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Lives together/worlds apart: Mothers and daughters in popular culture

Walters, Suzanna Danuta, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1990

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A

**LIVES TOGETHER/WORLDS APART:
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN POPULAR CULTURE**

by

SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York**

1990

@ 1990

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

**LIVES TOGETHER/WORLDS APART:
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN POPULAR CULTURE**

by

Suzanna Danuta Walters

Adviser: Professor Stanley Aronowitz

This research spans the years from 1935 to 1989, and traces the changes in the mother/daughter relationship through a critical analysis of popular culture. Focusing on film, television, and women's magazines, I address central questions of social history, feminism, and popular culture. Fundamental to this is an analysis of how the relationship of mother and daughter shifts from one rooted in "other" discourses (of class and ethnicity, for example) to one discussed solely in psychological terms. It is argued that, since World War II, the dominant culture has by and large constructed the relationship as one of never-ending conflict and thus promoted an ideology of separation to achieve (daughter's) maturity. This ideological move is placed in a social context of the anti-woman backlash of the early post-war period, and the renewed anti-feminism of the Reagan decade. In addition, specifically feminist discourses of mothers and daughters are examined to determine the extent to which feminist cultural work has gone beyond the "bond/separate" double-bind. Generally, this work has reproduced the dominant framework by adopting the psychological paradigm and a de-contextualized and de-historicized interpretation. I argue for an examination of the mother/daughter relationship that recognizes its social constructedness while at the same time understanding its centrality for enhancing women's solidarity.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my committee members - Stanley Aronowitz, Serafina Bathrick, and Stuart Ewen - for their continued and substantive support and encouragement. Particular thanks must go to Serafina, whose engagement with this project was a moving reminder of just how exhilarating feminist "mentoring" can be. Thanks also must go to those friends and family members whose unfailing support through these turbulent years kept me rooted in the politics of this research, particularly Annie Gibeau, Diane Lopez, Ara Wilson, and my sisters, Pamela and Lisa Walters.

But for the presence of my mother, Marianne Walters, this dissertation would not exist. It is her example of feminist mothering, and our eternal collaboration on a relationship and a life, that continues to provide the sweet and fragrant food for my heart and for my mind.

It is true, Martin Heidegger, as you have written, I fear
to cease, even knowing that at the hour
of my death my daughters will absorb me, even
knowing they will carry me about forever inside them...
even as I carry the ghost of my mother under my navel,
a nervy little androgynous person, a miracle
folded in lotus position.

Like those old pear-shaped Russian dolls that open
at the middle to reveal another and another, down
to the peasized, irreducible minim,
may we carry our mothers forth in our bellies.
May we, borne onward by our daughters, ride
in the Envelope of Almost-Infinity,
that chain letter good for the next twenty-five
thousand days of their lives.

Maxine Kumin, "The Envelope"

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CHAPTER ONE
LIVES TOGETHER/WORLDS APART:
RECONSIDERING THE SUBJECT OF MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

One sunny weekend, early on in this research, while I still enjoyed the fantasy of beachtime scholarship, I sat looking out at the turbulent Atlantic Ocean, wondering aloud about the curious fascination that the subject of mothers and daughters has for so many women. I had been conducting an interview of sorts with a friend - a young woman in her early 30s, professional, very successful in the field of social services, married, mother of two young sons. We had been talking about her relationship with her mother, which she described in less than laudatory terms. With all the discussion, one thing struck me: that, regardless of how hurt or denied she felt in relation to her mother, the *relationship itself* elicited a great deal of thought and concern. She felt, in no uncertain terms, that working out her relationship to her mother somehow held the key to her own identity. When I asked her why, why would an adult, mature, successful, healthy woman be so "into" thinking about and delving into this relationship above all others, her response was, I believe, quite telling: "Because it's about me."

