of mothers from their feature films, see Lynda Haas, "Eighty-Six the Mother," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, eds.

chose to freeze them that way. In the twentieth century, the Disney versions of the tales became so iconic that they came to be, for many children, the definitive telling of the stories.

These absent mothers, particularly in the Disney films, are most often idealizations contrasted with a present, yet monstrous, version of a mother. In films such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, the absent mother is an ideal woman who would have, presumably, been a perfect mother should she have lived. However, both these unfortunate girls are raised by step mothers who are jealous, vindictive, and violent. In other Disney films, such as the more recent *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *Pocahontas*, mothers simply do not appear, and no attempt is made to account for untimely ends to which these mothers have succumbed. In these stories, mothers are conspicuous for their very absence, and because they are not mentioned, the audience is left to determine whether these mothers are absent because of death or because she has abandoned her child.

Dever sees a relationship between such idealized absence and the body of the mother: “Representations of the maternal ideal must necessarily get past the body; thus what emerges is a maternal ideal constituted in the breach, in the amazing superabundance of good mothers represented as dead or missing. Indeed, in the mid-Victorian period, it could be argued, the *only* good mother is a dead mother” (19). The relationship between the ideal mother and the body is in question here. The body of the mother, because it always belongs to an actual woman instead of an idealized figure, is immediately brought into the realm of the real. Because it is the body of a woman, it is immediately sexualized, as women’s bodies on theatrical display always are. Because mothers on stage are always embodied, stage mothers can never live in the realm of perfect mothers.

Presence makes achieving the status of “perfect mother” nearly impossible for women. It

means they will be constantly fighting against the gaze, interacting with their daughters, following their own inclinations, and carrying out their own actions. As an absent figure, a mother does none of these things. She can become a figure reconstituted by each person who imagines her in the ideal realm. She can literally become all things to all people, but this is only achieved by her absence.

Absence as a result of death is often seen as an ill-fated event in a daughter's life, for which she receives sympathy and compassion for her devastated future. When a mother dies naturally, she is viewed as a sympathetic character defeated by death, though through no fault of her own. When the mother is sympathetic, her presence in the story is benign and less impactful on the audience. When the mother abandons her daughter by choice, she becomes a hostile force. While the mother absent by death leaves her daughter with the understanding that her absence is a result of forces beyond her control, the mother absent on purpose leaves her daughter with the belief that she is insufficient or inadequate. By contrast to the sympathy given to the other absent mothers, the mothers who abandon their daughters by choice are portrayed as cruel and malicious. Ironically, the difference between mothers who are absent by death and those absent by choice does not seem ultimately to make a difference in the daughter's development. The mother's absence still thwarts the daughter's development into the heterosexual economy.

Maternal absence can still be a source of some power for mothers, however. Purposeful absence can allow a woman to resist the culture's demand that all women mother. Though it can be painful to daughters to live without mothers, some mothers purposefully absent themselves for the benefit of all. Other mothers seek self-fulfillment that must be carried out without their children. Some mothers are neglectful and abusive, and absent themselves because they see their

children as nuisances. The reasons for mothers to leave their children or stay absent from their lives are many, and are often complex. In these plays, the mothers have chosen to be absent to their daughters. Each woman has many reasons for her choice, whether that choice is to kill herself, give her child to an orphanage, or leave her children to their own devices. The factors contributing to her choice are often deeply ingrained in social demands and causes.

The plays dealt with in this chapter address the anxieties over absent mothers and daughters in different ways. *Annie*, *Crimes of the Heart*, and *My Sister in this House* address the anxiety over what happens to daughters when their mothers are absent from their lives, and largely serve as cautionary tales about how wrong things can go. *Why We Have a Body* takes the view that maternal absence, though painful, can be necessary for the well-being of both mother and daughters. Each of these plays was written and first produced in the latter decades of the twentieth century. During this time, parallel to the years of the second-wave feminist movement, some of the greatest fears voiced about women were that their unprecedented entry into the workforce would do untold damage to the children left in daycare. Such fears were intended to prevent women's expansion beyond their traditional realms. In each of these plays, the absence of the mother weighs much more heavily on the daughter than does the presence or absence of a father. This suggests that the mother is the most important parent, and her absence can be the most powerful characteristic in forming a daughter's persona. While the daughters eventually find happiness despite the absence of their mothers, the problems they go through on the way to that happiness are represented as wholly the result of maternal absence.

Anxieties about absent mothers are explored and ultimately alleviated in *Annie*, the 1977 musical with book by Thomas Meehan, music by Charles Strouse, and lyrics by Martin Charnin. *Annie* tells the story of an orphaned child in Depression-era New York. The title character is a

ten-year-old girl who has lived in the Girls' Annex of the Municipal Orphanage for nearly her entire life. She was left on the steps of the orphanage with a note identifying her as "Annie" and wearing a broken locket, a portion of which was kept by her parents to identify her when they were to return for their daughter. After an escape attempt to find her parents in a Hooverville shanty town, Annie is returned to the orphanage where she is berated by the orphanage's unkind headmistress, Miss Hannigan.

A stroke of luck befalls Annie, however, and Grace Farrell, the private secretary to the wealthy industrialist Oliver Warbucks, chooses her to live in Mr. Warbucks' mansion for a week as a publicity stunt. Annie moves into the mansion, where she manages to charm Mr. Warbucks. He offers to permanently adopt her, but she rejects his offer, stating that she must wait for her real parents to claim her. Mr. Warbucks offers to assist in her quest, so offers a public reward to Annie's parents to come forward.

Mr. Warbucks then takes Annie on a visit to Washington. She is introduced to President Roosevelt, where she charms both the president and his cabinet with her optimism that the country will rise out of its dire economic straits. When they return to New York, Annie learns that there have been no solid leads in finding her parents, so she agrees to become Mr. Warbucks' daughter, and the two celebrate.

However, into this happy party intrudes a couple claiming to be Annie's parents, who possess the other half of the locket. This couple is in fact in league with Miss Hannigan, and before they can take Annie or the promised reward, they are unmasked by Mr. Warbucks' contacts at the FBI. Annie stays with Mr. Warbucks, and they live happily ever after.

Annie closely follows the plot of arguably the most famous fairy tale in twentieth century America, *Cinderella*. Both are stories about orphaned girls raised in dire circumstances and

mistreated by dastardly “step-mothers.” Annie also possesses an equivalent to Cinderella’s fairy godmother in Grace Farrell. While in both instances these “fairy godmothers” are able to give love and support to their charges, neither is able to effect any real change in the circumstances of their “goddaughters.” They provide assistance, but do not step in to the story to take the place of the absent mother. They are supporting players, and while they may appear to possess the necessary powers to help either Cinderella or Annie, their powers only extend as far as putting their charges in advantageous circumstances so a man may save them.

As in many fairy tales, Annie’s lack of parents is a necessary precondition to her story. Without them, she is free to become the daughter of Oliver Warbucks. With parents, Annie would have remained one of the many destitute children of the Depression. The absence of parents is necessary to allow Annie to raise her class status. As in fairy tales, Annie shows the extreme vulnerability of a girl without parents. Ironically, that same vulnerability leaves her open to good fortune.

In keeping with the trope of the absent mother, the specter of Annie’s parents is invoked from the very beginning of the musical. When the audience first sees Annie, she is singing:

Maybe far away, or maybe real near by,
he may be pouring her coffee, she may be straight-ning his tie.
Maybe in a house all hidden by a hill,
She’s sitting playing piano, He’s sitting paying a bill.
Betcha they’re young, Betcha they’re smart,
Bet they collect things like ashtrays and art.
Betcha they’re good, (why shouldn’t they be?)
Their one mistake was giving up me. (Charnin 14-15)

Through Annie’s beginning song, her absent parents become present. The mystery of their location and reasons for leaving her so long in the orphanage are presented to the audience from the first. By speculating on their current status, Annie brings the audience’s attention to her own situation, which is one of poverty and neglect. The absent parents immediately become the

manifest cause of Annie's living conditions. Though their economic status may have demanded such an action, they are still the only reason offered as to why Annie has come under the power of Miss Hannigan, who mistreats the orphans in her charge. For most of the musical, until the audience learns about Annie's parents' deaths, it has only has the parents to blame.

These absent parents also stay on the stage for the duration of the musical through the symbolic locket Annie wears. Almost always visible to the audience, this locket represents the parents Annie doesn't have, as well as the promise those parents made to return. Annie's connection to her absent parents remains so strong, through the symbol of the locket, that she rejects both the locket offered by Mr. Warbucks as well as his offer of parenthood. Though he offers affection and stability, the absent-presence of her parents will not permit her to grasp new parentage.

One can see in her relationship with Oliver Warbucks reflections on Annie's relationship with her absent mother. Whereas her fantasy was for both parents, her great reward for her suffering is that she gets to live with a millionaire, who is a single man. Here, a characteristic of the absent mother trope shows through. Annie is much better off economically with Mr. Warbucks than she would have been with her poor parents. He is able to give her more of his time and attention, because he does not need to work. If her parents hadn't been absent, Annie would never have the opportunities she has experienced with Mr. Warbucks.

Mr. Warbucks replaces her former fantasy of a nuclear family with a reality of a single father. By cleaving to Mr. Warbucks, Annie gives up on her fantasy of a mother and a father in favor of the reality of a single father. Together, Annie and Warbucks create a family unit. They sing of their close relationship:

Together at last, together forever,
We're tying a knot they never can sever.

I don't need sunshine now to turn my skies to blue,
I don't need anything but you![...]
I'm poor as a mouse, I'm richer than Midas
But nothing on earth could ever divide us
And if tomorrow I'm an apple seller, too,
I don't need anything but you! (Charnin 109-111)

Annie feels content with Mr. Warbucks. As their duet shows, they feel no need for others to be in their family. Together, they have “tied a knot” in their relationship. The conjugal relationship such a phrase suggests implies an intimate bonding as enduring as marriage. The closeness of this connection is underscored by Annie's regret at leaving Mr. Warbucks for her supposed biological parents:

Silly to cry, nothing to fear
Betcha New Jersey's as nice as right here.
Betcha my life is gonna be swell
Looking at them it's easy to tell.
So maybe I'll forget how nice he was to me
And how I was almost his baby, maybe. (Charnin 119-120)

Annie is more forlorn over leaving her adoptive father than she is excited over her dream of her parents coming true. She has accepted Mr. Warbucks as her family, and no longer expresses the need for completion she had at the beginning of the musical. The implication is that she will not miss having a mother, because Mr. Warbucks makes up for her absent biological parents.

Annie's change in outlook also demonstrates to the audience that a daughter can thrive without a mother, particularly when a male authority figure steps into the breach to solve the problems of a lone daughter.

One reason Annie is quickly convinced to give up her fantasy of a mother may be that her only experience of a woman caring for her during her childhood has been unpleasant. Miss Hannigan was the most important woman in Annie's life until Mr. Warbucks was able to remove Annie from her influence. Though she is a mother figure for the orphans under her care, she

rejects maternity completely. In song, Miss Hannigan expresses how much she actively hates her charges:

Little cheeks, little teeth, ev'rything around me is little.
If I wring little necks surely I would get acquittal![...]
How I hate little shoes, little socks and each little bloomer.
I'd have cracked years ago if it weren't for my sense of humor.
Someday I'll step on their freckles, some night I'll straighten their curls.
Send a flood, send the flu, anything that you can do to little girls. (Charnin 45-46)

In violent imagery, Miss Hannigan expresses how deeply she resents taking care of the orphanage. She is frustrated over her charges' control of her life and she is unable to engage in romantic relations because of her responsibilities at the orphanage. She expresses her desire to find erotic companionship when she sings: "I'd like a man to nibble on my ear/But I'll admit, that no one's bit, /So how come I'm the mother of the year?" (Charnin 44). Her frustration is palpable, but she cannot escape.

Miss Hannigan represents a unique form of the absent mother. She is a mother whose greatest wish is to be absent from her collection of daughters, but is forced to stay with them. If she had been allowed to follow her own inclination regarding motherhood, she would not be looking after orphans. Much of the abuse Annie and the other orphans suffer could have been avoided if Miss Hannigan had been allowed to be absent.

Thrust as she is into occupying the position of mother, Miss Hannigan is also forced to negotiate many of the difficulties of being a mother that other mothers must also reconcile. Like many mothers, she has a conflict between expressing herself as a sexual being and fulfilling her responsibilities of child care. Miss Hannigan is thrust into the role of mother though she has made the decision to remain childless herself. She is literally a mother against her will. Because this musical takes place during the Great Depression, she does not even have the option of searching for a job away from little girls.

Through her strong presence and emotionally-charged actions, Miss Hannigan becomes a theatrically memorable character. As such, she undercuts the potential power of the absent mother. While the figure of the absent mother can be tremendously powerful because it calls to mind women who have rejected the traditional roles of women in society and describes a woman who is out of the direct control of the patriarchy, this power can also be invalidated. By focusing on the neglect Annie undergoes after her parents leave her at the orphanage, particularly on the treatment by Miss Hannigan, Annie's parents become figures of scorn.

From the beginning, when Annie lovingly describes her parents but admits they willingly gave her to the orphanage, Annie's parents are under suspicion of blame for her condition. The other orphans in her orphanage even single Annie out by mentioning that she is unique because she actually has parents. There is no attempt to think of her parents as real people, nor any attempt to understand how and why they would make the decision to give her up for adoption. They become defined by their action of giving Annie up to Miss Hannigan's control.

These parents haven't the ability to speak for themselves. Instead, Miss Hannigan, as the only present mother, is placed in the position of speaking for Annie's parents and neglectful mothers everywhere. Because of this, Annie's biological mother's potential voice is co-opted by Miss Hannigan. Instead of speaking for herself or allowing her absence to speak through silence, her absence is filled with Miss Hannigan's complaints about the demands of "little girls." Because Miss Hannigan is the only mother figure to speak of her own desires, desires which encourage her to be abusive to her charges, the audience cannot help but color Annie's absent mother with the same brush. If neglect is caused by self-interest, it follows that absence can be caused by self-interest, as well.

Like other daughters with absent mothers, Annie's development into the heterosexual

economy appears stunted. In her relationship with Mr. Warbucks, she is perpetually infantilized. He sings of her as his “baby,” a status which Annie seems poised to maintain for the foreseeable future. Such infantilizing is an obstacle to Annie’s development into an adult sexual woman. She has no woman to enter into a mirroring relationship with her, already inhibiting her healthy heterosexual development. With the added obstacle of her father’s vision of her as an infant, Annie seems poised to remain an asexual child forever.

The reputation, and consequently the audience’s perception of Annie’s parents, is saved by news of their deaths. Because they are dead and therefore unable to retrieve Annie from her place in the orphanage, her parents’ guilt is mitigated. They may have wanted to take her back, but could not because they died. However, their initial relinquishment of Annie to the orphanage still stands against them, and will continue to do so, because the absent parents cannot defend their choices.

The characteristics of the absent mother trope are present in *Annie*. Annie has been abandoned to an orphanage by a mother and father of whom she only has fantasies, though the presence of a mother is still felt in Annie’s life in the personage of Miss Hannigan. The absence of a mother is particularly felt in the inhibiting of Annie’s sexual development through her lack of a mirroring relationship. Despite these hardships, Annie ultimately ends the play happily, with a social stability she could never have had, had her parents not left her in an orphanage. *Annie* teaches the audience that a mother, while a nice fantasy, is not a necessary part of a young girl’s life. Instead, a wealthy bachelor can fulfill the mothering role better than Annie’s erstwhile mother-figure, Miss Hannigan. For Annie, success is achieved by giving up entirely on the idea of a mother, and instead replacing the idea of a mother with loyalty to a patriarchal authority figure.

Wendy Kesselman's 1981 play *My Sister in this House* demonstrates the tragic outcome of two girls who grow up away from their mother. In fifteen scenes, Kesselman tells a story of familial dysfunction based on a true story of a 1933 double-murder in France. Two sisters, Christine and Lea, work for the Danzard family, represented in the play by Madame Danzard and her daughter Isabelle. Christine and Lea have discordant relationships with their mother, who has placed them into service careers beginning in their adolescent years. From the outset, Christine actively loathes her mother and resents her mother's abandonment and continued demands, while Lea learns to feel the same.

Eventually, tensions mount between the sisters and the family they serve. Throughout the play, Kesselman skillfully builds this tension until it explodes in the final minutes of the play, when the sisters attack Madame Danzard and her daughter, killing the two women with their bare hands. The violence of the attack is highlighted in the final scene, when the girls undergo a trial that sentences Christine to death for the crime, and Lea to ten years of hard labor.

When the audience first meets Christine she works by herself as a maid in an unnamed household. She is twenty years old. The audience hears a letter from Lea to Christine, read by Lea. In the letter, the fears and difficulties of a young woman left alone to serve another family are made manifest.

Dear Christine. When Maman left me here on Friday, I thought I would die. They didn't want to take me at first, but Maman told Madame Crespelle I was fifteen [...] Three days ago Maman came and took me away. She said I could earn more money somewhere else. I was just getting used to the Crespelles, but I'm getting four more francs a month and Maman's promised to let me keep one of them. (Kesselman 87)

At this point Lea is fully under her mother's control. Her mother has the power to place her in service, to withdraw her to new households, and to take the money she earns. The mother's concern for her daughters seems based mostly on the money they can earn for her. While Lea is

troubled by living apart from her mother and sister, Maman is not concerned by the separation. The absence of a mother from Christine and Lea's lives is a result of their mother sending her daughters away to work. They have effectively been abandoned to the families for which they work. When they are placed in service together in the Danzard household, the sisters are overjoyed, as this pairing gives them the opportunity to bond and dispel their loneliness. Without their mother, the sisters begin to turn to each other as mirroring partners, a development which will eventually lead to a highly dependent incestuous relationship.

The absence of their mother is highly significant for Christine and Lea. Not only has their mother's control over their placement and money directed their lives, but their separation from her and their family has been the most determining characteristic of their young lives. Christine in particular harbors great resentment over her mother's control and abandonment, which she demonstrates when Lea unpacks a blanket their mother made from her, when the sisters first move to the Danzard house.

Christine: What—you still have this old thing?

Lea: I had to take it. She was with me when I packed.

Christine: (turning away) Well, I don't care. It has nothing to do with me.

Lea: Don't you like it?