This is not a strident narcissism being voiced, although the pop psychologists

lead us to interpret it in such a way. Rather, it is the recognition of shared womanhood that is being expressed. The relationship of mothers and daughters remains of interest to *all* women because it is so much "about us" as well as about our mothers. It is no accident that mothering and the mother/daughter relationship has played such a key role in feminist theory and feminist cultural work. Most women feel that, in some vital and fundamental way, the working out of their relationships with their mothers is central to working out their own issues and problems. And realizing that they, too, will (in most cases) someday be mothers, understanding how *they* were mothered plays an increasingly important role in women's development.

If the subject is central to women's individual development, it has also emerged as central to the project of a feminist theory and politics. In this 80s decade of backlash and revisionism, the popular narrative of the history of the contemporary women's movement goes something like this: IN THE BEGINNING... our newly awakened anger and astonishment at the realities of our own oppression caused us to take positions that were "extreme." One of these "extreme" positions was the radical rethinking of motherhood as the sole fulfilling "role" for adult women. But now, as the popular historians would have it, we have emerged from the dark angry nights of early women's liberation into the bright dawn of a "post-feminist" era. The personal history of feminist pioneer Betty Friedan is instructive here. In her first, groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique*,¹ Friedan bemoaned the state of American womanhood, overeducated for the menial and unfulfilling role of "housewife/mother" that was forced upon her with vigor since the end of World War Two. She urged

¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963).

women into the workforce, into careers as the only way to fully develop and liberate themselves. She was the model for my mother's generation. Her words spoke to a generation who felt some vague malaise, sensed a grave injustice, but were unable to find a voice for it, a name for it: sexism. But by the early 1980s, Friedan was singing another tune, wondering aloud if we hadn't, perhaps, gone a bit too far, bemoaning now not the state of imprisoned womanhood, but the sorry lack of family life. After all, she seemed to ask, isn't motherhood (and its associated ideological baggage - heterosexuality, couple-hood, the nuclear family) what women *really* want after all? In *The Second Stage*² Friedan recanted, and railed against those feminists who still thought that "the family" was a central site of women's oppression.

For Friedan and others, we may have come a long way (baby) but we've still got a long way to go (back). This era, we are told, has its own set of problems. We are being punished for "wanting it all": the "superwoman syndrome" and the "Cinderella Complex" are the watchwords that construct a female identity in crisis, a subjectivity at war with its own history, a woman bereft. As popular wisdom would have it, contemporary women are now caught in the binds their foremothers unwittingly made for them: in renouncing traditional values of Mom and apple pie (especially Mom), today's woman is a lost soul, a climbing-to-the-top career woman who has lost touch with that essential part of her femaleness: motherhood.

Two popular films of the late 80s say it all, I think. In one, *Fatal Attraction*, the bad woman is the childless, single, professional woman who seduces the innocent family man and tellingly attempts to blackmail him with a fantasized pregnancy. The

² Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (New York: Summit Books, 1981).

good woman is, like old times, the good *mother*. And Diane Keaton in *Baby Boom* lets us all know the deep dissatisfaction of women at work and lays bare the budding mama lurking behind every gleaming corporate desk. These films are meant to speak to us: the daughters of feminism. They are warnings, pleadings, urgings: don't become the women your mothers fought for you to be.

Mothers and mothering are central in this new dialogic of female angst. The immensely popular *My Mother/My Self*³, and the more recent work of Colette Dowling (*The Cinderella Complex* and *Perfect Women*)⁴ tellingly point to our relations with our mother's as setting the psychic stage for our tendency to "love too much" (as Robin Norwood would have it) or our inability to recognize that we can never have "it all." These and other popular treatises have located unloving/too loving mothers as the ultimate cause of their daughter's neurosis and unhappiness. In this age that has declared itself "post-feminist," we are most assuredly returning back to the days of Wylie's infamous "momism."

It is therefore an important historical period in which to reconsider the subject of mothers and daughters, and there are several reasons that stand out to me as justification for this re-examination. In the first place, as many feminist critics have noted - particularly Adrienne Rich - the mother/daughter relationship has been either ignored or mystified by patriarchal scholarship. It stands to reason that if the history of the world has largely been written by men, then sons are going to figure more

³ Nancy Friday, *My Mother/My Self* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1977).

⁴ Colette Dowling, *Perfect Women: Hidden Fears of Inadequacy and the Drive to Perform* (New York: Summit Books/Simon & Schuster, 1988) and *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence* (New York: Summit Books/Simon & Schuster, 1981).

prominently than daughters, and fathers more than mothers. The story of mothers and daughters thus requires reconsideration as a revision or amendment of male-defined scholarship and history. Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*⁵ is precisely such a text.

Secondly, it need hardly be said that 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.

Thirdly - and again this is self-evident - the mother/daughter relationship is a central aspect of family life. Moreover, it could be argued that mothers and daughters are the *bridge* of family life and are responsible for the reproduction and maintenance of family growth and development. One need only glance at the literature of family therapy, for example, to prove the point that it is the women in the family that are expected to nurture and "take care." That same literature would also tell you that it is the women who are turned to in eliciting change and to whom therapeutic "interventions" are most often directed. Importantly, this "bridge" moves both backwards and forwards generationally: mothers are responsible for creating mothers out of their daughters, and daughters are responsible for maintaining the older generation as well. All the statistics and social service records tell us that it is daughters and not sons who predominate in care for their elderly parents.

It follows from this, then, that the relationship of mothers and daughters is central to the important question of changes in the traditional structure of the family.

⁵ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976).

For if mothers and daughters are indeed the bridge of family life, then it is precisely this bridge that will need to be rebuilt so that both mother and daughter can walk over it in the search for new, nonpatriarchal family forms. If women help to reproduce in their daughters the desire to mother, and the psychological conditions for patriarchy are reproduced from mother to daughter -then it will be vitally important to rethink and reorganize this relationship so that it can prove liberating to both mother and daughter.

If part of the feminist project, indeed a very central part, has been to challenge the existing structure of the nuclear family, to liberate women from its restrictive hold, then it stands to reason that the mother/daughter relationship must play a fundamental part in that challenge. The dismantling of the patriarchal family can only be done when both mother and daughter are empowered to struggle and resist.

But most importantly, we need to reconsider the subject of mothers and daughters if our aim is to enhance and encourage the continuum of women. The historical and public dimension of this continuum - recovering, rewriting, rethinking our history as women - cannot be separated from that personal continuum that links us back over the years to our mothers and their mothers before them. And this takes us back to what we started with: "Because it is about me." While certainly, individual women can of course feel "positive" and good about themselves even when they are deeply unhappy with their mothers, there is no question that the internalization of empowering and complex images of their mothers enables daughters to themselves enjoy a more powerful and realistic self-image.

It is not that the mothers liberation is the "key" to the daughter's liberation, or vice-versa for that matter. But it is rather that the meaning of "woman-identification" and "sisterhood" implies a recognition of the shared experience of all women, however

differently structured by race, class, sexuality or by one's identity as a mother or as a daughter. Importantly, the concept of "shared experience" needs to include a conceptualization of that differential structuring. But if most daughters will in turn become mothers - and this remains true for most women - then it must certainly mean that damage will be done if that daughter-to-be-mother must negate *her* mother in order to reach her liberation. The liberation of women *cannot* be won as a liberation *from* other women, but can only be won as a reaching *towards* us all, every one of us.

One of the difficulties in developing this project - the representation of mothers and daughters - is that, until quite recently, motherhood and mothering have almost always been talked about generically. In other words, it is not until the feminist movement that we begin to get any sense that it is *different* to mother sons than daughters, and that those mothering functions are valued differently and imbued with different meanings depending on which gender the child in question is. Psychological discourse, in particular, has until very recently spoken about mothering without any specific reference to the sex of the child - or assuming the male child to "speak for" all children - an omission that today we would consider serious and perhaps even problematic.