Christine: It's old and falling apart. I never liked Maman's sewing. It's vulgar.
(Kesselman 90)

This blanket becomes a major symbol in Lea's ultimate repudiation of her mother, when, in the fifth scene, Lea and Christine unravel the blanket. In this act of violence, they tear the blanket apart with their hands. They unravel the blanket and wind the yarn around the furniture in the room and themselves, creating a giant knot. The girls turn this destruction into a kind of play, reveling in the obliteration of the symbol of their mother. Such symbolic violence toward their mother is disturbing for the audience, especially as it foreshadows greater violence later in the play.

The charges the sisters level against their mother are numerous. Along with their symbolic savaging of her by ripping apart the blanket, the girls outline the grievances they feel toward their mother. Christine hates her mother for removing her from the convent school she attended as a child.

At Saint Mary of the Fields, I used to escape. Once a month. No one in this town would have brought me back—you know what they call it there. But your Maman—our Maman—she brought me back every time. In the end all I wanted was to be a nun! (She smiles.) That's all I wanted. But then of course she took me out. She hadn't expected that. That was against all her plans. I had to work. I had to make money. And she kept all of it. (Kesselman 104)

Christine blames her mother both for insisting she stay with the nuns when she wanted to run away, and then for taking her away from the nuns when she had finally resigned herself to her fate. Her resentment has become so great that it has turned to hate. Throughout the play, Christine works to convince Lea to feel this same way, and mostly succeeds. Directly after relating to Lea the story of their mother taking her away from the convent, Christine convinces Lea that the two should refuse to visit their mother on Sundays as they have done in the past, and instead should spend their money and free time together. Christine works to sever Lea's relationship with their mother, and becomes increasingly jealous of other demands on Lea's attention and affection. As their mirroring relationship continues to develop, Christine relies on Lea to position her as the dominant member of their partnership. The presence of their mother could potentially undermine such mirroring, making it a threat to Christine's dominance.

Because Christine and Lea are alone, they are without either the attention or protection they would have from a nurturing parent. They are suffering from the greatest dangers feared by those who worry over the phenomenon of absent mothers. They are left to fend for themselves in the world, without a mother to protect them from harm and help them to cope with disappointment and danger. In the house of the Danzards, it becomes increasingly clear that

Christine and Lea are living in circumstances that are safe bodily, but are neither secure nor protected.

The girls' vulnerability is underscored by the constant scrutiny of Madame Danzard. The fourth scene, performed in silence, is an eloquent description of the constant inspection under which the girls live:

Madame Danzard takes a white glove from the cabinet and carefully puts it on. She rings the small round bell. Lea hurries in. She stands silently as Madame Danzard, wearing her white glove, slowly goes all around the room, testing the furniture and mouldings for dust. Lea smiles as Madame Danzard checks. [...] Madame Danzard walks up the staircase, smiling, checking the banister, kneeling down and touching the balustrades. [...] Madame Danzard, bending down in an awkward position on the staircase, finds a spot of dust on the white glove, stands up, shows it to Lea. [...] Lea rushes up the stairs to clean the place where the dust has been found. (Kesselman 106)

The sisters are constantly being watched and evaluated by eyes that are neither kind nor sympathetic. Madame Danzard seeks to find something wrong with the girls' work so that she can castigate them with her displeasure. She invades their privacy by sneaking into their room when they aren't there, in order to examine the girls' personal effects and environment. In the tenth scene, when the situation between the girls and the Danzards has deteriorated to silent cohabitation without communication, Madame Danzard awakes in the middle of the night and goes into the parlor to take her white glove and count the silver. In this, she shows the enjoyment she receives from inflicting her inspections on the sisters.

The deterioration of communication between servants and masters upsets Christine, who says to her sister, "Madame doesn't speak to us anymore. She hasn't said a word in months," to which Lea replies, "She never did, Christine" (Kesselman 126). Christine's comment shows a relationship with Madame that is different from Lea's. While Christine has rejected her biological mother, she seems to have become attached to Madame Danzard. Though she gets

little nurturing or respect from Madame, Christine looked to Madame Danzard for acknowledgement and approval of her work. In her mother's absence, Christine has looked to her employer as a substitute mothering figure, an attachment that is destined to cause as much pain for Christine as her original detachment from her mother. Madame is present for Christine, but only in body. She provides no more mothering than her absent mother.

Lea, however, finds a different source of mothering in the absence of her mother. She looks to her older sister as a mothering figure. Lea learns from Christine how to be a proper servant, and she is dependent on Christine's approval. Lea frequently shows insecurity over her position and her inability to perform tasks as well as Christine.

Lea: I can't seem to do anything right. I can't seem to please you.

Christine: You please me, turtle. You please me more than anything.

Lea: You're so quick. You get things done in a minute.

Christine: You're fine the way you are.

Lea: Maybe this was a mistake. I slow you down. (Kesselman 94)

Lea's insecurities require Christine to repeatedly assist Lea to locate herself within the household scheme, as well as within their relationship. Lea derives great comfort from stories of her childhood, which only Christine can remember to impart to her. Like a mother telling her daughter about the event of her birth, Christine tells Lea an oft-requested story about a horse and carriage that nearly ran them down. Christine threw herself over her sister to protect her, and the result is a scar the girls share. "And when we stood up, we were both bleeding. But it was the same wound. It started on my arm and went down across your wrist. Look—(*She lines up her arm with Lea's.*) We have it still" (Kesselman 95).

With this story, Christine reinforces a connection between the sister's bodies. They show the same marks upon their arms; Christine's wound the direct result of her sacrifice to save her sister. The bond between the sisters is solidified in the moment of this accident, making them, in

the words of a fortune-teller they once visited, “bound in blood.” Here, Christine and Lea are bound by more than their sisterhood. They have a connection equivalent to the bodily connection of a mother to her child. Christine’s scar comes from protecting Lea. Her mothering of her younger sister is written on her body.

These sisters have become so intertwined and dependent on each other that they become not only sisters and lovers, but also eventually a whole family unto themselves. This can be seen in the photograph the sisters have taken. After Madame and her daughter have their pictures taken, Christine and Lea use their hard-earned money to have a portrait done of themselves. The desire for such a photograph shows that Christine and Lea attempt to mimic the mother-daughter relationship they see the Danzards perform.

These sisters have another relationship between their bodies in their incest. The sexual relationship of the sisters is hinted to the audience subtly. Christine makes Lea a set of decorated white lingerie, which Lea sees as the most beautiful things she’s ever beheld. In a scene in their shared bedroom, when Christine is finishing a chemise for Lea, Lea models the garment for her sister. Their following dialogue is romantic in tone.

Lea: Yes.

Christine opens her eyes.

It’s beautiful.

Christine: It’s you who are beautiful.

Lea (*tentatively reaching out her hand*). I’m cold.

Christine: (*going toward her*). I know. (Kesselman 112)

The most overtly sexual scene occurs nearly at the end of the play, when the girls perform a silent scene in their bedroom after Madame Danzard has left them alone in the house:

Lea undoes her hair. It falls around her. Slowly, she unbuttons her coat, pulls it open. She is wearing the elaborate white chemise with the wide shoulder straps Christine sewed for her. Lea begins to move around the room. Her movements have a strange grace of their own. She moves all over the small room, her hair

flying. Christine watches her. Suddenly, she pulls Lea down to her. The light dims. (Kesselman 135)

This incestuous aspect of their extreme interdependence on each other comes out at the trial. As the judge and medical examiner are outlining the gruesomeness of the murder of the Danzard women, the judge asks the silent Christine, “Did anything abnormal happen between you and your sister? You understand me, don’t you? Was it simply sisterly love?” (Kesselman 143). The judge shows a prurient interest in the intimacy of the sisters. To the judge, the potential lesbian incest of the sisters would explain their violent actions, as it shows them to be mentally ill. Though the judge does not comment on their absent mother, his focus on the girls’ intense connection cannot help but call to mind the absence of their mother, who, if present, may have prevented the sisters from becoming so deeply bonded that they became lovers.

In Christine and Lea’s sexual relationship, the worst fears about absent mothers are realized. The sisters are completely unable to enter into a heterosexual economy. Their mother’s absence has forced the sisters to live without a mirroring figure upon which to base their development into socially acceptable sexuality. This absence in their lives has compelled the girls to explore sexuality on their own, which they do by turning to each other as sexual partners. Presumably, the presence of their mother could have prevented this incest through the mirroring relationship and the modeling of heterosexuality.

Christine and Lea’s story is in a way highly tragic, though the girls are not necessarily always sympathetic. The girls have undergone incredible hardship, but have become such antisocial beings that it is hard for an audience member to truly empathize with the girls. Kesselman creates an alienated relationship between audience and characters. The relationship between Christine and Lea is presented with little romance or sentimentality. Instead, the audience is asked to examine the inner workings of a household, determining for themselves how

the women each contribute to the violent events of the Danzards' deaths. The tone of *My Sister in this House* remains consistently subdued and restrained.

Kesselman's play is a clear example of the absent mother trope, particularly in how it relates to the disruption of the mirroring relationship. *My Sister in This House* dramatizes the most extreme example of how a daughter's development can be disturbed by an absent mother. Christine and Lea are unable to form a functional family unit. There is no mother to model the motherhood role to Christine and Lea, so when the two attempt to recreate a mother-daughter relationship, they do not know how. Instead, their relationship becomes enmeshed with their attempts to enter the heterosexual economy, for which they likewise lack a model, resulting in an incestuous lesbian affair. *My Sister in this House* can serve as a cautionary tale to mothers who may be allowing economic concerns to separate them from their daughters. The lesson of the story is that no career, either the mother's or daughter's, should be allowed to interrupt the mother-daughter mirroring relationship.

Less than ten years after the debut of *My Sister in This House*, Beth Henley wrote a play that is far different in tone and treatment of the absent mother trope. *Crimes of the Heart* from 1981, comically examines the relationship between three daughters and their absent mother. Henley's work portrays three daughters whose mother committed suicide when they were children. The consequent absence of their mother has impacted these women in different ways, each way clearly powerful and deeply felt by each daughter.

The action of the play commences when the youngest daughter, Babe, has shot her husband, Zackery, and is in jail because of it. Lenny, the oldest daughter, who lives in their childhood home and cares for their aged grandfather, summons the middle daughter, Meg, back home to deal with the crisis. As the play opens, it is Lenny's birthday, and the only person to

remember is the family's cousin, Chick, who gifts Lenny with leftover candy from Christmas. As the play continues, Meg returns home, and Babe joins her sisters after being bailed out of jail by her lawyer, Barnette.

Henley's description of the mother's suicide is highly comical. At first, the playwright presents the fact of the mother's suicide mysteriously, allowing the audience to only slowly put the facts together. In the first act, Babe and Meg bring up the topic of their mother's death:

BABE. (After a pause.) Gosh, sometimes I wonder...

MEG. What?

BABE. Why she did it. Why mama hung herself.

MEG. I don't know. She had a bad day. A real bad day. You know how it feels on a real bad day.

BABE. And that old yellow cat. It was sad about that old cat.

MEG. Yeah. (Henley 21)

Because the audience has not yet received the full story of the mother's death, it cannot yet fully understand the comic implications. Later, in the second act, Henley gives the audience a fuller picture when Babe says, "That old yellow cat. You know, I bet if she hadn't of hung that old cat along with her, she wouldn't have gotten all that national coverage" (Henley 44). Here, Henley turns the tragedy of the mother's suicide into a farcical murder-suicide.

Though comically treated, there is no doubt in the play that this death and the subsequent absence of their mother has been the defining event in the daughters' lives. The audience learns early in the play that the girls' father abandoned the family when they were young, and that this deeply impacted their mother's state of mind. However, the father's abandonment is not mentioned again, and it becomes clear through continual references to "Mama" that it is the absence of the mother that is the most important here, with the most lasting impact.

Each of the daughters shows different responses to the mother's absence, and each has an emotional problem that, one could infer, would have been prevented with a mother's guidance.

These problems, along with their actions, have resulted in each of the daughters coming to the play with broken lives and little hope for the future.

The oldest daughter, Lenny, turns thirty as the play begins. This birthday immediately calls to mind the absent mother, as birthdays recall a mother's work in giving birth. Lenny's grandfather, the man she takes care of full time, is in the hospital. Lenny has never married and continues to live in her childhood home. When we first meet Lenny, she converses with her cousin, Chick. Chick takes the opportunity to disparage Lenny's sisters, and Lenny allows it, even going as far as to apologize for her mother's death when Chick complains that it has hindered her acceptance into the Ladies' League.

As the play begins, Lenny is having a bad day. Though her birthday, her sisters have forgotten. Her grandfather is in the hospital, and she learns in the morning that her horse, which had been stabled at Doc Porter's house, has died from a lightning strike. Her thirtieth birthday has left Lenny feeling old and decrepit, as she describes to Meg, "I'm thirty years old today and my face is getting all pinched up and my hair is falling out in the comb" (Henley 14).

As the oldest, Lenny must serve as the leader of the Magrath sisters. She is the de facto mother of the group, though she herself suffers from the absence of her mother. When she learns of Babe's arrest, she immediately summons Meg to the family home. Lenny's first response to a crisis is to reunite the sisters with the urgent telegram: "Babe's in terrible trouble—Stop! Zackery's been shot—Stop! Come home immediately—Stop! Stop! Stop!" (Henley 14).

Lenny has taken on the role of the matriarch of the family. She upbraids Meg for staying away at Christmas, saying, "Is that why you didn't use that money Old Granddaddy sent you to come home Christmas; because you hate us so much? We never did all that much to make you hate us. We didn't" (Henley 15). By categorizing herself and Granddaddy as "us," Lenny shows

she has come to identify with the position of matriarch, and how deeply she is affected by her the sisters' estrangement. Meg and Babe even comment on the degree to which Lenny has grown into the figure of their grandmother: "She's turning into Old Grandmama [...] Do you know she's taken to wearing Old Grandmama's torn sunhat and her green garden gloves?" (Henley 22).

However, this does not prevent Lenny from feeling deep and lasting resentment. For instance, she is upset that in their childhood, Meg was allowed to sew twelve jingle bells into her petticoat, while Lenny and Babe only got three. She says, "I can't help it! It gets me mad! I resent it. I do" (Henley 40). Here Meg still thinks as a daughter, even though her mother's death catapulted her into the role of substitute mother to her sisters. Lenny goes back and forth from thinking like a mother to thinking like a daughter. Forced to fill both roles, Lenny must work through the frustration of constantly locating herself.

One of the most lasting effects of their mother's absence has been the Magrath sisters' inability to effectively engage in the heterosexual economy. None of the sisters have children, a symbolic detail that shows how their lack of a mirroring relationship has made the sisters unable to reproduce themselves as mothers in their own mother's image. The cycle of mothering across generations has been broken by their mother's suicide and consequent absence.

The most enduring effect of her mother's death and absence for Lenny is her inability to engage in relationships with men. After Meg and Babe discuss their sister, Meg declares, "She needs some love in her life" (Henley 22). Babe responds that Lenny has indeed experienced a sexual relationship with a man she met through a lonely-hearts club. Lenny even went to visit her beau in Memphis, but when the man visited her and met Granddaddy, Lenny broke off the relationship, declaring that it was on account of her inability to have children.

Lenny's trouble with men, and the fact that she has only ever had one boyfriend, show

that her development into sexuality has been slow and stunted. According to psychoanalytic theory, Lenny cannot develop into proper heterosexuality without her mother present to teach her how to engage in such sexuality, and to model femininity for her daughters. The mirroring relationship is broken through the absence of Lenny's mother, so Lenny cannot learn to mirror her mother's behavior. Thus, she is left to figure out the complexities of femininity and sexuality by herself, which she cannot easily do. Her one attempt to engage in such a relationship is thwarted by her grandfather and her own insecurities. Luckily for Lenny, through her sisters' intervention late in the play, Lenny is given a second chance with her beau.

Meg, the middle sister, has her own challenges with femininity and relationships, which are more clearly related to her mother's suicide. Meg's defining characteristic is her blatant sexuality. Chick describes her: "She was known all over Copiah County as cheap Christmas trash, and that was the least of it" (Henley 7). Even Meg herself admits, "Look, I know I've had too many men. Believe me, I've had too many men" (Henley 47).

The same absence of a mother that leads Lenny to withdraw from sexuality leads Meg to throw herself into it. While Lenny cannot find a way to engage in relationships, Meg throws herself into relationship after relationship, always seeking but never finding a lover to fill the spot left vacant by her mother. This revolving door of relationships leaves Meg appearing rather cold and unfeeling in her actions towards her erstwhile lovers.

One such lover, Doc Porter, appears briefly in *Crimes of the Heart*. Doc was Meg's high school boyfriend. He has a limp, a condition blamed on Meg by members of the town. During a hurricane, which evacuated the city of Biloxi, Meg insisted on staying in her home, and Doc stayed with her. The hurricane caused the roof to collapse, crushing Doc's leg, and leaving him with a permanent limp. Lenny in particular blames Meg for Doc's condition, relating,

“Everyone says she baited Doc into staying with her. She said she’d marry him if he’d stay”
(Henley 41).

Meg’s behavior towards Doc during the play shows that she hasn’t changed much in her approach in the intervening years since their high school romance. Though Doc is married with two children, Meg still accompanies him on an all-night assignation. When she returns home in the morning, she tells of her unsuccessful attempt to seduce Doc, and the hope that has been rekindled for her from their encounter:

Oh, Lenny, listen to me, now, everything’s all right with Doc. I mean nothing happened. Well, actually a lot did happen, but it didn’t come to anything. Not because of me, I’m afraid. I mean, I was out there thinking, “What will I say when he begs me to run away with him? Will I have pity on his wife and those two half-Yankee children? I mean, can I sacrifice their happiness for mine? Yes! Oh, yes! Yes, I can!” But...he didn’t ask me. He didn’t even want to ask me. Why aren’t I miserable! Why aren’t I morbid! I should be humiliated! Devastated! Maybe these feelings are coming—I don’t know. But for now it was...just such fun. I’m happy. I realized I could care about someone. (Henley 57)

Meg’s words here show selfishness in her relations with men, particularly Doc. She is not concerned with his family’s needs or the effect losing their father would have on the children. Instead, she is thinking of what would make her happy. That Doc is not interested in a long-term relationship with Meg is not an obstacle to her happiness, however. The spark of hope in relationships and men is relit for Meg.