Connected with this sort of "generic" mothering discussion, is an insistent emphasis, still very deeply entrenched today, on the *activeness* of mothering and the *receptiveness* - or even *passivity* of being a daughter. In fact, our language itself is revealing: "daughtering" is non-existent, "mothering" is a fact of life, with various and sundry interpretations. Now this imbalance is not solely restricted to mothers and daughters: there is no concept of "sonning" either. But neither is there a concept of "fathering" that connotes nurturance and caretaking in the way that "mothering" does:

to father is to literally produce a child by virtue of insemination, although "fathering" has now become more attached to concepts of parenting than previously. "To father" usually implies to produce a child; "to mother" usually implies to take care of and nurture a child. So this imbalance is not merely restricted to the difference between the way we understand being a parent vs. being a child. This imbalance also takes on special significance when speaking about mothers and daughters. So long as no concept of "daughtering" remains, "mothering" lives under the extraordinary burden of being the active member in a relationship in which she is semantically overburdened.

One of the most important steps we can take in rethinking the mother/daughter relationship is to take that relationship out of the confines of psychological description and prescription and into the more varied and comprehensive realm of culture and society. The very terms we use to describe the mother/daughter relationship are themselves inextricable linked to a psychological framework: bonding, symbiosis, separation, differentiation, autonomy. These terms are not innocent; they have a history and, most importantly, they are gendered. In other words, part of our work has to be in going beneath the seemingly "neutral" categories with which we describe and understand a relationship, and uncovering and deciphering its "genderedness."

For example, while the term "separation" has a general meaning in relation to processes of development, it also has a particular resonance when we think of the term "mother," as I believe will become apparent throughout this text. Separation from whom? we need to ask, and for what purpose? Not only do we need to question these concepts for their gender bias, but we need to locate them historically and culturally. For example, autonomy and individuation are highly valued characteristics of a *capitalist* society, and as such are naturalized so as to appear as unassailable *truths*

about the nature of adulthood and maturity. Not coincidentally, these highly valued attributes of a functioning adult in a capitalist society are found to be lacking or deficient in women.

What I am saying, then, is simply that the mother/daughter relationship needs to be described, understood, and analyzed in fully social and historical terms. We need to look at how the ways we understand and work with mothers and daughters is structured by our own unconscious acceptance of certain concepts and paradigms that are not "innocent" but are, in fact, often destructive to the possibility of mother/daughter intimacy and continuity. Nothing is to be taken for granted or assumed about this relationship. Practically, this means that the themes that we take to represent psychological truths about the relationship need to be seriously and rigorously questioned; they need to be deconstructed to uncover and reveal the ideological agendas inscribed within many common-sense understandings of this relationship.

Many of these "common-sense" ideas are manifested in popular culture, particularly in the narrative forms of popular culture such as film, literature, television. How the relationship is represented there will tell us a great deal about how we think about the relationship in our own everyday lives, for there is no greater index of practical knowledge than popular culture. This is not to say that popular images of mothers and daughters are a simple reflection of already existing ideas that come from psychology or sociology. Rather, these popular images both reflect and construct; they both *reproduce* existing dominant ideologies as well as help to *produce* those very ideologies. And those psychological "truths" are themselves made apparent to the population through the mediation of popular forms: if we live in a Freudian culture it

is not because most people have studied Freud, but because the institutions of cultural production have so absorbed Freudian thinking that it has become part of the foundation of how we tell a story, or perceive a character's motivation. This relationship will thus be analyzed as a *construction*, as a representation, rather than as manifesting some essential psychological "truth" about mothers and daughters.

Going back to the Greek myth of Persephone and Demeter is helpful here. The myth dates back to approximately 650 B.C. - to the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter." Demeter is the goddess of grain, corn, and the harvests and the sister of Zeus and Hades. Her daughter Persephone (also known as Kore - the maiden) was abducted and raped by Hades, god of the Underworld, who took her with him to his kingdom and forced her to become his queen. She was out picking flowers one day - the beautiful, many petaled Narcissus - planted there by Zeus to lure the girl for his brother Hades. (It is interesting to note here how women are called Vanity/Narcissistic for picking of the flower that was constructed by the male abductor/rapist as a lure) Demeter heard, but didn't see, Persephone's call, and no one would tell her what had happened to her daughter, (no one will speak of the rape, mention the violation, name the trap) until an old goddess, Hecate, told her of Persephone's abduction. She was racked with grief over the loss of her daughter and searched day and night for her until she ended up at the palace of Eleusis where she disguised herself and became a nursemaid to the infant prince. There, she is discovered to be a goddess and orders a temple built in her honor where she retreats and gives in to her grief and refuses to do her job - refuses to let the grain grow and the harvests bloom until her one condition is met: the return of her daughter. Zeus finally relents, as the land is barren and all life in jeopardy, and sends Hermes down to the underworld to tell Hades to return the girl to

her mother. Persephone is returned to her mother, but has to visit Hades once a year, as she is tricked by him into eating addictive pomegranate seeds. Demeter then allows the flowers to bloom and the corn to grow, but only for those months when her daughter is with her. It is this return of the daughter to the mother - this reunion - out of which one of the most sacred rites of ancient Greek Life were constructed: the Eleusinian mysteries.

Part of the work of understanding the mother/daughter relationship centers around interpreting this myth. It has variously been interpreted as a cyclical story of birth, death, and renewal or a metaphor for the loss of virginity and the entrance into female adulthood. But more recently, Adrienne Rich has pointed out that it is primarily a story of abduction, a story of unwilling and violent separation of mother and daughter, a story of the power of patriarchy as it asserts itself into the innocent life of a girl child picking flowers.

But there is something more important than interpreting this myth, and constructing alternative myths in its place. Whether the story of Demeter and Persephone is the grand metaphor for mother/daughter relationships is not really the question, as we here seek to dispel all grand narratives. Rather, the move here is to a radical demystification, a tearing down of those great edifices of narrative and myth that tell us "this story and no other." It is precisely this social construction of the mother/daughter relationship that I seek to both examine and assert, to render those naturalized narratives suspect and awkward in their claim to universality and truth.

From this venerable Greek myth of Persephone and Demeter to the modern fable of maternal malevolence embodied in contemporary films such as *Mommie*, *Dearest*, the narrative of mothers and daughters has largely been portrayed in terms of

conflict and the ambivalent struggle of separation. Never achieving the stature of the Oedipal configuration, the mother/daughter nexus nevertheless wanders through our cultural landscape in a sort of half-light; present and persistent but rarely claiming center stage. Yet this relationship, such a persistent aspect of the popular imaginary and the social narrative, has almost solely been interpreted in psychological terms. Few critics have attempted to chart this relationship as it exists and is constructed in the cultural context of film, television, women's magazines, and popular literature.

We are living in a world that has not only been characterized by vast economic and political changes, but that is increasingly marked by the influence of the mass media. Mothers and daughters come to understand their relationship not only through the exigencies of family life, economic survival and social policies, but through the systems of representation and cultural production that help to give shape and meaning to that relationship. Indeed, when we go to the movies, read a novel, see a television sitcom, or open the pages of a women's magazine, we are presented with vivid and often contradictory images that provide us with a variety of messages concerning our behavior and self-image as mothers and daughters. Films like *Terms of Endearment*, television programs like *Maude*, and popular books like *My Mother/My Self*, furnish us with examples of mother/daughter interactions that contribute to our understanding of our own affiliations. The relationship of mothers and daughters is located in *culture* in the most fundamental sense, where issues of gender, genre and generation intersect and interact. This dissertation is an attempt to critically chart the changing images of the mother/daughter relationship in a variety of popular forms from the post-World War Two period to the present.