The sexuality Meg displays here is far from benign. Though, again, responsibility for this is not laid directly at the feet of her dead mother, that mother is still held partially accountable for Meg’s actions. In the first act, Chick mentions Meg’s promiscuity and her mother’s suicide in the same paragraph, implicitly making a connection between the two. Chick indicates that if their mother had stayed with the family, she would have curbed and guided Meg’s sexuality into something more clearly acceptable to society. Meg is like a flower that,

neglected and abandoned, has grown wild.

Meg also has a more direct relationship to her mother's suicide than do her sisters, a connection that may explain her preferential treatment in relation to the jingle bells. Meg was the one who found her mother's body after the suicide. In speaking about Meg, Lenny learns from Babe for the first time the extent to which finding her mother's body affected Meg's psychological and emotional health. Babe recounts that Meg "started doing all sorts of these strange things," including spending time at the public library reading a book entitled "Diseases of the Skin," which showed pictures of "rotting-away noses and eyeballs drooping off down the sides of people's faces and scabs and sores and eaten-away places all over *all* parts of people's bodies" (Henley 40). Babe continues:

It was the same way she'd force herself to look at the poster of crippled children stuck up in the window of Dixieland Drugs. You know, that one where they want you to give a dime. Meg would stand there and stare at their eyes and look at the braces on their little crippled-up legs—then she'd purposely go and spend her dime on a double scoop ice cream cone and eat it all down. She'd say to me, "See, I can stand it. I can stand it. Just look how I'm gonna be able to stand it." (Henley 40-41)

Babe suggests a motivation: "She said she was afraid of being a weak person. I guess 'cause she cried in bed every night for such a long time" (Henley 41).

Here we see how her mother's death has been directly responsible for turning Meg into a person who detests weakness in herself and is determined to erase any traces of compassion and pity she may possess. The pain of losing her mother has been so severe that Meg has lived her life in such a way as to never experience that level of pain again.

Babe, the youngest Magrath sister, is also deeply affected by her mother's death, which the audience sees through Babe's own attempted suicide in the final act, which closely mirrors her mother's until she encounters unanticipated difficulty. Before Babe becomes suicidal,

however, the audience is introduced to her excessive detachment from her everyday life. She shoots her husband when he commands the fifteen-year-old boy with whom Babe is having an affair to leave the property. As Zackery is lying, shot, on the floor of their living room, Babe adjourns to the kitchen to make lemonade. According to Babe, she drank three glasses, then called out to Zackery to invite him to have a glass, as well. Zackery does not answer her summons, so Babe poured him a glass and took it to him in the living room. Babe describes her detachment during the ensuing moments:

And there he was; lying on the rug. He was looking up at me trying to speak words. I said, "What?...Lemonade?...You don't want it? Would you like a Coke instead?" Then I got the idea, he was telling me to call on the phone for medical help. So I got on the phone and called up the hospital. I gave my name and address and I told them my husband was shot and he was lying on the rug and there was plenty of blood. (Henley 35)

This detachment from violence closely mirrors the level of detachment Meg appears to be seeking in order to deal with their mother's suicide. It is not surprising Babe responds with such disengagement to her own violent act, since her childhood was defined by the violent act of her mother's suicide. Babe learned at an early age to deal with violence and death, and clearly has a well-developed defensive mechanism in dealing with such things, even in her adulthood.

Babe's aplomb falls apart in the final minutes of the play when she attempts suicide after a threatening phone call from her estranged and injured husband. In this phone call, he compares Babe's psychological disposition to her mother, diagnosing both as unbalanced. Babe's side of the conversation is all the audience hears: "I'm not! I'm not!...She wasn't crazy either...Don't you call my mother crazy!" (Henley 66). It is clear from Babe's words here that Zackery has attacked by agitating Babe to the point where she is suicidal, a tactic employed by inserting Babe's mother into the present moment. This menace effectively breaks apart Babe's hard won distance from present circumstances.

After the phone call, Babe begins to look for rope to hang herself. She searches throughout the kitchen, even eliciting Lenny's help to find stronger rope. When she locates some, she retires upstairs to kill herself while Lenny is on the phone reuniting with her beau in Memphis. This scene refuses to turn into tragedy, however. Instead of ending the play with a suicide, Babe's attempt fails spectacularly, as the stage directions describe: "There is a moment of silence, then a loud, horrible thud is heard coming from upstairs. The telephone begins ringing immediately. It rings five times before Babe comes hurrying down the stairs with a broken piece of rope hanging around her neck" (Henley 67).

After this failure, Babe attempts to asphyxiate herself with the oven. She can't figure out how to do so, however, and becomes desperate to find a way to end her life. Her desperation leads her to call on her mother for aid as she attempts to light a match for the oven. Suddenly, she exclaims, "Mama...So that's why you done it!" (Henley 68). The epiphany Babe has had is why her mother hanged the cat along with herself. She explains to Meg, "It's 'cause she was afraid of dying all alone" (Henley 69). Learning this new piece of information brings closure and understanding to Babe regarding her mother's death. Being able to more fully understand and empathize with her mother leads Babe to a new feeling of peace.

Babe's epiphany about her mother brings the deceased woman back into the present before letting her go. Her death is finally understood by her daughter, resulting in Babe's ability to fully exorcise the pain of the suicide, an exorcism that permits Babe to allow her mother to become fully absent. When Babe attempted to repeat her mother's actions, she showed how much the absent mother was still present in the lives of the Magrath sisters. Her absence has begotten her presence in the psychological problems of the sisters, particularly in the actions Babe shows after she is threatened and desperate for escape. This presence is ultimately

commuted to absence when Babe works through the pain caused by that absence.

Babe's revelation of her mother's fear of loneliness leads her to declare, "I'm not like Mama. I'm not so all alone" (Henley 70). She says this as she is with her sisters. The implication is that the Magrath sisters can provide for each other the companionship and understanding that was lacking for their mother. Each of the sisters has made progress in preventing the loneliness of their mother. Lenny has reconnected with her beau, Meg has relearned from her encounter with Doc Porter that she can feel desire and romance again, and Babe learns that she has a network of support, support she can receive and reciprocate to her sisters. The happiness of this scene is achieved in spite of the absent mother, showing once again that a mother is not a necessary commodity to a daughter's contentment.

As the play closes on the sisters having Lenny's belated birthday cake for breakfast, Lenny experiences a vision of the three of them together and laughing. This hopeful note sends the audience away with the message that the Magrath sisters are likely not going to relive their mother's unhappiness, and that they have found a way to finally be free of the constant oppressive presence of their mother's absence.

Crimes of the Heart is a good example of the absent mother trope, particularly in how it shows the sisters to have been deeply affected by their break in the mirroring relationship. The Magrath sisters have all failed to continue the cycle of motherhood, and have failed to effectively enter into the heterosexual economy in socially acceptable ways. The sisters have clearly suffered from their mother's suicide. Her death was painful for them to endure, and continues to hang over their heads in their dealings with others. Ultimately the mother's absence is overcome, though. The sisters end the play happily, showing that the mother's absence is not necessary to their ultimate contentment.

In the decade following *Crimes of the Heart*, Claire Chafee examined another absent mother with her play *Why We Have a Body*. Chafee's work shows a woman engaged in what Adrienne Rich calls "courageous mothering." Courageous mothering is not the type of mothering where the mother's main creation in life is her daughter and the main tragedy of her life the moment her daughter becomes her own person. Rich describes:

As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need not to be the vessels of another woman's self-denial and frustration. The quality of the mother's life—however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist. Because the conditions of life for many poor women demand a fighting spirit for sheer physical survival, such mothers have sometimes been able to give their daughters something to be valued far more highly than full-time mothering. (247)

In *Why We Have a Body*, the character of Eleanor embodies this type of courageous mothering. In Chafee's play, the story of Eleanor's relationship to her daughters is this: Eleanor has given birth to two daughters, Lili and Mary. She was present in their childhood to some degree, though now that the two girls are adults, Eleanor is no longer around. She has left her daughters and her old life to become an explorer.

Eleanor is different from other absent mothers, however. She is physically gone from the lives of her daughters, but is still present to the audience. She is able to engage the ideas contained in the trope of the absent mother directly, defending her decisions and putting them in the context of her other life choices. Eleanor works directly to break away from the mirroring model of motherhood. She wants to interrupt the cyclical nature of that trope, and forcibly does so through her absence. Without their mother to mirror the traditional path into the heterosexual economy, Mary and Lili must devise their own path, a path both daughters choose to avoid. While Mary's choices lead her away from relationships and sexuality, Lili avoids becoming

mired in the heterosexual economy as a lesbian. While Kesselman used lesbianism as a symbolic indicator of dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, Chafee uses it to demonstrate that Lili lives entirely in a world of women.

Eleanor addresses her own feelings toward the art of mothering and the personal recriminations that accompany the experience:

I suppose my girls are mad at me. I imagine I did a number of horrible things to them growing up. Whole entire lapses of concern...In fact I spent the whole time that they would describe as their childhood in a sort of fog. I was in a light trance at the time [...] If it's true that we replace each cell entirely every seven years, and if the soul does progress across the sky, like the planets ...then it's fair to say I was a different person. Someone I no longer am. The person you have come for is no longer here. And the little girls they were, are no longer here, So...it is just a memory talking to a memory. (212)

In this passage Eleanor addresses the guilt that is elsewhere identified by Adrienne Rich as a universal mothering experience. Rich writes, "The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children" (223). Rich goes on to describe this phenomenon as the "guilt of Everymother" (223).

In *Why We Have a Body*, Eleanor's response to this guilt is to ultimately absolve herself of it. Eleanor refuses to live in a state of perpetual penance for things she inadvertently did which harmed her daughters, especially when she cannot even identify to herself the mistakes she might have made. Eleanor forgives herself for these mistakes because she was a different person during her daughters' childhoods. She was then without her own subjectivity, a state she has now achieved. This allows Eleanor to look back on her mothering without looking through the lens of maternal guilt, but rather, one of knowledge and full consciousness, one in which she has awoken from her "fog."

Eleanor's reflections on her own job of mothering to her daughters and her self-absolution leads to further recollections of the motivations that inspired Eleanor to leave her

daughters and enter into a career of exploration. Part of this motivation was that Eleanor was loath to pass on to her daughters the legacy of self-hatred and self-recriminations that seems to be the endowment of one maternal generation to the next:

Any woman has within her a profound hatred for sex...INHERITED, at the very least in the tissues of her sex, a collective shame passed down through tiny chinks in her mother...happening in imperceptible increments every night as the mother wipes up crumbs from dinner with a damp sponge...Every woman has a day when she hates the form that she has taken on so much that she makes plans to have it destroyed...She counts the beans on her plate. She adds up numbers with phenomenal speed, the approximate number of calories in the plate that's put before her. The speed of her equations impresses astronomers. She is calculating just how much she can expect from things.... (198-99)

Though it may appear on the surface to be an abusive, neglectful choice that harmed her daughters, Eleanor's abandonment of them proves that she cares enough about her daughters to make her own subjectivity a priority. She left them for their own sake, so that she would not have the effect on them that her own mother had on her. Eleanor's mother was trapped in the "mirroring" form of motherhood. Eleanor's mother gave Eleanor only the knowledge it would take to create a reflection of herself. This woman, not present in the play, is quoted by Lili as saying, "details I would not remember but never-the-less know" (191). These pieces of information include how many sticks of butter are in a pound, how to make an onion dip, and the admonition to always let a frozen cake completely thaw before serving it. Eleanor recognizes such useless pieces of information as a manifestation of the generational nature of the maternal mirroring process. She experienced her own mother's attempts to mold her into a reflection, and refuses to mold her own daughters into reflections of that reflection. She struggles to break out of this cycle:

I am convinced there is something in the female psyche that gets stuck. And it just circles in and circles in like a 747 over Chicago, trying to land and can't. We just don't think it's our turn. For five decades, I have struggled to say something more than, "Where could I have put my pocketbook?" which is the central thing I

remember my mother saying. “Where could I have put my pocketbook?” She would say it like it meant...Like she meant to say, “Now where could I have put my...mind?” We haven’t thought big enough. Our thoughts are small. We retrace our steps constantly. (203)

Eleanor’s daughters want their mother to return to them and help them make sense of the world and their lives. Mary even goes as far as to send a “telepathic fax” to her mother, since there is no other way of communicating with Eleanor. Mary sends the message, “Come home. We need you for verification. Huge chunks missing...make haste, your daughter Mary, and your daughter Lili” (215). Eleanor receives the message, but refuses to go back. She is not finished growing into her own subjectivity, and is not willing to return to her daughters. This leads the girls to the conclusion that they must go on living without the mystical solution to life’s problems they thought their mother was going to be able to provide. Mary says, “So. I guess this is pretty much it then. I guess we are the next generation” (217).

Though a painful realization to both Lili and Mary, who had been hoping for so long that their mother would return to them and solve their problems, this realization is also liberating. Lili and Mary embark on a closer relationship than the two have ever had before. They have come to terms with each other as sisters and friends, and with their mother’s absence. Mary chooses to turn herself in to the police, who had been chasing her. This choice marks Mary as a subject, guiding her own choices and destiny, instead of a fugitive running from authorities. Instead of living a life in response and reaction to her mother’s absence, Mary makes her own choice, in this case to go to prison.

Though many mother-daughter plays show a relationship fraught with mutual recriminations and a quest for subjectivity that destroys one or both women, in Chafee’s work, the mother-daughter relationship is a good deal more complicated than previous playwrights had established. For Chafee, a mother’s own quest for subjectivity forces her daughter’s own birth

into subjectivity. This kind of mothering is somewhat painful to both the daughter and the mother, but ultimately frees them both from the baggage of guilt and recriminations. Chafee's account of courageous mothering leads to a love between mother and daughter that is not based on blind devotion or a relationship negotiated through a male figure, but to a true and honest recognition of each other as complex and caring people. Though Eleanor's actions disrupt the mirroring relationship, they allow for a different kind of "mirroring," one that allows each woman to show a truer reflection of self to the outside world.

Why We Have a Body delivers a new message about absent mothers. Rather than focus on tragic circumstances surrounding Eleanor's absence, Chafee examines the process of gaining independence, both on the part of the mother and daughters. To Chafee, a mother's own growth as a human is considered as important as her daughters'. Eleanor's absence is ultimately for the benefit of both herself and her children. In Eleanor's absence, she is being cruel to be kind. Without this absence, she might have easily turned into a figure like Miss Hannigan, resentful and frustrated. *Why We Have a Body* is a uniquely feminist vision of the absent mother. Chafee balances the needs of the children with the needs of the mother, citing them as equally important. While Mary and Lili find their mother's absence difficult, this is balanced with Eleanor's difficulty in staying with those daughters.

Though Chafee works to provide a new vision of the absent mother, which works against the traditional tenets of the trope, the majority of the plays examined in this chapter contribute to the patriarchal power structures supported by the trope. While the daughters contained in these plays are all sympathetic characters, the audience sympathizes with the daughters at the expense of the mothers, whose pain and frustration is never considered as important as their mothers.'

In *Annie*, patriarchal forces show themselves in the degree to which Annie's ultimate

happiness and success rely on the intrusion of a male authority figure into her life. Her young life has been molded by the world of women, but is characterized by physical discomfort and emotional abuse. When a wealthy man rescues her, her world becomes a fantasy world of comfort and affection. In the world of *Annie*, an absent mother is a tragedy that makes a young girl's life terribly difficult. However, that same girl is ultimately better off without a mother. Her dead mother willingly gave her to an orphanage, and her present-absent mother, Miss Hannigan, is an abusive antagonist. In this musical, patriarchal power is Annie's salvation, a power that is ultimately held up as a benevolent force above the harmful force of women.

My Sister in this House teaches the audience that in the absence of a mother, chaos will reign. Though Christine serves as a mother-figure to Lea in this play, her mothering morphs into a sexual relationship, a breaking of an incest taboo considered one of the most basic of social rules. In the absence of a mother, not only do Christine and Lea become lovers, but they develop into murderers with the capabilities to inflict extremely graphic and gruesome acts on other people. *My Sister in this House* can serve as a warning that mothers serve an important function in a daughter's life. She socializes them to resist incest and violence, making them productive, not destructive, members of society. The horror of the sisters' actions silently and subtly teaches mothers that being absent from her children, even if it is because of economic necessity, can be a disastrous mistake.

The most purely comedic of the plays of this trope, *Crimes of the Heart*, likewise reinforces the horrors of daughters growing up without mothers. In the absence of their mother, who chose to leave her daughters via death, the Magrath sisters have each developed emotional difficulties that make it problematic for them to contribute to society in traditional ways. Like *My Sister in this House*, one of the daughters has become violent, going as far as to shoot her

own husband. Henley's play supports the idea that daughters without mothers are destined to develop into violent, antisocial creatures. For, while Babe is the most violent sister, the others show signs of anger towards men and a withdrawal from romantic relationships altogether. The Magrath mother shoulders most of the blame for these difficulties, as her choice to commit suicide created these problems in her daughters. The message to mothers is that their absence can create huge problems in the next generation, even encourage a daughter to follow a mother's example toward suicide.

Chafee's take on the absent mother reserves the majority of its sympathy for the mother who feels absence is the only answer to combat the frustration and despair she has felt her entire life. Chafee resists the same approach demonstrated in part by each of the other plays discussed here. In creating a resistant reading, Chafee shows that a different approach to the absent mother is possible. She demonstrates that there can be a different approach to an ancient trope of the mother-daughter relationship, an approach with a hopeful outlook toward the ability of a mother to be a positive force, even in her absence.

CHAPTER SIX: FEMINIST MOTHERING

Because self-consciously feminist mothering in drama is a somewhat recent phenomenon, it has no classic paradigm. While mothers and daughters have questioned their roles throughout history and carried on their relationship in a manner we would today call “feminist,” these women largely had to strike out on their own without a definitive model. The representations that follow this feminist model of mother–daughter relationships can be characterized by their resistance to a pre-determined pattern. Rather than expecting mothers and daughters to conform to a set of behaviors and standards, the feminist model of motherhood accepts that motherhood is a messy business, full of contradictions, unanswered questions, and unexpected joys. Feminist models differ from previous models in their acceptance of such mess as the norm. Rather than expecting mothers to organize the chaos and clean up the disorder, feminist models attempt to celebrate the lived reality of motherhood, mess and all.

Though the cornerstone of feminist models of motherhood is the acceptance of ambiguities, there are several features of feminist models of mother-daughter relationships that repeat in various representations. One of the most frequently repeated tenets of the feminist model of motherhood is the acceptance of motherhood as tough work. Rather than promote the belief that women naturally possess the skills of mothering, the feminist approach supports the belief that the work of mothering is difficult and exhausting. The feminist model of motherhood is also known for rejecting patriarchal ideals of motherhood. Rather than expecting mothers to live up to the example of Saint Mary, this model works in opposition to such unachievable ideals. Instead, feminist models replace ideals with a celebration of the real experience of mothering. For such models, good mothering cannot be measured and assessed by comparing it

to ideals. Rather, the real experience of mothering is seen as a process of everyday ups and downs, an indirect and inefficient path through the wilderness of motherhood. The energy and effort required to mother are valued as they are, rather than as the means to a fantasy outcome. Above all, feminist models of motherhood resist the fantasy of uncomplicated, straightforward relationships between mothers and daughters. In reality, the mother-daughter relationship is full of obstacles and resentment, as well as intimacy and love. Representations which show only one side of such complicated emotions are ultimately one-dimensional and shallow.

When mothering daughters, feminists have the unique opportunity to transmit the ideology of feminism to a new generation. While it is true that such mothers can transmit such an ideology equally well to their sons, the call to empower their daughters in a patriarchal culture is particularly imperative. Feminist mothers have the responsibility to help their daughters learn the negotiating tactics necessary to live in a strongly patriarchal society, tactics of resistance that daughters may not otherwise learn.

Several twentieth-century feminist writers have worked to redefine approaches to motherhood that would include feminist values. Their goals were to "reconceive mothering, to create new concepts of reproducing and nurturing that will better express their own values, including their commitments to the transmission of feminism from one generation to the next and to the production and reproduction of women's cultures" (Trebilcot 1). Adrienne Rich provided such a re-definition with "courageous mothering," which she saw as an approach to motherhood impacted by the tenets of feminism.

We want courageous mothering. The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with the reductive images of females in children's books, movies, television, the schoolroom. It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. To refuse to be a victim: and then

to go on from there. (Rich 246)

Rich sees motherhood as a potential site of resistance to patriarchy. One of the changes in the feminist approach to mothers and daughters that Rich points out here is the focus on both the mother and the child as needing respect and subjectivity. She specifically speaks against allowing a mother's life to be consumed by her children, which Griffin sees as a particularly important tenet of feminist motherhood: "Another insight to fit in a feminist analysis of motherhood: the sacrifice of the mother which is supposed to be for the child's benefit can destroy the child. If the mother sacrifices her self, so does the child sacrifice a self. Her love devours the child. Her value becomes repression, her protection, dominance" (Griffin 37).

Though the feminist approach to motherhood is one of reevaluation and interrogation, feminists are still concerned with the power and health of the relationship between mothers and daughters, which can have a great deal of impact on the lives of many women. "The mother/daughter relationship is a central nexus between women: If part of the feminist insight has been that women are too often defined and understood solely in terms of their relationship to men, then it is important for us to begin to stress that women's lives are also shaped and impacted by their interaction with other women, particularly other women in the family" (Walters 7).

One of the most crucial aspects of that situation is the degree to which subjectivity is encouraged and discouraged in mothers. It is important both to mothers and their children that women are subjects and seen to be so by children. Nancy Friday writes:

What is most necessary is that the child feel her mother is for real, authentic. It is better to learn as early as possible that while mother loves us, it is not to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. If the child is encouraged to enter into collusion with mother, to pretend that the maternal instinct conquers all, both will be stuck ever after with mechanisms of denial and defense which cut them off from the reality of their mutual feelings; gone is any hope of a true relationship

between them. (7)

To Friday, the consequences of a mother without subjectivity, living only for her child, are disastrous both for the mother and her children. She encourages a questioning of the belief in the all-powerful maternal instinct as an entrance into a feminist method of motherhood.

Another tenet of feminist mothering is the belief that women occupy many different subject positions in the course of a lifetime, and that while motherhood is an important role for many women, it must be understood in the context of the many different roles a woman may occupy. Though the title “mother” or “daughter” may describe a particular role, it does not define a woman’s total existence. Kaplan relates this to her own mothering experience: “I am only a mother in relating to my child, not outside of that relation. It is precisely patriarchal culture that has essentialized and fixed the concept of "Mother" to my being-in-the-world, instead of permitting it to be a mobile part of my being that comes and goes depending on whether I am in relation or not to the child" (Kaplan 41).

Having accepted that motherhood is an institution that often serves the goals of the patriarchy, many feminists are unsure of how best to relate the goals of feminism to the role of motherhood. To Rich, there is power in motherhood that can be put towards feminist goals. “To have borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness. But also, it can mean the experiencing of one’s own body and emotions in a powerful way” (Rich 37). Rich sees motherhood as beneficial for women. She embraces the bodily experience as a path by which women can learn more about themselves and their experiences.

Rich is not blind to the potential of motherhood to serve patriarchal ends, however. “Certainly the mother serves the interests of patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion,

social conscience, and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions" (Rich 45). Though she identifies the institution of motherhood as a benefit to the patriarchy; Rich does not go as far as to declare that women should refuse to be mothers. Her view is that women should work to change motherhood so that it is beneficial to women in their quest for subjectivity. Other feminists, however, have been more vocal against motherhood itself, declaring that by mothering women serve patriarchal ideals.

Lucia Valeska is one such writer. She proclaims:

To have our own biological children today is personally and politically irresponsible. If you have health, strength, and energy, and financial assets to give to children, then do so. Who then will have children? If the childfree raise existing children, more people than ever will "have" children. The line between biological and non-biological mothers will begin to disappear. Are we in danger of depleting the population? Are you kidding? (78)

Here Valeska attempts to undermine motherhood's contributions to the patriarchy by separating the act of mothering from the bearing of children. In her view, responsible feminists should refuse to bear children biologically, and instead should care for already-existing children. To give birth to biological children would not only contribute to overpopulation, but it contributes to the belief that biological mothers are the best possible mothers for children.

Rich's perspective on feminism and motherhood is far more moderate. Instead of wholesale rejection, she sees a need for feminists who are mothers and feminists who are not to find common ground in understanding how both are impacted by the patriarchy. "The gulf between "mothers" and "nonmothers" (even the term is pure negation, like "widow," meaning without) will be closed only as we come to understand how both childrearing and childlessness have been manipulated to make women into negative quantities, or bearers of evil" (Rich 249).

Here Rich points to the need for an understanding of the institution of motherhood and how it works against both those who mother and those who do not. In her view, those who

debate over whether or not having children is against the ideals of feminism do not fully understand the divide between the institution of motherhood and the real-life experiences of mothers and their work. She is clear in her definition:

The institution of motherhood is not identical with bearing and caring for children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and sexual love. Both create the prescriptions and the conditions in which choices are made or blocked; they are not "reality" but they have shaped the circumstances of our lives [...] Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal "instinct" rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self. (Rich 42)

By no means a constant or unvarying approach to motherhood, feminism and feminists brought new political and social views to the discourse of motherhood. As their consciousness was raised, feminists began to look at not only their own work as mothers, but also the work of their own mothers and how the institution of motherhood could be viewed through the lens of feminism. Often this new viewpoint raised great passions. The institution of motherhood went unexamined until they could get past the strong emotions and lingering resentment of the socialization they went through in twentieth-century America, with which they often associated their mothers.

Walters explains why some feminists originally approached the topic of motherhood with what today seems like a decidedly un-feminist approach. "Personal experience, always the touchstone for the feminist scholar, reiterates this mixing of love, responsibility, and (all too often) blame that seems to characterize the mother/daughter relationship" (1). In her classic book *My Mother / My Self*, Nancy Friday reflects on how the personal experience of some women blinds them to the outside stresses and demands that the institution of motherhood inflicts on many mothers:

I've heard many a grown woman still lament the fact that mother wasn't home when she returned from school in the afternoon. Forget that mother may have

been a terrific role model as a professional working woman--the role model the daughter may have patterned her own career upon. Until she accepts that mother didn't have to be perfect, her childish anger will inhibit the full use of the admirable traits her mother did have. Very often for women like these, their very success in work will bring with it associations of the "bad" mother they do not wish to grow into. (11)

As the feminist consciousness grew during the twentieth century, opportunities for women in fields previously closed to them were opened. As such, women began to be more vocal in questioning whether motherhood was the best choice for them. This questioning of motherhood and their own relationships with their own mothers led many, particularly those in the emerging feminist movement, to see motherhood as a choice that competed with other life choices. "The twentieth-century, educated young woman, looking perhaps at her mother's life, or trying to create an autonomous self in a society which insists that she is destined primarily for reproduction, has with good reason felt that the choice was an inescapable either/or: motherhood or individuation, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom" (Rich 160).

In some cases, the emerging feminist movement led feminists to turn against their own mothers. As Walters has accused, some feminists were unable at first to look beyond their own personal experiences with and attitudes towards their own mothers in order to see the forces working on those same mothers. Thurer explains:

Trivialized on the one hand for their domestic work (which even a machine could do), mothers were now also endowed with the awesome power to do harm. Never considered special when they performed mothering, they were regarded as social misfits when they did not. Even their own daughters (us?) eventually turned against them, blaming them for their own subordination and failure to supply their children with the support and encouragement to become autonomous...a fine thank-you to the first generation of women who had tried so hard to be psychologically correct! (257)

The attitude of early feminists often expressed sentiments that seemed anti-motherhood. This attitude was reflected in the slogan, "It is up to women to stop rocking the cradle and start

rocking the boat.” This slogan was meant to encourage women to become activists in various aspects of society, though it had the unintended effect of creating a perceived conflict between feminism and motherhood. Of the slogan, Thurer writes, "Unfortunately, it led to an unfair caricature of feminism as motherhood hating, which has resulted in an ever sharper cultural anxiety" (265).

Robin Morgan believes the feminist approach to motherhood has changed since those early days. She celebrates this change as a positive one both for feminism and for her personally:

Since the patriarchy commanded women to be mothers (the thesis), we had to rebel with our own polarity and declare motherhood a reactionary cabal (antithesis). Today a new synthesis has emerged; the concept of mother-right, affirmation of a woman's child-bearing and/or child rearing when it is a woman's choice...It is refreshing at last to be able to come out of my mother-closet and yell to the world that I love my dear wonderful delicious child. (8)

While the approach towards motherhood has changed, the relationship of mothers and daughters has always been important and powerful for feminists. Whether speaking of their own experiences between generations of mothers and daughters or analyzing the relationship as uniquely women-centered, feminists have discussed and questioned the tenets of the relationship since its inception.

The feminist scholar who has most impacted discussions of the mother-daughter relationship is Adrienne Rich, whose *Of Woman Born* is frequently cited as one of the first times a major feminist writer examined the tensions of mothers and daughters. Of Rich's contribution to feminist thought on mothers and daughters, Walters writes,

Rich thus poses (but does not resolve) a central dilemma in rethinking the mother/daughter relationship: how to acknowledge the real and embodied sameness between mothers and daughters--the fact that we inhabit the same bodies in a world in which women's bodies are a primary site for the production of male dominance--without lapsing into a sort of feminist biological determinism

that locates our impetus for woman identification solely in our physiological likenesses. (147)

Thurer gives Rich credit for distinguishing between the real-life experiences of mothers and the institution of motherhood. As such, she is the first person to place the blame for negative stereotypes of mothers on the patriarchy and not on mothers themselves. Thurer writes,

In her passionate, ground-breaking book *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich now understood patriarchy to be the oppressor, and not motherhood, which is only a product of patriarchy. Rich distinguished between the institution of motherhood under patriarchy--with all the distortion and pain that it wrought for women--and the experience of mothering, which implied new and feminist possibilities. (265)

As perhaps the first writer to express such an understanding, Rich was able to bridge the painful and angry feelings of those feminists who blamed their mothers as causes of patriarchal dominance and a later approach to motherhood that attempted to understand the social and political realities of motherhood in the United States during the twentieth century. Rich herself addresses what she sees as a fault of early second-wave feminists in their attitude towards mothers:

It was too simple, early in the new twentieth-century wave of feminism, for us to analyze our mothers' oppression, to understand "rationally"--and correctly--why our mothers did not teach us to be Amazons, why they bound our feet or simply left us...There was, is, in most of us, a girl-child still longing for a woman's nurture, tenderness, and approval, a woman's power exerted in our defense, a woman's smell and touch and voice, a woman's strong arms around us in moments of fear and pain. [...] It was not enough to understand our mothers; more than ever, in the effort to touch our own strength as women, we needed them. (224-225)

Rich expresses a regret that early second-wave feminists did not attempt to understand their mothers' oppression, but also understands the pain and desire from the perspective of those feminists, wanting reinforcement from a mother who was not necessarily equipped to give it. As she interprets her own attitudes at the time, Rich sees the needs of many second-wave feminists as related to their own desires for closeness with their mothers. She sees a longing for a close

mother-daughter bond at the heart of the frustrations and blaming of daughters like herself.

Rich chooses to celebrate this longing, however. She writes, “The cry of that female child in us need not be shameful or regressive; it is the germ of our desire to create a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course” (Rich 225).

Of Woman Born signified the beginning of a new feminist approach to motherhood. In such an approach, what is best for the child is balanced with what is best for the parent. The subjectivity of both parent and child is considered of high importance, and that subjectivity is brought out in artistic work. Hirsch writes of the emergence of mother-subjects after the initial distrust of mothers and motherhood by second-wave feminists:

Mothers--the ones who are not singular, who did succumb to convention inasmuch as they are mothers--thereby become the targets of this process of disidentification and the primary negative models for the daughter. At the same time, however, mothers and other women increasingly appear in these novels as alternate objects of desire, suggesting other possible subjective economies based in women's relationships. Eventually, mothers begin to appear as subjects. (11)

Marianne Hirsch has identified what she perceives as several limitations in the feminist approach to motherhood. Hirsch writes, “One of the barriers to a theory and practice of maternal discourse is the feminist reliance on psychoanalysis as a conceptual framework and on the psychoanalytic construction of mothering” (167). She also believes feminists need to find a method of speaking as mothers themselves: “Until feminists can find ways to speak as mothers, feminism as a social and intellectual movement will be unable to account for important experiential differences among women” (Hirsch 196). She is hopeful, though, that a feminist theory of motherhood is forthcoming: “I believe that feminists are in the process of inventing new theories and new fictions that might be maternal without falling into essentialism that might act out the mother's contradictory double position” (Hirsch 198).

The contribution theatre has made towards this emerging new feminist theory of

motherhood relates to both the form and content of dramas that look at the mother-daughter relationship without romanticizing or pathologizing that relationship. In its contribution to feminist literature and theory, much of theatre's work has been in exploring nonrealistic forms. Feminist critics have long debated the benefits and costs of using a realist approach to drama.

They have largely concluded that realism works against feminist goals. Helen Keyssar explains:

Realism encourages us to forget the border between stage and audience; the world of the play could easily be part of our world, and we come to care about it almost as we would about our own lives and communities. Critics hostile to realism argue that realism obliterates or disguises the construction of the world—all appears seamless and 'natural,' therefore appropriate. (Keyssar 5)

The denial of a border between stage and audience leads to a complacency that works against feminist goals of activism and change. In order to inspire change, feminist theatre artists largely favor non-realistic stage forms that inspire a multiplicity of meanings. Jeanie Forte writes that realism is largely incompatible with feminist goals: "Classic realism, always a reinscription of the dominant order, could not be useful for feminists interested in the subversion of a patriarchal social structure" (20). Forte continues on the alternatives open to nonrealistic feminist playwrights:

A subversive text would not provide the detached viewpoint, the illusion of seamlessness, the narrative closure, but instead would open up the negotiation of meaning to contradictions, circularity, multiple viewpoints; for feminists; this would relate particularly to gender, but also to issues of class, race, age, sexuality, and the insistence on an alternative articulation of female subjectivity. (21)

Hirsch agrees that a truly feminist literary creation would have a different form than that of traditional realism: "If the female Oedipus is perceived to take a different, more complicated, circuitous form, then narrative structures adopted by women writers should reflect some of these complications" (Hirsch 102).

In the plays that follow, the approach is largely non-realistic. Mark Reed's *Yes, My*

Darling Daughter, while more realistic than the others, takes a comedic approach. The somewhat realistic form is used to foreground a debate over the values and beliefs of first-wave feminists. In Megan Terry's *Calm Down Mother*, the form of the "transformation" is used, a form created by Terry. Here, three women embody many different characters on a stage bare of setting. In Karen Finley's *Theory of Total Blame*, the form is highly nonrealistic and episodic, with scenes broken up by "religious conversions" enacted by each character. In the discussion of these plays, the relationship between mothers and daughters becomes a site of negotiation of feminist ideology, a negotiation that involves both form and content. Through such representations, these playwrights attempt to forge a new model of motherhood that embraces equal value and respect for mother and daughter.

Mark Reed's 1937 play *Yes, My Darling Daughter* depicts the trials and tribulations of a mother and daughter impacted by the mother's involvement in the first wave of American feminism. The Murray family is headed by Lewis and Ann Whitman Murray. Ann is a writer and former suffragist whose youth involved living the bohemian life in New York. In her youth, Ann took lovers and lived a liberal existence among her friends. Her role in the suffrage movement inspires her daughter to refer to her as a "famous feminist." Lewis is far more conservative than his wife, though the two appear to be deeply affectionate. Together they live a fairly upper-class existence. The play takes place in their summer home.

Ann and Lewis have two children. Their son is absent from the play. He is in Canada serving as a children's camp counselor. Their daughter is Ellen. She has recently graduated from college and hopes to become a journalist. Like her mother, Ellen is a writer, though her political views are much more conservative than Ann's. Ellen is somewhat tomboy-ish. As the play opens, she is reading large books while sitting in the family's parlor, dressed in denim

overalls with bobbed hair.

Several other characters join the Murrays at their summer home in the course of the play. Connie is Lewis's younger sister, who has recently returned from Reno after her third divorce. Mr. Jaywood is a literary agent who is going to sell Ann's most recent story, and who is her former lover from her time spent living in New York as a young woman. Douglas Hall is Ellen's boyfriend, a young man who works at an architecture firm, but who is about to leave his job in architecture for Belgium, where he is to work for two years selling razor blades. He hopes that his time in Europe will help him attain financial independence so that he and Ellen can marry.

The plot of *Yes, My Darling Daughter* revolves around Ellen's decision to spend the weekend alone in Douglas's company. She was supposed to spend the weekend with friends, but arranges to go off with Douglas. Though Douglas initially resists the plan, their imminent separation of two years convinces him they need the time together, since during that time they will have no opportunities to be together.

The major conflict occurs when Ann learns of the couple's plan to spend the weekend alone together. She originally tries to prevent the plan from coming to fruition, but after debating with her daughter, decides it would be hypocritical, considering not only her politics, but also her personal history, to forbid her daughter from leaving with Douglas. When others find out that Ann has not prevented her daughter from spending the weekend with Douglas, her mothering is called into question. In particular, Ann's relationship with Lewis is severely impacted. The situation created by Ellen's absence during the weekend leads the rest of the house party to be wholly honest about their opinions on motherhood and Ann's life choices in general, opinions which are generally less than complimentary for Ann.

Before she learns of her daughter's plans for the weekend, Ann's attitude toward her

daughter is one of indulgent acceptance. While Connie expresses a desire to see Ellen behave in a more traditionally feminine way, Ann prefers to allow her daughter to develop as she chooses, though Ann accepts Connie's advice. When Connie asks if Ann would mind a suggestion, Ann responds, "I'd welcome one," implying that she is not convinced of her own infallibility as a mother (Reed 20). The advice Connie gives is related to transforming Ellen into a feminine young woman: "If she were my daughter I'd rush her tomorrow to some good beauty consultant, then to a really intelligent dress-maker" (Reed 20).

Connie's concern for Ellen is closely related to her opinion of Ann's life. Connie says to Ann, "All I say is that it's a shame to let a girl with so many possibilities develop into a freak, maybe a crank" (Reed 21). Ann responds, "Like her mother" (Reed 21). Though Connie attempts to explain to Ann that she meant no offense, it is clear that Connie sees Ann's youth as misspent, and that she sees her sister-in-law as sadly unfeminine. As far as being a "crank," Connie says to Ann, "Anyway, you're not *now*. Since you married Lewis, you've been growing more feminine steadily" (Reed 21). Since Lewis and Ann have been married for over twenty years, Ann's slow progression into femininity inspires her to laugh at Connie's encouraging words.

Ann's apparent disinterest in transforming her daughter from a book-worm into a debutante could possibly be interpreted as a disinterest in mothering in general, but such an interpretation isn't really borne out by the play. Ann is clearly interested in her daughter and cares deeply for her, but her opinion on how to mother is different than that of others. She believes she should respect her daughter's choices.

When Ann learns of Ellen's plan to go away with Doug, she has a crisis of conscience. She is unsure of what to do for her daughter, and doesn't feel their relationship is one of her

imposing her will on her daughter. When she makes the decision to confront Ellen about her plans, Ann says, “You know, dear, up to the present moment, you and I have always got along very well without my ever having to fall back on the fact...the fact that I’m your mother...” (Reed 53). She is preparing herself to “mother” her daughter in a fashion that is uncomfortable for Ann, a fashion that calls for Ann to make decisions for Ellen that are for her “best interests,” though Ellen may not agree.

When Ann begins to hint to Ellen that she already knows about Ellen’s plans, she tries to get Ellen to confide in her. At first she attempts to forbid Ellen from leaving with Douglas, then she attempts to reason with her against the course of action. Ellen refuses to be handled in such a way, and eventually declares that what she chooses to do with her own personal life is none of her mother’s business. To this declaration, Ann argues:

You just get that idea out of your head, Ellen. You are my business. You and Roger. True, I’ve puttered around a little the past twenty years at writing and lecturing; but my real thought and my real concern have been over you and Roger. You’re all I have to show for my life. That’s why, when half my business gets it into its head to go into bankruptcy, I feel I do have something to say about it. (Reed 57)

Here, it is clear that Ann has begun to espouse some rather conservative views on sexuality and motherhood in the years since her bohemian youth. She sees her children as her life’s work, though she has served as a leader in social movements. She also declares that her daughter would go “bankrupt” by spending the weekend with her beau. Such beliefs are contrary to those Ann has espoused in her own life. Ellen points out the hypocrisy of Ann’s forbidding her daughter to do what she herself did in her youth, but at first has no luck in convincing Ann to relent.

Ellen’s argument to her mother is passionate about her desire to exercise the rights and privileges her mother fought for as a suffragist. As part of her senior thesis, Ellen has researched

her mother's life and discovered that Ann once lived with a beau, whom she eventually identifies as the Mr. Jaywood staying in the house that weekend. Ellen is appalled that in her attitude toward her weekend with Doug, Ann has become "some ordinary conventional matron." Ellen wants to exercise her private life without Ann's interference, which she sees as the cornerstone of what her mother fought for. She argues, "That's the whole point, Mother! That's the principle you fought and struggled for! That's what Connie and all the rest put in practice! And now when a perfectly decent emergency arises, when I want to take advantage of the very thing you worked for, you say 'naughty-naughty!'" (Reed 63).

Though Ann attempts to convince Ellen that her own situation was different, Ellen accuses her mother of hypocrisy. Ellen is hurt by her mother's attitude, saying to her, "I counted on you" (Reed 64). She declares that she will be going away with Douglas with or without her mother's approval. In the face of her daughter's conviction, Ann asks to meet Doug and refrains from expressly forbidding her daughter to leave or in any way letting Doug know that she knows about the planned affair. After meeting Doug and being convinced that he's a trustworthy young man, she says to her daughter, "Ellen, I'm a fool; but then I always was. I'm going to stick to my principles. Go off with this boy. My dear, I give you my blessing" (Reed 73). In order to be a "good" mother, Ann must compromise her feminist principles. Ann sets feminist ideologies and the ideology of the saintly mother against one another. She is redefining what makes a good mother, by following her own feminist inclinations instead of the patriarchal definitions of good mothering.

Ellen receives her mother's blessing with relief, but gives Ann one last chance to forbid the weekend. Their conversation shows a deep affection and concern for each other's feelings:

Ann: Well, then go quickly before I regain my commonsense. Go. Climb hills. Walk hand in hand under the stars. Make love. This may be your one great hour

on earth. Go. I'll stand by you.

Ellen: Oh, Mother, I won't go...if you say I shouldn't!

Ann: Get out of here...quick!

Ellen: [...] Good-bye. Oh, Mother, I never realized how much I loved you!

Ann: Ellen, dear...it's all right. It's all right. Don't let a thing worry you. I'll stand by you. (Reed 75)

Ann's repetition of the promise that she will stand by her daughter shows that though Ann may not absolutely agree with Ellen's decision, she supports Ellen's right to make that decision. She is concerned for her daughter's emotional safety, but trusts that Ellen can make good decisions for herself. Likewise, Ann wants Ellen to experience the joy of youth and infatuation. Though her acceptance is contrary to the day's social rules, Ann is willing to stand against those social rules in order to give her daughter the chance to guide her own life.

Shortly after Ellen leaves with Douglas, Ann experiences guilt and second thoughts. She says of herself, "I'm not a fit mother to bring up a decent girl" (Reed 75). She then goes on to question the motivation behind her capitulation to Ellen's demands. She says that she is selfish, and that she could not bear to lose her daughter's respect. Her questions over whether or not she did the right thing do not allow her to betray her daughter's confidence, though. While Ann may be experiencing second thoughts, she still tries to withhold from Lewis the fact of their daughter's affair. Her attempts fall flat however. She is unable to keep her husband in the dark, and confesses that not only has Ellen gone off with Douglas, Ann did not try to stop her. Lewis' reaction is outrage, and he questions his wife's suitability as a mother:

Lewis: Ann, are you crazy? Did you let a girl of twenty-two talk you into a thing like this? You should have stopped her, if you had to tie her. Don't you love her?

Ann: Of course I love her.

Lewis: That's a pretty way to show it.

Ann: Ellen has exactly as much right to love as you have yourself. All we can do, as parents, is prepare her to exercise that right intelligently and decently. In fact, our work is over. (Reed 87)

However, Lewis is unconvinced by Ann's reasoning and continues to be disgusted by her

permissiveness towards Ellen's sexuality. Lewis begins to question whether marrying Ann was a good idea, and brings up the resistance to the match expressed by his own father: "I can hear him now. 'So, Lewis, you don't mind if the mother of your children is a woman of loose morals'" (Reed 89). Ann defends herself against the charges of loose morals, but Lewis continues to rail against Ann's perceived moral lack. He says, "I can't understand. I should think when Ellen found she had a mother like you..." (Reed 89). That Lewis refers to his wife as "a mother like you" shows he has deep seeded negative opinions toward his wife. Though Lewis may appear to be a liberal thinker in marrying a wife with a colorful and unconventional past, he is still conservative enough to hold that same past against his wife. That his attack on his wife takes the form of complaints against her mothering skills shows the degree to which feminism is thought to be contrary to motherhood. Ann's past feminism has not made her a bad *wife* in Lewis' estimation, but it has made her a bad *mother*.

The second act ends with Lewis leaving the household amid the apparent collapse of his marriage. In the third act, the weekend has ended, and the household awaits the return of Ellen and Douglas, as well as Lewis, and the fireworks that are sure to fly when the family reunites. Mr. Jaywood reveals that Lewis has spent the weekend arranging for a minister to marry his daughter and Douglas. Such news works Ann into a lather of resentment and anger, and she recommits to her feminist leanings: "He feels moral, that's what he feels...superior, capable of leading the entire female sex back to the Gay Nineties. The idea of his trying to marry Ellen off like some wanton! I feel the old militant spirit surging within! I'm going to strike a blow for feminine emancipation on the top of Lewis' head that will..." (Reed 102).

Ann's speech shows that she clearly associates her support of her daughter with her responsibilities as a feminist activist. She defends her daughter as she would defend any of her

peers' rights to privacy and self-fulfillment. Though she personally worries for her daughter and questions what is the right advice to give her, she does not question her feminist values. Those feminist values do not prevent Ann from being extremely sensitive to Ellen's feelings. When Ellen is about to return from her weekend away, she tries to convince Lewis to delay his insistence that Ellen and Douglas marry. In doing so, she makes the only overt reference to Ellen's sexual development in relation to her weekend with Douglas: "Lewis, dear, don't you realize Ellen has undergone a rather...how shall I put it for your correct ears...a rather revolutionary physical experience since Friday?" (Reed 105). Her concern here is for her daughter's feelings and trust. While Lewis appears most concerned with society's censure and his own perception of right and wrong, Ann's attention is consumed with how best to welcome her daughter back without judging her decisions and being sensitive to her changes.

In choosing to go away with Douglas for the weekend, it is clear that Ellen is taking after her mother. Lewis accuses Ann of being proud of her daughter for the choice she has made, and Ann responds that she is indeed proud of her daughter, "I am. She's beginning to be a person in her own right" (Reed 106). To this pronouncement, Lewis is still resistant, declaring that Ann is only proud of her daughter because Ellen has "made the free-love team." After this, a truce of sorts is achieved between Lewis and Ann until Ellen returns.

In the end, Ann encourages Ellen to take a job in Europe so that she may be close to Douglas as he works in Belgium. Though it appears Ellen and Douglas will marry and live near each other in Europe for two years, Douglas' willingness to stay with Ellen is questioned. When he learns that Ann knew of their weekend and did not prevent it, he demands, "What kind of a family is this?" (Reed 122). His distaste for Ann's liberalism is clear, and Douglas is not keen on marrying into a family with such a permissive mother. He expresses anger at Ann and even

asks, “What kind of a woman are you to serve a man tea when all the time you know he is running off with your daughter? Where were your motherly instincts?” (Reed 125).

It is ironic that Douglas, much like Lewis, has taken it upon himself to give Ann mothering advice. Ann is the only actual mother in the play, yet the other characters are constantly telling her the best way to mother. Here, Douglas implies that Ann’s “motherly instincts” should have led her to prevent Ellen from accompanying Douglas for the weekend. Previously, Lewis had implied that Ann’s maternity should naturally have led her to forbid Ellen’s sexual development. Even Connie advises Ann to feminize her daughter. The advice of these two figures is ironically conflicting. While Lewis believes Ann’s natural mothering instincts should have led her to prevent her daughter’s sexual development, Connie’s advice would have Ann lead her daughter into a more conspicuous femininity, to the end of making her more sexually appealing to men.

Each character’s attempts to advise Ann’s mothering not only make it more difficult to determine what good mothering is, but they show that each is subtly critiquing and judging Ann’s job. As a group, they believe Ann should spend her mothering energy on grooming Ellen to be useful to the patriarchy. Connie thinks Ellen should be groomed into an object of the male gaze, while Lewis and Douglas think Ellen should be guided to embrace patriarchal social rules. Though she does not declare her method of motherhood to be perfect, Ann follows her own feminist inclinations in dealing with her daughter.

At the end of the play, Ellen has become more like her mother than she ever was at the beginning of the play. After learning that feminism allows her to develop as a sexual being and an independent thinker, she seems much more supportive of her mother than she was in the beginning of the play. Then, when she spoke of writing conservative articles while her mother

wrote liberal ones, Ellen seemed to largely disagree with her mother's politics. However, learning about her mother's youth and experiencing her mother's support has brought the women closer together, even as it causes tension in the relationship between Ann and the rest of the family.

Though the tenets of feminism are responsible for the increased closeness of mother and daughter in Reed's play, the overall view towards feminism is far from clearly positive. Reed's attitude to feminism appears rather mixed. While he portrays Ann in a positive light, he is far from endorsing or celebrating her politics. As the only person in the play to defend her decision to allow her daughter to decide her own sexuality, Ann's feminism isolates her ideologically from her husband and the rest of the family.

In speaking about her own liberal beliefs, Reed has Ann confess at one point that her permissiveness toward Ellen's weekend away is not a result of Ann's feminism, but instead because she is afraid of her daughter's displeasure. In making Ann second-guess her feminism in this scene, Reed implies that first-wave feminist activists are not wholly committed to their work, but are instead concerned with the opinions of others. As such, Reed questions Ann's commitment to her movement. The ideology behind Ann's support of her daughter becomes not feminism, but a maternal need for approval. This apparent change of heart on Ann's part is questionable, however, because as the play continues there are no other hints that Ann is acting under any ideology but feminism.

In the final act of the play, Ann's commitment to feminism appears strong. There are no more suggestions that she is more concerned with her daughter's affection than she is with her feminist ideals. Instead, Ann speaks of her pride in her daughter's independence, and Ellen's ability to make responsible choices. Though Reed questioned Ann's veracity toward her politics,

he also allows her to reinforce those politics as the play draws to a close.

Reed's contrasting approaches to Ann's feminism may appear schizophrenic, but it also reflects the internal struggle Ann feels towards her job as a mother. Ann wishes to be true to her feminism while doing the best thing for her daughter. She sees a conflict in the interests of these two when it involves Ellen going against social rules. Ann ends up encouraging Ellen's disregard for those rules. She is unsure whether it is best for her daughter to resist the rules, but decides that what is best for her daughter is to allow Ellen to make her own decisions, a choice on Ann's part that stays true to her feminist ideology. Reed honestly reflects the conflict women feel when trying to be both "good" mothers and "good" feminists.

Though Ellen and Douglas end up destined for marriage, that conclusion is far from satisfying. Instead of celebrating the marriage, the play undercuts audience expectations by being disappointing. Ellen will marry a man who is quick to judge mothers and rejects Ellen's feminist inclinations. Douglas does not respect Ann's feelings and decisions, and will not respect Ellen's if she were to make similar decisions without his consent. While the play ends by upholding Ann's feminism, it is likewise ambivalent about Ellen's future happiness. Reed resists giving the audience a wholly satisfying conclusion to the play, undercutting the possible romance of Douglas and Ellen.

Nearly thirty years after the debut of *Yes, My Darling Daughter*, Megan Terry premiered *Calm Down Mother*, another play that examines feminist mothering. *Calm Down Mother*, a one-act play first performed in 1965, is what Terry calls a "transformation." The play is for three women, who embody a total of seventeen roles and enact several vignettes with only four chairs. The vignettes seem at times completely random and unconnected, but are bound together in a thematic exploration of what it means to be a woman, what limitations are placed on women, and

how the body impacts these definitions. Victoria Sullivan and James Hatch see the play as an exploration of female identity:

In this play the three women go through a series of short sketches focusing on female identity, or lack of identity, playing various archetypal female roles. The underlying theme linking these sketches is that anatomy may be destiny, that women's bodies define their role, that "bellies" and "eggies" are the essential female elements. By giving this idea vivid life on the stage, Ms. Terry reveals its fearful limitations. (xii)

The theme of motherhood, as well as women's connections and disconnections with mothers, weaves itself throughout the scenes of Terry's piece. None of the scenes are specifically about motherhood, but motherhood is both implicitly and explicitly examined through the relationships the women discuss, as well as their attitudes toward their bodies and conception. Terry refrains from romanticizing the relationships between these women or the motherhoods they discuss. Instead, she shows that there are no absolutes. In these vignettes, Terry shows women who both connect with and reject one another, just as they connect with and reject their own bodies.

As the play begins, a disembodied voice explains the fates of three one-celled organisms in the primordial ooze. During this voice-over, the three actresses are clustered together in the attitude of a plant. While these actresses stay in this pose, the voice over describes the three organisms as they are pushed around at the whim of the tides. It is not until the three cells unite that they are able to take root and resist being drawn back by the tide.

The suggestion Terry makes here is clear: it is through combined effort that women are strong enough to "take root" to resist the social tide of the patriarchy that abhors resistance. However, the utopian idea of "united we stand, divided we fall," is overturned when the voice describes, "A tornado uproots and splits the plant. Two parts fall away. One stretches toward the sun" (Terry 279). Such division would appear to be the end of cooperative strength, and

therefore a death-knell to women's hopes of a united front, however, one of the actresses shows the possibility for hope when she breaks out of the plant formation and declares to the audience: "I'm Margaret Fuller. I know I am because... 'From the time I could speak and go alone, my father addressed me not as a plaything, but as a living mind.' I am Margaret Fuller. I am Margaret Fuller and I accept the universe!" (Terry 279).

Thus, in the first minutes of the play, Terry shows how the division, though harmful to the utopian unity of the plant, gave birth to Margaret Fuller, the woman sometimes credited with being the first American feminist. This symbolic vision of cohesion and division, resulting in the birth of the feminist idea, is the overarching theme of Terry's work. By dramatizing various relationships between women, Terry shows women alternately joining together and dividing, but always raising questions about what it means to be a woman, and how being a woman impacts one's place in society.

In the first vignette after the introductory scene of division, the three women portray a scene in a delicatessen. The sisters Esther and Sophie work at the deli, and a nineteen-year-old girl comes to the store to purchase beer. Sophie is immediately taken with the girl's hair. First she compares the girl's hair to her mother's, and then to her own hair, which has mostly fallen out due to adverse reactions to multiple surgeries. Esther is disgusted by Sophie's vanity over her largely missing hair, but Sophie continues to speak in loving tones that oscillate between her memory of her hair and her mother's. In describing her mother's hair, it is clear that Sophie had a very intimate and sensual relationship with her mother: "But her hair! My mother's hair went in points from here. One point right here and then back and so wavy. Wavy here and here and here. And then it came to a little point in the back. I used to comb it for her when she took her bath. Here, give me the comb, let me do it for you" (Terry 281).

Sophie's clear memory of the minute details of her mother's hair, as well as her desire to reenact the combing of that hair with the girl, show a bodily memory of her mother. As it will be in further scenes, the body is brought to the fore here. Sophie describes her mother's hair and skin with details that make it clear she has had bodily contact with her mother, and takes comfort in these memories.

This focus on her mother's body in relation to Sophie's own honors the feminist focus on the body as a site of knowledge and power. Sophie's mother's body is a powerful thing for her daughter, and their bodily connection continues to be a powerful site of identification for Sophie. The connection to the body is so strong that it continues even to her mother's death and beyond. As Sophie describes her mother's dying and dead body, she describes a cycle of caring for her mother's hair and skin that goes until the end:

I had skin like her, too, till the blood pressure...And then I'd wash her back.
And...I did. I did it for the last time. Her skin and her hair. I'll never forget the
last time, before they put her in her silk...before they laid her out you know...and
everyone came from all over the neighborhood...her hair...wavy like
yours...points...from here...to... (Terry 282-283)

This speech precedes a movement piece in which the three women are emitting a "mournful hum" and stroke and comb each other's hair. This joint expression of mourning and pain over the loss of a mother bonds the women and allows them to express the pain of lost love and the lost bodily connection to mother.

This scene moves directly into a short scene in which the women express anger and a desire for violence. Woman Two wishes that the anger others direct at her were less powerful, while Woman One expresses a desire to lash out with physical violence: "I want to hit" (Terry 282). Woman Three instead expresses vulnerability: "Lay bare every part of your limited life. Maybe you could force your life to grow into lives" (Terry 282). Woman One and Woman Two

then gang up on Woman Three, beating her down to the ground.

Woman One and Woman Two become Nancy and Sally. Sally is a recently divorced woman who has moved into a new apartment. Nancy is her friend who has come to inspect the new apartment and to reassure herself that Sally is dealing well on her own. When it is clear to Nancy that Sally will not take her husband back, she begins to confide in Sally. She begins by saying, “Sal, I’m going to fall apart” (Terry 284).

That she is about to fall apart is unusual for Nancy. Sally responds to her declaration by jokingly calling Nancy “Stella Dallas,” referring to one of cinema’s most famously sacrificing mothers. Nancy then describes herself as the “bulwark of the family. The fight settler. Held Sister together through divorce. Settled Granddaddy’s estate. Got Jorgensen into State Assembly. Oh, Christ, Sal...hold on to me...I can’t any more...” (Terry 284).

The dramatization of Nancy’s breakdown occurs on stage. She looks for solace from her friend, and both her breakdown and Sally’s sympathy are highly emotional and impactful to the audience, which is watching a heartbreaking scene. Nancy explains what has precipitated her break down:

Mother...it’s “terminal bone cancer.” Sal, it’s not fair. It is *not* fair. She’s such a fighter. My God, she began a whole new career when Dad retired to his bottle of booze. No training, only her guts...good taste. Do you know she knows as much about fashion as I do? She always knew. She knew how to see. She *knows* how to see. [...] Such a fighter. Like me. No, I’m like her. (Terry 284)

The scene becomes increasingly emotional as Nancy explains that she is prevented from going to her mother in her mother’s last days:

I was going to take the next plane, but the doctor talked me out of it. You see, if I suddenly appear—you see—she’ll think it’s the end. If the children all swoop home and stand around the bed, it means, in her mind, she only has hours left...I can’t go to her until it really *is* the end. Oh God, Sal, how am I going to stand it? I’ll be dying for her every day, every goddamned day from now till...till... (Terry 285)

Nancy's expression of her own pain and grief is followed by an embrace between the friends, which ends the scene.

Nancy's pain comes not only from grief over the imminent loss of her mother, but from her inability to go to her mother in their time of need. Along with her mother, Nancy is suffering, but she is also concerned for herself, for she is suffering along with her mother. The pain she feels as she is prevented from being near her mother is palpable to the audience, and expresses an intimate and meaningful relationship.

The relationship Nancy describes is not only clearly very emotionally rewarding to her, but clearly a relationship of respect, as well. Because she first characterized her mother as a fighter, she implies that part of her love for her mother comes from her respect for her mother's ability to succeed amid very difficult circumstances. Her mother has not crumbled under the pressures of living with an alcoholic, and to Nancy this shows her mother's mettle.

The difficulty of being apart from her mother at this time appears to be the most difficult part for Nancy. She wishes to sympathize with her mother as her mother's health declines, but also needs her mother to help comfort her. Nancy expresses a desire for mutual comfort, but is prevented from doing this by the advice of the doctor. Thus, Nancy must suffer through her mother's illness with only the sympathy of friends like Sally for help.

As Sally and Nancy embrace, Woman Three rises from her position on the floor. She walks into a new scene, in which Woman One and Woman Two play nursing-home inhabitants, with Woman Three as their nurse. Though the two elderly women, Mrs. Tweed and Mrs. Watermellon, seem to be partially senile, they speak in tones that suggest a nearly poetic language. Mrs. Watermellon's opening lines contain the highly evocative phrase, "The world is waiting for the sunrise, and I'm the only one who knows where it begins," (Terry 285) which

suggests that, though the world may see them as senile, these women still have a firm command of language, which they use both to evoke lyricism and to attack each other.

Mrs. Tweed and Mrs. Watermellon have a brief discussion of menstruation, a physical process they clearly no longer go through at their advanced ages, but that they see as important and meaningful. Mrs. Tweed asks, “Where does it begin then?” to which Mrs. Watermellon responds, clasping her breast, “Here, right here, right here it starts. From the old ticker it starts and pumps and pumps and pumps around and thumps around, coagulates in my belly and once a month bursts out onto the ground...but all the color’s gone...all but one...all but one...” (Terry 286). Mrs. Tweed responds to this with, “You shouldn’t think of such things. Woman a’ yore age” (Terry 286).

Mrs. Watermellon’s characterization of menstrual blood is both sentimental and joyful. Though we aren’t told what the “it” is of which Mrs. Tweed wants to know the origin, but since the previous conversation had dwelt on the passage of time and the secret of a sunrise, it seems likely that “it” is equally profound for these women.

The menstrual blood that Mrs. Watermellon describes as “bursting” forth onto the ground once a month is first characterized as the blood of the heart. In making this connection, Mrs. Watermellon celebrates menstruation. The same blood that pumps through a woman’s heart and makes her life possible also makes it possible for her to incubate new life if she should so choose.

Mrs. Watermellon also seems to find a childish joy in the idea of menstruation. She luxuriates in the words “thump” and “pump,” repeating them and rhyming in a playful way that suggests menstruation for her is not entirely about the profound experience of motherhood, but is also somehow a joy-filled expression of a woman’s body. This most commonplace function of a

woman's body is for Mrs. Watermellon worthy of both reflection and celebration.

Mrs. Tweed's response to Mrs. Watermellon's speech shows a much different view of menstruation on her part. Mrs. Tweed thinks her friend shouldn't even think of "such things," much less celebrate them so openly. Mrs. Tweed seems to think that, because they are post-menopausal, they should give up any thoughts or memories of menstruation. Whereas Mrs. Watermellon still has the connection to menstruation, Mrs. Tweed does not, and has no desire to keep such a connection.

The two women proceed to bicker and insult one another, and into this row comes the Nurse. The nurse acknowledges these women only as bodies that are falling apart. She does not celebrate these women's bodies or experiences at all, and instead is patronizing towards the women. She brings them cream of wheat for their meal, and in a mechanical voice declares, "Time for your creamy wheat. Time for your wheat. Your cream's all gone. Time for the heap the wheat's all dry" (Terry 286).

While the verbiage is somewhat stylistically stilted and elementary, the nurse effectively represents the view that, because these women are past their child-bearing years, they are useless to society. With the phrase, "Your cream's all gone," the nurse seems to be calling to attention the inability of these women to lactate at their ages, which gives way to the next phrase, "Time for the heap." The phrase "time for the heap" implies that if the women cannot produce "cream," they should be cast away. Their use value to society is gone once their ability to produce children is gone. Though a harsh statement about women's childbearing and its relationship to society, Terry is here examining the notion of the menopausal woman's relationship to society. She uses the character of the nurse to voice the patriarchal belief that a woman's worth is tied directly to her ability to give birth.

From this they transform into three prostitutes, preparing themselves for a night of working in a lush apartment. Momo, Felicia, and Inez bicker among themselves over their relationship with their pimp, Ricky. Inez in particular is very upset with Momo for not turning all her money over to Ricky. Inez sees this as very risky behavior and steals Momo's money to give back to Ricky. As Inez and Momo fight, Felicia says to Inez, "Calm down, mother" (Terry 288).

Terry's naming of her play after Felicia's line is ironic. Though the other scenes show women in touch with their bodies and trying to cope with their interpersonal relationships, Terry names the play after the only scene that shows no cohesion among women. This is a scene of division, much like the opening scene of evolutionary division.

These three women use motherhood as a sarcastic tool. Calling one another "mother" or "mommie" is not done from affection, but to call out one of them who seems to be placing herself in a position of power over the others. The three women even enact a sexualized mother-daughter scene:

Felicia: (*Throws herself in Inez's arms*) Oh, Momma baby, mommie, mommie.

We won't fight. We won't do it any more. We didn't mean to get you mad.

Inez: I should blister you till you couldn't sit down.

Felicia: (*Turns her bottom up for spanking*) Do it. We're bad. Bad, bad girls.

Momo: (*Nearly on her knees—she does the same*) Bad, bad, bad, we should have a spanking. (Terry 289)

This sexualized banter between the women undercuts any fantasy of mother-daughter relationships that may have seeped in from other scenes. In this scene, mothers are figures of power, control, and discipline, but also of ridicule.

The attitude towards the body and procreation is completely different here than in the previous scene. Whereas Mrs. Watermellon's nostalgic celebration of menstruation saw the body and bodily functions as inspiring joy and life, these three women are largely divorced from

their bodies. They are very matter-of-fact about their job and their birth control. Momo says to Felicia, “Why you get so nervous whenever we have to ball a gang? It isn’t as if you never did it before” (Terry 287). These women are so matter-of-fact about their bodily involvement in their career that any hesitation to be the sexual object of many men at once only brings forward accusations of weakness.

From this harsh vision of three women without nostalgia for their bodies the play goes into the final scene, in which Sue, Sak, and Ma are washing dishes together and talking. Sak and Sue, who are sisters, begin a conversation on birth control, a topic particularly political in 1965, while their mother occasionally chimes in with her views. Sue begins the scene by setting down a magazine she had been reading and declaring, “All this birth control jazz. Who’re they kidding? Being mad if you don’t let a baby happen? That old dame Mother Nature does it every month—and look, Ma, no rubber!” (Terry 290).

Though her sister and mother do not immediately grasp Sue’s point of view, she goes on to explain that if Mother Nature decrees that menstruation should occur every month, it is really Mother Nature that is limiting fertility and “casting thy seed upon the ground.” Ma and Sak are rather agitated by Sue’s strong opinions on this front. They follow closely the tenets of their unnamed religion in this case, and feel that birth control is against the teachings of the Christian Bible. Sue, however, saves some of her greatest complaints for religious authorities who teach that birth control is wrong: “Who the hell are all these guys on platforms to say you can’t take pills, you can’t use rubbers, down with vaseline, out with diaphragms, who the hell then are they? For God’s sake. They’re all preventing life!” (Terry 290).

The mother-daughter relationship in this scene is an important one for the play. This is the only scene where a mother and daughters are directly embodied. Their relationship is

troubled, however, by the very topic of motherhood and the prevention of that state. Sue's impassioned plea for the acceptance of birth control, which she reveals she herself practices, is also an impassioned plea for the choice of motherhood. To her own mother, who did not have the same choices as her daughter in regards to motherhood, Sue's sharp words about those who oppose birth control may seem like a rebuke or reprimand.

Thus, the cycle of a mother raising a daughter who will become a mother in her turn seems disrupted. Though Sue does not reject the possibility of future motherhood, her attitude clearly shows that even if she mothers, she comes from a different point of view than her mother. Terry has here dramatized a clear conflict between generations with conflicting ideologies. Sue sees the primacy of her own choice whether or not to have children as more important than a religious fear of damnation. Her resentment of the religious figures her mother respects so highly is clear:

So if God sees fit to flush them down the pipe every month if they don't meet up with an electric male shock, then who the hell are these priests and all to scream about pills and controls? Tell me that! Who the hell are they? They want to save my eggs till they can get around to making them into babies, they can line up and screw the test tubes. [...] And you two! You sit there in the church every Sunday, kneeling and mumbling and believing all that crap that those men tell you, and they don't even know what the hell they're talking about. (Terry 292)

This direct attack on herself and her religious beliefs offends Ma to such a degree that she demands Sue pack her bags and leave the house.

Terry's dramatization of such a conflict between mother and daughter demonstrates both the tension between different ideologies and a daughter's emerging independence from the ideology held by her mother. Sue is no longer comforted by religious authorities, as is her mother. When their two ideologies collide, Sue chooses the ideology that upholds the body, whereas her mother chooses the ideology that upholds her organized spirituality and justifies her

life. Their inability to find common ground or to respect their differences tragically divides the women, forcing one to move out of the home.

The detachment of Sue, however, brings the play back to the beginning image of the one who breaks away to become Margaret Fuller. In this instance, Sue is likened to the Margaret-Fuller character who is born out of division but goes on to be a great thinker, philosopher, and activist. Though the division from her mother and sister cannot help but be painful to Sue, it is a necessary step in her growth into an individual with a feminist ideology.

Sue's division is immediately followed by the ending image of the play. The three women face the audience and chant about their "bellies," "bodies," and "eggies," while placing their hands alternately on their bellies, sides, and breasts. They chant the words before ending with, "The eggies in our beggies / Are enough / Are enough / Are enough. / ARE THEY?" (Terry 293).

Terry's ending question asks the audience to reconsider the relationship of women's bodies and bodily functions to their lives. While not negating the importance of "bellies" and "eggies" to women, this play asks the audience to come up with a definition of woman that includes more than bodily functions. She leaves the audience contemplating the organs of pregnancy and motherhood. However, if the ability to become pregnant is "not enough" to define a woman, Terry suggests that motherhood does not define a woman, either.

The feminist message of Terry's piece is that the mother-daughter relationship can be beneficial and supportive for both mothers and daughter, but it isn't always so. Mothers and daughters are prone to the same tensions as other interpersonal relationships. Likewise, motherhood and daughterhood should not be used to define and thus limit the lives and potential of women. One can celebrate the physicality of women, as does Mrs. Watermellon, but to only

look at the body of woman as a definition ignores the experiences of Momo, Inez, and Felicia, who have a completely different relationship to their bodies and childbearing capabilities. Terry shows that there is a vast spectrum of relationships women have to motherhood and their bodies. As a feminist, she strives to allow each relationship to demonstrate its significance, without silencing any.

Twenty years after *Calm Down Mother*, Karen Finley investigated motherhood through a feminist lens with *The Theory of Total Blame*, which premiered in 1989. In this play Finley explores several dynamics of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship through the characters of Irene and Jan. Irene is the single mother of four grown children, whose husband attempted suicide and is now in a coma. Finley's text describes Irene as "the matriarch. She's had a hard life and alcohol is her self-prescribed reward for making it through the day" (223). Irene's behavior and attitudes are often strident and angry. She speaks in a manner that is shocking in its blatant disregard for the conventions of warm and supportive motherhood. She can be violent in both action and word, but is eloquent in speaking about her place as a mother and the place of mothers in society.

Jan has a history of violence and victimization, and a tense relationship with her mother in the present because of this. Jan describes a childhood rape and a subsequent child she then gave up for adoption. During the time of the play, she is married to Jack. Though Jan's history of victimization might lead one to see her as a tragic figure, Finley does not, as seen in the description of the character Finley gives in the published version of her play: "She wears outdated clothes. One of her characteristics is that she always eats food that is color coordinated with her outfit" (223). Instead of giving sympathy to the character of Jan, Finley attempts to describe the general indifference of society to women's victimization.

One of the themes Finley takes up in *The Theory of Total Blame* is the contrast between the social myth of the perfect mother and the reality of the relationship between Irene and Jan. Irene vacillates between a harsh reality and ambivalence towards her children and a performance of “mother” based on the cultural ideology that says mothers should be warm towards their children and express their love and devotion.

In showing this contrast, Finley begins the play with an appearance of familial love on the part of Irene. Irene’s first line is a toast to her family: “It’s so nice to finally have the entire family together” (Finley 225). She then continues, “It is so nice that you were able to come home for the holiday” (Finley 226), before she tells her daughter she’s never loved her, and tells her to stop whining about a childhood rape and the subsequent baby Irene forced Jan to give up for adoption. Her next words blame Jan’s rape on Jan herself: “That’s what the family is here for! You made a mistake and we took care of it. I only wish it had happened now so that we could have sold the little brat” (Finley 226). The warmth Irene shows by celebrating the family’s togetherness is undercut by her verbal abuse of her daughter and the callousness she shows towards her daughter’s past experiences.

Irene then returns to her performance of maternal devotion and sacrifice. When Jan becomes upset with her brother Ernie for not waiting for their mother before sitting down to their meal, a short interchange shows Irene embracing mistreatment from her children:

Ernie: Because I’m a chauvinistic pig, that’s why.

Irene: And I like it.

Buzz: Ma, get me some milk.

Jan: Ugh! DAIRY! Didn’t living in Tibet teach you anything? I hate the way you treat Mom like a slave.

Irene: But I like it. A mother stops being a mother once she stops being needed. (Finley 228)

This passage shows how Irene’s sons, Ernie and Buzz, treat their mother as a servant. Though

Jan is disgusted by how they treat their mother, Irene embraces that same mistreatment as a reinforcement of her own maternity. Ernie and Buzz have defined their mother as a person who is there for their own convenience. Irene has also defined herself in this way. She likes that her son is a chauvinist and treats her with blithe disregard. She equates her sons' "need" with being a mother. The reality is that these same sons do not express that they need their mother so much as they express their desire to have her serve them. However, for Irene such service has become equated with her sons expressing their need of her. Thus, Irene defines a mother as a woman who performs menial labor for her sons.

By exposing this treatment of Irene and the equation of mother with menial servant, Finley criticizes such treatment. By describing Ernie as a chauvinist and Buzz as a possible enslaver of his mother, Irene's sons are criticized. However, Irene is also criticized for taking such behavior in stride and doing nothing to stand up to her sons or re-define herself as a mother without such treatment being necessary.

Finley also uses scenes of family dysfunction to comment on motherhood in American society. Irene's family is a site for an exaggerated vision of family dysfunction and confrontation. The family often calls to mind the antics of a Jerry Springer-like reality television show. They live in a state of constant confrontation with each other and the past. Each family member describes severe emotional distress, and together they describe a family that has been impacted by illegal drugs, rape, suicide, violence, abuse, alcoholism, incest, repressed sexuality, and emotional distance. As such, the extent of the family's dysfunction becomes so exaggerated as to have little traction with the audience. Instead, it becomes largely symbolic of a social dysfunction which manifests itself with violence towards women, mistreatment of mothers, and the demand that men repress their emotions and sexuality.

The exaggerated dysfunction is still a powerful tool to impact the audience on a visceral level, despite the fact that it is mostly symbolic. In particular, the raw description Jan gives of her sexual assault and the harsh response given by her brother and mother show this:

Jan: My insides were ripped open with a beer bottle by three Catholic priests on a pool table—

Ernie: So the night belongs to Michelob? So what else is new? All women go through that rape stuff.

Irene: Do you hear yourself? Lots of women get raped so get used to it, huh? (Finley 244)

It is difficult for an audience to hear of such a vicious assault and be as blasé as are Irene and Ernie. However, those familiar with Finley's work would know that she often speaks of violence against a woman in detailed and unedited prose in order to use it as a metaphor for violence against women everywhere.

This technique of Finley's work is evident in a performance piece, *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, inspired by the case of Tawana Brawley, a sixteen-year-old girl who was found in a trash bag in New York, alive but covered in feces. She claimed that she had been raped by a group of white police officers. Ms. Brawley was accused of making the story up, and the whole story became clouded in speculation and accusation. The abuse Ms. Brawley had clearly suffered throughout her young life, as well as the image of her covered in feces, inspired Finley to create a performance piece. Finley describes the piece:

I smeared my body with chocolate, because, I said in the piece, I'm a woman, and women are usually treated like shit. Then I covered myself with red candy hearts—because, “after a woman is treated like shit, she becomes more lovable.” After the hearts, I covered myself with bean sprouts, which smelled like semen and looked like semen—because, after a woman is treated like shit, and loved for it, she is jacked off on. (Finley, “Different,” 84)

Here Finley treats Brawley as an allegorical figure for the treatment of women in American society, a treatment she sees as inherently victimizing and invasive of the body.

Finley's treatment of the character Jan belongs to this general technique of Finley's work. Jan is a victim many times over, which stands as a comment on sexual assault and violence against women. However, the violence Jan describes does not control the play. Instead, this victimization quickly loses its traction in *Theory of Total Blame* as it becomes clear that each of the characters is a victim of something, and the sheer amount of violence and victimization overtake Jan's victimization. Eventually, her victimization turns on Jan, as she becomes mostly defined by the victimization of her rape and the subsequent indifference of her family. Within the confines of her family in this play, she cannot grow beyond the assault.

Another major theme in *The Theory of Total Blame* is that of scapegoating mothers for the problems of their children. In his introduction to the play, Michael Feingold comments on the character of Irene, which Finley herself played in the original production: "The mother as tragic archfiend, the ultimate victim and perpetrator of the family as societal trap. It's probably as close as American playwriting can get to a work of the stature of Medea. Finley has no inhibitions about writing and playing such a monster, because she knows that monsters are not of their own making" (Feingold 219-220). It is often social and economic conditions that are ultimately at the root of monstrous motherhood. Social conditions and gender norms can contribute to a monstrous mother through thwarted dreams, as in the case of Regina from *The Little Foxes*. Economic realities can increase the stresses of an already stressed mother, causing her to resent her daughters because they are the roots of such stresses, as in *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*. Irene suffers under all of these conditions, but unlike the monstrous mothers, Irene is given far more time to explain her point of view and question the root causes of her anger and frustrations.

As the "archfiend," Irene seems the easiest person to blame for her entire family's woes.

She willingly accepts blame for many things, though she clearly chafes at taking on blame for things she truly doesn't believe to be her fault. In the first minutes of the play, Irene says to Jan, "I've always intended to make your life as miserable as possible" (Finley 227). Such a statement cannot help but come off as humorous. It calls to mind an adolescent accusing a parent of deliberately ruining his or her life. In Finley's work, Irene willfully admits that it is indeed her life's work to make her daughter miserable. Because she is such an abrasive character, the audience may be tempted to believe Irene, but it becomes clear later on in the play that Irene has many other concerns and problems, and has not had the time to really devote to making her daughter's life a ruin.

As her children repeatedly use the words "blame" and "your fault" to their mother, Irene responds by alternately accepting the blame in the same way she accepted being treated as a servant by her sons, and questioning the very notion of that blame. Her acceptance of the blame, however, is not total, for in that acceptance lies a resistance to the demand that it is a mother's job to accept blame and scapegoating by her children. To her daughter's tirade, Irene responds,

I accept the fact that your life was my fault, all my fault. It's a mother's profession to take the blame for her children's psyche—even Jesus blamed the Virgin Mary, Prince Charles blames Queen Elizabeth. It's in the mother's contract—the unwritten, unspoken contract—generation after generation. And it's your job to blame me, your mother, for your successes, your faults, and your problems. Just accept the game plan since I blame you. Yes, I blame you for the fact that having children is the reason why I never accomplished anything in my life. It's a nice trade-off. (Finley 241-242)

Here, Irene's response to being her children's scapegoat is both acceptance and rejection. Here Irene gives what might be called the "Theory of Total Blame." Blame is total because it is both accepted and rejected, as well as reciprocated. It is also total because it encompasses both failures and successes. In Irene's theory, the mother stands as the central figure for not only her children, but for society to focus their blame.

In a philosophical moment, Irene attacks those who place so much stock in blaming as a useful pastime: “I hate people who have to rationalize suffering, to know a reason to blame on everything. They just can’t accept that bad things happen to good people. Because if they did they’d be out of control” (Finley 233). Irene’s defense and questioning of the role of blame falls on deaf ears when it comes to Jan. Jan continues to blame her mother for all past wrongs, including things she did and things she didn’t do. In one particular instance, Irene defends herself against Jan’s accusation. Here, we see Irene’s attempt to turn her daughter into a successful woman by trying to raise her to conform to standards of femininity that would help Jan interact with the patriarchy, but would keep her largely without power:

Jan: You never held me. You never gave me confidence!

Irene: No one loves a smart woman! Why give you confidence when the only real opportunities for women are biological opportunities? Who are we? Our father’s last name? Our husband’s last name? And if we change it we’re asked “why?” If we don’t assume our husband’s last name we’re considered arrogant and dogmatic. (Finley 242)

Here, we see Irene defending herself. While Jan blames her mother for not instilling confidence in her daughter, she should be blaming a patriarchal structure that often demands women be passive instead of confident and active. Irene might have taught her daughter to fight against such structures, but it is likely she would then be blamed for instilling a false sense of equal opportunity in Jan. Here, Irene is caught between two conflicting demands of raising a daughter, and no matter what she chooses she will be held to blame by someone. This echoes back to Ann in *Yes, My Darling Daughter* in demonstrating the constant negotiations of direction and choice feminist mothers must face.

Eventually, Irene reacts against the blame being leveled at her and she ends the family reunion she had praised in her first lines in the play. She clears the house of her children, yelling, “I knew one day it would come to this! You’d all blame me! I’ve been waiting for this

moment for years! Get out of my house! Get out of my house! [...] You blame me. ME the widow, the wicked witch! Well, get out of my house. All of you!” (Finley 252).

Throughout all of her children’s accusations toward their mother, from the suggestion that she caused her husband to shoot himself, to her purposeful sabotage of their confidence, the children never attempt to see things from their mother’s perspective. She remains a mother to them, but never a person in her own right, who has her own problems and desires. She is castigated for being an alcoholic, but her children do not look beyond that behavior to the possible causes in Irene’s own life experiences. That information she gives to the audience, with “I deserve the right to drink. No one else rewards me for going to work every day. No one else goes to work like I do. I clean this damn house. I had five kids, three miscarriages, and one abortion. I’ve been a mother, a whore, and a slave. I’ve been needed, rejected, and desired but never valued by any of you” (Finley 233-234).

Here, Irene reveals that not only does no one see her as a person with desires equal to her children’s, but she is wholly unappreciated. Finley uses Irene’s words here to expose a common lament of working mothers. There is no appreciation for the everyday work they do, such as going to work and cleaning the house. Her children are more than willing to blame their own unhappiness on their mother, but they do not take the time to examine the totality of their mother’s contributions to their lives. In response to Irene’s call for appreciation, Buzz returns, “get straight and stop blaming your fucked up life on us” (Finley 235).

Such moments of Irene commenting on the role of mothers constitute another major theme in *The Theory of Total Blame*, that of looking beyond the role of mother to the woman who fills that role. Irene’s children are not interested in seeing their mother as a woman, and so they make no attempt to understand her. It is left to the audience to hear Irene’s own story and

construct a picture of her that is not wholly defined by her motherhood. If the audience can reach the character through the harsh and angry words she often speaks, it can see a much more vulnerable woman, who was herself a victim of sexual violence.

Part of understanding the character of Irene comes from understanding past experiences that have shaped her life in the present. She speaks of her childhood by describing the horror and anger of being a victim of sexual abuse. “My father was fucking me without guilt before you were even born. The rest of my life I wished I was ugly—so I slashed my face with razor blades and I drugged myself so I couldn’t feel” (Finley 236). Irene’s story here shows the degree to which she responds to pain by lashing out in anger at herself. She speaks not of slashing the person who abuses her, but her own face. Such actions speak of an intense self-blame and anger at being abused, and give hints of how Irene has become, in the present, a woman who responds in many instances with anger and self-destructive alcoholism.

Irene is aware of her own alcoholism, and even the extent to which it is self-destructive:

Why should I pretend to stop drinking? For the children? Shit, they’re the reason I drink! My so-called daughter hasn’t called me in years for my so-called life-style—who cares if my decisions are intoxicated, liquor motivated, no one cares, no one listens. No one cares about me. Why should I care about me? Let’s see how low they’ll let me fall before they’ll let me up—besides, I can stop whenever I want to. And you know children, as soon as they’re in trouble they call on you to bail them out. (Finley 232-233)

Though she is clearly feeling sorry for herself and casting blame onto her children for their indifference, Irene’s words are still powerful. Her children show no care for their mother, so cannot really expect her to show care for herself. Irene’s own self-worth is dependent on the worth reflected to her by her children. Without it, she is waiting to hit rock bottom, so she may get a morsel of attention. However, she knows that she will get her children’s attention the moment they need her, even though it is withheld when she needs it for her own sake.

The emotions Irene expresses here are part of the greater emotional tapestry of Finley's play. Though the anger may seem to the audience the only palpable emotion, Feingold sees a more complex interrelation of emotions in *The Theory of Total Blame*:

Finley's cubist version of a family, its alternative versions all interpenetrating, is a loving and thriving unit at the same time that it's a record of endless disasters. It's just that the loving side isn't the most immediately visible, since the characters openly speak their subtexts, their places in the social scheme, their Gestalts, in lieu of the usual platitudes.... Every line and gesture that demolishes the conventional view of family life, with outrageous humor or even more outrageous horror tales, is really a cry in the dark, a plea for family life—and the social organism of which families are the cells—to be put on a sane, humane basis. (219)

Irene and Jan are complicated characters. Though they seem at times overwhelmed by their anger and little interested in their family members, at the same time, they express love and concern for these same people. For instance, Irene claims to be dedicated to making Jan as miserable as possible, yet spent several days making Jan's favorite vegetable dish for their reunion. Jan accuses her mother of being a selfish, hateful woman, yet defends her to Irene's sons when they treat her like a servant. Each time these characters seem irredeemable because of their constant attacks on each other, they undercut those attacks with small gestures of love and affection.

Perhaps the greatest source of anger in Irene's life is the treatment of women, particularly mothers, in American society. "This country is so cruel to women having children—the ability to have a child is the end of a career. The men planned it that way. You never see a Kennedy or a Rockefeller being a surrogate mom. The sooner you realize that women are second-class citizens, the better off you'll be" (Finley 226).

Here Irene focuses her anger on the institution of motherhood itself. She sees a patriarchal conspiracy to keep women from gaining the power of the Rockefeller or Kennedy

families. The conspiracy she sees is intended to keep power in the hands of men, while mothers do the work that makes such an imbalance of power possible.

Irene extends this anger toward the mistreatment of women in general: “The Chinese had it right—KILL ALL THE GIRL BABIES! Then when there are no more girl babies left maybe the men will miss us—but probably not—all they’ll miss is raping us and dinner on the table. As soon as they learn how to make babies in test tubes, we’re a goner!” (Finley 242). Irene has illuminated the use-value of women in a harsh evaluation of the patriarchy. She sees women as useful only for menial work and motherhood. Such anger shows that Irene clearly wishes that the institution of motherhood itself would change, so that women would be valued as mothers, rather than be relegated to motherhood as a job befitting their powerless status. Irene’s anger echoes that of many mothers who see themselves losing jobs and respect because they have become mothers, even though motherhood is, on the other hand, demanded by the patriarchy as a powerful thing.

Finley ends *The Theory of Total Blame* with a poem called “The Black Sheep.” This prayer/poem is intended to demonstrate Irene’s religious conversion, and manages to take the powerful anger Irene has shown in the play thus far and put that energy towards compassion and caring. In this poem, Irene/Finley extends compassion toward the audience members who belong to what she calls the “Black Sheep Family,” those who, “appreciate differences in culture / believe in sexual preferences / believe in no racism / no sexism / no religionism” (Finley 254). She speaks of a powerful desire to be inclusive rather than exclusive of the Other, and continues:

We’re related to people we love who can’t say
I love you Black Sheep daughter
I love you Black Sheep son
I love you outcast, I love you outsider
But tonight we love each other
That’s why we’re here

to be around others like ourselves
So it doesn't hurt quite so much (Finley 254)

By addressing the audience as fellow members of the Black Sheep Family, Irene/Finley creates a community in the theater, ending the play on a note of hope and acceptance for both performers and audience. In doing so, Finley doesn't undercut the strength of the anger she expresses with Irene, but instead allows the audience to take both that anger, along with a message of hope, with it as it leaves the theater. In giving the audience this avenue to return from the world of the theater, Finley leaves the audience with a message that they should not feel pressured to create families, because being a mother or father is not the only way to create a valuable life. "Black Sheeps' destinies are not in necessarily having families, / having prescribed existences / like the American Dream. / Black Sheep's Destinies are to give / meaning in life—to be angels, / to be conscience, to be nightmares / to be actors in dreams" (Finley 256).

The Theory of Total Blame shows a strong feminist inclination in that it refuses to give an easy answer to the questions raised about the relationship between Irene and Jan. Instead, it explores the difficulties and complexities of the relationship without romance or nostalgia. Finley uses her play to question the place of women in society, as well as society's attitude towards mothers.

The model of feminist mothering is one that continues to emerge as a recognizable form of mothering with unique characteristics. Each of the plays explored in this chapter contribute to this emerging model. As the feminist model continues to form through repeated representations, each incarnation contributes new dimensions to the characteristics of the model.

Yes, My Darling Daughter belongs among other representations of the feminist mothering model because it embodies the unique struggles of a feminist mother when she is forced to make a decision that may pull her loyalties in different directions. Ann Murray

represents the kind of woman who is attempting to forge her own personal mothering style. While others give her advice about how to form her daughter, Ann struggles with how best to mother, knowing that the advice she hears from many different directions may not actually be in her daughter's best interests. She bravely diverges from received knowledge to stay true to her own inclinations as a feminist. Even though her own daughter does not begin the play ascribing to those same feminist principles, Ann feels she must stay true to her ideals. In doing so, she brings Ellen to a feminist point of view.

The struggle between what Ann believes society is asking of her as a mother and what she is asking of herself as a feminist is one that features strongly into the model of the feminist mother. *Yes, My Darling Daughter* contributes to the feminist mothering model by characterizing the mother-daughter relationship as complicated and multi-layered. Ann Murray is never lost as a person because she is a mother. She is ultimately celebrated as a woman who is brave enough to stand up for her belief system, and who models that same bravery to her daughter.

Calm Down, Mother again demonstrates the complexity of mother-daughter relationships. In this piece, the emotions of mothers and daughters are explored and celebrated, while simultaneously bringing notions of the body and motherhood to the fore. This work contains scenes of daughters remembering the body of their mother, a daughter facing the loss of her mother, and a mother who rejects her daughter because of conflicting values. In all scenes, relationships among women are complicated and diverse.

The question Megan Terry's work most wants the audience to embrace is the final line of the play: "The eggies in our beggies...Are enough...ARE THEY?" (293). She questions whether a woman's reproductive capabilities are enough to define her. Terry's play suggests that

motherhood is a powerful aspect of a woman's life, but that a woman has many more facets than the one of motherhood. Terry ultimately celebrates the maternal, but with her final question she calls for that celebration to lead to greater explorations. Terry contributes to the emerging model of the feminist mother by merging the celebration of motherhood with questions about its place in women's identities.

In *The Theory of Total Blame*, Karen Finley explores feminist motherhood in a completely different tone than that of either Reed or Terry. Finley's perspective on motherhood is explored through anger and violent imagery, which contribute to a complicated viewpoint on how mothers are treated both at home and within a patriarchal society. Through the character of Irene, Finley shows a mother who is alternately strident, abusive, and self-sacrificing. Fully conscious of the blame she has been assigned for her children's disappointments and failures, Irene rejects this blame and casts it back onto a patriarchal society that devalues mothers.

Finley's play gives a new tone and dimension to the emerging model of the feminist mother. Whereas *Yes, My Darling Daughter* and *Calm Down, Mother* ask the audience to celebrate feminist mothers and question the centrality of motherhood in every woman's life, Finley takes a different approach. She *demand*s that the audience witness the struggles of a mother who is furious over her treatment. Irene attacks, through word and deed, old models of motherhood that require self-sacrifice and blame mothers for the actions of their children. Finley confronts the audience with Irene's anger and frustration. In doing so, she contributes a unique style of feminist mothering, one that attacks and confronts traditional motherhood models.

From the example of these three representations, it is clear that the feminist model of mothering supports a complicated view of the mother-daughter relationship, allowing for disparate views of mothers' attitudes and emotions. These plays are alike in their desire to

represent a form of mothering that allows for both mothers and daughters to express the spectrum of their emotions, including the anger and frustration they often feel. The feminist model of motherhood allows for mother and daughter to develop as separate and equal subjects. Though they are not free from conflict, they are able to struggle through their conflicts and obstacles in order to reach a place of common understanding.

The feminist model of motherhood has the potential to change the face of mother-daughter dramatic and theatrical representation. While other models celebrate a form of the mother-daughter relationship with pre-determined conflicts and outcomes, the feminist model embraces a form of the mother-daughter relationship far closer to the real-life experiences of most mothers. In celebrating the everyday difficulties of the mother-daughter relationship, like Ann Murray's decision to allow her daughter to have premarital sex or Irene's frustration over maternal blame, the feminist model of motherhood reinforces the everyday work of mothers everywhere. Though other models of motherhood embrace the ideal and prototypical, the feminist model celebrates the frustrations and difficulties as valuable.

The feminist vision of the mother-daughter relationship is a powerful one. While other models ultimately support patriarchal beliefs about women and mothers, the feminist model rejects those paradigms, looking for a way to represent mothers and daughters in a way that respects their everyday struggles and triumphs. To the women in the audience for these plays, there is no lesson about how to be a perfect mother or warnings about the consequences of bad mothering. Instead, there is an attempt to give a body and voice on the stage to the awesome and awful work of motherhood. Such representations have the power to change the way the audience looks at motherhood, perhaps bringing newfound respect and appreciation for the work of mothers.

Representations of the feminist model of motherhood have the potential to change the way women are represented on the stage. Instead of following old patterns of behavior, the feminist model creates new precedents and new outcomes for the mother-daughter relationship. By staying true to the mothering experiences of real women, this model allows for esteem and admiration of women's work and lives. The work of mothering becomes valuable and important, and mothers themselves become everyday heroes.

CONCLUSION

Representations of mother-daughter relationships have the power to deeply affect the way women are perceived in American society. As a relationship that focuses attention on women and their intimacies, the mother-daughter relationship has the potential to be a concentrated site for an investigation of how women are perceived and treated. As such, it is an important place to look for a full understanding of the status of women, both in the realm of society and the realm of the stage.

The use of tropes to represent the mother-daughter relationship has severely constrained the potential of that relationship to be represented in a manner that refrains from reducing it to a handful of psychic processes and emotions. Through these reductions, women themselves have been reduced. Instead of embracing and exploring the glorious mess of motherhood, the tropes all too often clean and reorganize that mess into neatly understandable and predictable patterns of behavior. Such repackaging is fundamentally dishonest, however. The mother-daughter relationship is complex and unique, comprised of a complicated knot of emotions and possibilities. All too often, representations fall into the trap of repeating old patterns with predetermined results, ignoring these complexities. This is not the end of the story, however. There is room to resist reductive tropes and patterns, particularly in the world of the stage. Because of its very nature, the theater is a place where resistance to those reductions can be fully explored and performed. In the plays I have examined in this project, each trope has contained at least one play that works to complicate the simplicity of the mother-daughter relationship as described by the trope.

The saintly mother trope depicts mothers who sacrifice pieces of themselves for the sake of their daughters. In some cases, the mother literally gives of herself, as in *I Remember Mama*

when Mama gives up her comfort in the warm coat and *Steel Magnolias* when M'Lynn gives up her kidney to her daughter. Sainly maternal sacrifice can also be more symbolic, as when Anne Hereford gives up her ambitions in *He and She* so that she may spend the summer with her daughter. While these sacrifices may appear selfless, they also have a darker side. By celebrating such sacrifices, it is implicitly declared that a daughter is more important than a mother. Audiences who watch these mothers sacrifice and receive praise learn that the best mothers are ones who give up their own comfort and desires. Their goals are of less value than those of the next generation.

In reclaiming the saintly mother trope so that it can be used toward goals other than the patriarchal, it is important to look beyond the behavior of the saintly mothers to the causes behind the actions they take and the expectations with which they live. The expectation to sacrifice as a mother is so great that a mother cannot live outside of the demand that she surrender things for her daughter. Thus, a mother can feel obligated to forgo her comfort and dreams for her daughter, simply because such behavior is expected of mothers. Feminist revisions of the saintly mother ask why such sacrifice is seen as positive when the mother is relinquishing things she holds dear. Because the focus is so often on the daughter, a switch in focus to the mother stands out, as in *He and She*. In this reclaiming of the saintly mother trope, the tragedy of a mother losing her dream is presented to the audience as an answer to a daughter's troubles that is dissatisfying at best and infuriating at worst. By refocusing the trope onto the mother, feminist revisions ask the audience to reconsider a mother's sacrifice in light of what is given up by the mother instead of what is gained by the daughter. This refocusing can lead to the conclusion that a sacrifice is not always a positive expression. In fact, it can often be a pointless sacrifice that does far more harm for the mother than good for the daughter.

The trope of the mirroring mother portrays women as strongly connected through a series of interwoven and interdependent psychological processes. These processes are created chiefly because the two figures involved in a mother-daughter relationship are women. In the woman defined by psychoanalytic processes, the most important role toward a daughter is to prepare her to leave home and become a married woman with children of her own. However, this same trope declares that a mother gains her own identity from being mirrored by her daughter. Thus, this trope is chiefly concerned with the tasks and emotional turmoil through which a mother must pass in order to separate herself from her daughter. The chief goal is to separate a daughter from her mother so that the daughter can become bonded with a husband or lover figure.

The view of women the mirroring trope maintains is one in which mothers and daughters are closely and emotionally bonded, a bond that is doomed from the very start. In the mirroring trope, women are slaves to their psychic processes, and cannot help but go through the development outlined by some psychoanalytic theorists. Such processes do not allow mothers to intellectually or emotionally recognize their daughters as separate beings, nor do they allow the daughters to see themselves as separate from their mothers.

Resistant readings of representations of the mirroring motherhood trope reinterpret the causes behind the closely bonded mother and daughter, divorcing the closeness from the perceived psychoanalytic causes. To feminist revisionists, the close bond between women should not necessarily be destroyed, though they do recognize that enforced closeness is rarely beneficial. In resistant readings, the closeness of mother and daughter can be celebrated without resorting to psychoanalytic models. In this way, the mother and daughter can avoid the competition and smothering relationship the mirroring trope determines they must experience.

In *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*, the daughter mirrors her mother's life in that she ultimately follows its same pattern. The relationship between mother and daughter is not uncomfortably bonded, however. The two women evince some aspects of the mirroring mother trope, but do not follow into a pattern of recriminations and mutual devastation. Instead, the daughter achieves happiness by returning to the house and company of her mother.

Resistant readings of the mirroring mother trope embrace the bond between women as a positive element of mother-daughter relationships. Rather than seeing this bond as threatening or a sign of future tension, the bond between a mother and daughter can be represented without resorting to old patterns of psychoanalytic distress.

The monstrous mother trope portrays women as destructive, caustic women who devour their daughters out of spite and anger. This trope often represents women as brutal creatures who turn on their daughters and husbands with violence, often to the point of murder. Representations of monstrous mothers reflect a patriarchal fear of mothers' power over their children, as well as their potential to channel that anger into the destruction of others. In patriarchal versions of monstrous mothers, any anger is shown to be devastating. While real-life mothers may have a great deal of legitimate anger caused by a multitude of sources and frustrations, in monstrous mothers, that anger is shown to be illegitimate, with few justifiable causes.

Many of these mothers seem frustrated over their inability to gain power outside of the home and family sphere. In *The Little Foxes*, Regina Hubbard Givens is perturbed when her father's will writes her out of the family's financial affairs. Regina, who has the business acumen and sharp intellect to be the leader of the family, is forced to the sidelines as her brothers run the family. To the Hubbard men, Regina is only valuable as a woman who can increase the

family's holdings by uniting her daughter in marriage to a cousin. A sympathetic reading of *The Little Foxes* can see Regina as a woman who has been made monstrous by patriarchal demands and proscriptions. She wishes to put her energies into business concerns, but is prevented from doing so by patriarchal social norms. The anger that results from such demands wears on Regina, creating a deep resentment that is projected outward toward her daughter and husband.

In reclaiming the trope of the monstrous mother, various techniques can be used. One, illustrated by the above approach to *The Little Foxes*, is to approach the play with a deliberate sympathy toward the mother, uncovering and exposing the patriarchal constructs that contribute to a mother's monstrosity. Another technique for resistance is to use a mother's anger itself to draw attention to the trope as a construct. As in *The Theory of Total Blame* and *The Verge*, the overwrought, excessive amount of anger some mothers voice becomes hyperbole, an anger so over-the-top that it seems a performance of anger rather than an emotion. In each of these cases, the anger still feels real and powerful, but its ability to stand as a destructive tool is lessened. Here, the hyperbolic anger focuses attention on the mothers themselves and the reasons for their anger, rather than on the daughter as the recipient of the vitriol. In underlining that these mothers are angry for legitimate reasons, though their anger seems alienated, it can still be a powerful tool in reclaiming the monstrous mother as a figure for resisting patriarchal norms. The monstrous mother possesses, more than any other motherhood trope, a readily noticeable potential power. This power, seen in her anger and propensity for destruction, shows that mothers can channel a great deal of power and dominance when they are able to focus that energy.

The absent mother trope often focuses on the daughter, forced to live apart from her mother, presumably the only woman who can unravel the mysteries of the universe for her and

set her onto the path to the heterosexual economy. The anxiety created by this trope is rooted in patriarchal fears of mothers breaking away from the social constructions of the family, forcing the patriarchy to reorganize the family as it has been traditionally known. Besides such anxieties, the absent mother trope also suggests that in the end, daughters are better off with absent mothers.

One feature of absent mothers that has rarely been explored in representation is the degree of power inherent in absence. By removing themselves from traditional mother-daughter relationships, absent mothers change the nature of the equation. Though their purposeful abandonment and absence from their daughters can be painful and difficult for daughters and mothers, the problems an absent mother creates makes obvious many of the ideologies and constructs involved in a mother-daughter relationship. As such, the absent mother serves as a focal point for demonstrating the ability of a mother to seize power by removing herself from patriarchal social institutions.

Why We Have a Body takes advantage of this power by embodying an absent mother who gains power over herself and knowledge of feminist struggles by abandoning her daughters. In Eleanor we find a mother whose path to subjectivity and independence from inherited notions of femininity begins with her absence. Through abandoning her daughters, Eleanor has the power to create an entirely new woman.

This power is likewise disruptive and potentially destructive. By refusing to fill the motherhood role as it is defined by patriarchal norms, absent mothers have the power to upset the status quo. Without her work as a mother, other solutions to the need for mothers must be found. A mother's ability to cause havoc with the status quo is a unique form of power, one that often lies dormant and unused, but is always present. An absent mother invokes this type of power

whether she wishes to or not, by throwing those left behind into a scramble to re-orient the world in her absence.

By invoking the powerful figure of the absent mother, feminist theatre practitioners seize the potential in the figure to help re-define the role of mother. As a character who is never easy to define or control, the absent mother represents a figure whose potential to undermine patriarchal family structures makes her dangerous.

The model of feminist mothers and daughters is defined by its resistance to patriarchy and the characteristics of uniquely feminist visions of mothers and daughters. In these visions, the needs and dreams of mothers are equally important as those of daughters. Feminist mothers resist the definition of mothers provided by the patriarchy:

The mothering typical of patriarchies helps to perpetuate hierarchical societal arrangements in a variety of ways: women are required to give birth only to children of their own race; mothers are required to make children conform to gender roles according to biological sex; mothers are expected to transmit the values of the dominant culture, whatever they may be, to their children, and more generally, to teach their children to be obedient participants in hierarchy; and women are expected not only to reproduce patriarchy in children but also to care for the men who create and maintain it. (Trebilcock 1)

By deliberately working against patriarchal definitions of mothers and the mother-daughter relationship, the feminist model begins in a position of resistance to other tropes and the traditional modes of representing the mother-daughter relationship they often embrace.

As one analyzes the tropes of mother-daughter relationships, it becomes clear that there is room for non-feminist plays to become feminist, through the act of resistant reading and resistant performance. The reclamation of such plays is an ongoing project for feminist theater practitioners who wish to use the means of the theater to explore women's relationships and how those relationships impact and are impacted by the social milieu around them.

Each of the tropes I have used in this analysis has unique ways to undermine patriarchal authority and control. Through the use of a resistant reading and the tools of the theatre, each trope can be maneuvered to become an examination of the tenets it might appear to support. Because in the theater the words and actions of the mothers and daughters in these representations must be portrayed on the live bodies of women, there is the potential in these portrayals to use the body to convey different meanings than the words themselves may appear to convey. The speaking aloud of the words in a script can vastly change the lines given to actresses to speak, as their inflections and tones can make the potential meanings of a play nearly infinite. The potential for dissonance between patriarchal words and a feminist embodiment of those same words makes theater a particularly rich site for resistant readings of the tropes of mother-daughter relationships.

Other techniques, many of which are characteristically embraced by feminist theatrical practitioners, can be used toward the goal of finding new ways of approaching representations of mother-daughter relationships. For instance, a Brechtian technique would lend itself handily to the resistant performances of many of these plays. In such an example, Brechtian alienation techniques would be used to distance the audience from the highly emotional relationships many mother-daughter representations rely upon for impact. Instead of focusing on the daughter's tragedy or the mother's self-sacrifice, a Brechtian approach would work toward focusing the audience on the social, political, and economic powers that influence the mothering decisions and behaviors of the women in these plays. Caryl Churchill is one theatre artist who particularly excels at this use of Brechtian techniques. In her play *Cloud Nine*, she alienates the audience through Brechtian acting techniques and performative, rather than representational, staging. In doing so, she calls to attention the degree to which the mother-daughter relationship is a

construction based on social rules and expectations. In *Cloud Nine*, she uses a doll to represent the daughter figure in the first act, calling the audience's attention to the fact that the character does not speak or act. The doll-daughter is controlled entirely by those around her, making a powerful statement about the lack of power allowed women in a patriarchal society.

Another potential theatrical technique would be to use hyperbole to explode a trope by portraying it in a nearly camp-like manner. By making, for instance, a monstrous mother seem ridiculously monstrous, the audience can begin to perceive a new vision of a monstrous mother. When such hyperbole is used, the audience begins to perceive the monstrous characters as almost machine-like in their behavior. By exposing a motherhood trope to such a treatment, a portrayal has the potential to call the audience's attention to the trope as a constructed entity, potentially undermining a trope's ability to appear to the audience as natural or inevitable. An excellent example of this technique occurs in Christopher Durang's *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls*, a spoof on *The Glass Menagerie* in which the character of Laura is replaced by a young gay man whose mother pressures him into receiving a "feminine caller." Through the use of camp, Amanda's obsession with finding her child a mate is shown to be absurd. Durang's spoof highlights the degree to which Amanda completely misunderstands her child, a misunderstanding that is the result of willful ignorance. Durang uses humor to ridicule Williams' mother-daughter relationship. In his play, rather than show fading, delicate women, Durang plays with gender to show how absurd such stereotypes are.

Through the use of such techniques, theatre artists can continue to explore and interrogate how the mother-daughter relationship is represented on the stage. There are high stakes to such explorations, because that relationship is a microcosm of American beliefs about the nature of women. In the tropes explored here, women are seen as greedy, competitive, and violent, as well

as sacrificing, indulgent, and ruled by emotion. In the few feminist representations, women are seen as far more complicated. They possess all of these emotions and more, but struggle openly with the difficulties and complications of maternity. If women are to be represented in ways that support women's continued move toward equality in American society, stage representations of the mother-daughter relationship must move away from traditional tropes. Either these tropes must be explored through new lenses and perspectives, or they must be abandoned in favor of the feminist model. The stakes of the representations of mother-daughter relationship are high. These representations have the ability to support or counteract the views of women these tropes maintain.

The feminist model has the ability to change how the mother-daughter relationship is perceived. This model celebrates the struggles and achievements of everyday mothers, including the internal debates and battles mothers occasionally feel. By allowing for such ambivalence and indecision, the feminist model esteems mothers. Instead of blaming mothers or holding them up to impossible standards of behavior, they are valued for the work they do and the contributions they make to American society. This change in our approach to the mother-daughter relationship can empower women. Instead of limiting the potential of women by constraining the mother-daughter relationship, the feminist model allows women the unrestrained capacity to form their own relationship models. Rather than follow the paradigms of past tropes, the feminist model allows the mother-daughter relationship to forge its own boundaries, redefining the relationship and expanding the limits of what women can be. Hopefully, as a new century of American drama develops, the mother-daughter relationship will be represented in dynamic new ways, celebrating the extraordinary everyday lives of mothers and daughters.

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VITA

Kristin Hanson was born and raised in West Branch, Iowa. She later attended The University of Iowa as an undergraduate student. In her junior year at Iowa, she studied abroad at the University of Hull in Hull, England. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in theatre arts in the spring of 2000. That fall, she entered the doctoral program in theatre at Louisiana State University. While at Louisiana State, she taught Introduction to Theatre and Introduction to Dramatic Literature classes, and served for two years as the Program Coordinator for the Women's and Gender Studies Program. She graduated from Louisiana State University in the spring of 2006 with her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Theatre.