The years from 1945 to the present are clearly crucial years both for the

history of women and for the history of the media. For it is in this period that we have witnessed the development and elaboration of a women's movement that has critically challenged our very sense of what it means to be women and men in the modern world. Arguably, no social movement in recent years has so altered and challenged human arrangements - from personal relationships to public policies.

Concurrently, it is within these last forty years that the institutions of the mass media, particularly television and the associated technologies of video and cable, have come to seemingly dominate our public discourse about everything from politics and national elections to fashion and family life.

These post-War years have therefore witnessed a critical intersection of feminism and the mass media. An examination of the changes in the representations of mothers and daughters during this period will reveal the multiple and often contradictory ways in which the media shape the consciousness of our personal relationships. In addition, analyzing these images will help us to understand the activity of the media as a *mediating* force, mediating our view of social movements, particularly of the women's movement. The goal is to examine larger cultural and historical patterns through the lens of a relationship that is significant to women generally, and to the family in particular.

Typically, in-depth media studies such as this one focus on only one specific medium, such as television or, more characteristically, film. In doing so, studies tend to participate in the theoretical segregation of the mass media, avoiding a more inclusive interpretation of media practices. For it is not simply that films, or television, or novels, influence social attitudes and behaviors, although that is certainly true. But, more significantly, it is the whole range of symbolic practices present in our

culture that often cohere in certain ways to create a "way of seeing" or a general "reading" of a relationship or an issue, in this case, the mother/daughter relationship.

This dissertation, in widening its net to include a variety of media forms, hopes to present a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between the media and society, and between the different media themselves. This research will take a "cultural studies" perspective, arguing for an understanding of representation and the mass media that is both historical and contextual, as well as concerned with the elaboration of central themes that emerge from the intersection of a variety of discursive practices.

Simply put, no medium is an island. To study a medium without studying the other popular images within which it interacts is to make of that medium a closed system, and thus to limit and constrain the analysis.

Interestingly, too, a critical perspective on the media has always been a central aspect of feminist praxis, from the earliest days of Betty Friedan's examination of women's magazines in *The Feminine Mystique* to contemporary feminist film criticism and theory. This dissertation locates itself in this tradition of feminist cultural criticism, yet departs from it in a number of important ways. Feminist cultural criticism has tended to oscillate between two approaches: first, a largely quantitative and empirical sociological approach that focuses on media *content* and that is often tied to reformist cultural strategies, such as demanding more women producers and writers, or more representations of women at work. And secondly, and more recently, a rather eclectic approach that merges Lacanian psychoanalytic frameworks with semiotic methods in a largely textual "close reading" of a filmic (or televisual) "text," focusing less on content or character than on form and structure. My approach, while drawing on aspects of each perspective, eschews both the quantitative and the textual in favor

of an historical, *contextual*, and *intertextual* approach that stresses the ideological thematics of particular representations and their relationship to the social milieu in which they emerge.

The mother/daughter relationship provides an especially good "location" to examine this intersection of feminism and representation, because it is both a significant subject of feminist practice as well as of popular culture. Through the lens of the mother/daughter relationship, we can address larger issues around the representation of women generally, and the impact of a social movement on the structures of representation. In this cultural history, the primary question is necessarily centered around *change*: to what extent have the representations of mothers and daughters changed during the post-War period? And, most importantly, has the feminist movement of the last 15 years impacted the dominant media institutions and their picture of this relationship? Have popular films, television, literature, etc., altered their representation of the mother/daughter relationship as a response to feminist demands and ideologies?

If we can posit that the mother/daughter relationship has most consistently been represented as one of conflict and struggle (eg. *Mildred Pierce*) or alternately of maternal martyrdom and daughterly transcendence (eg. *Stella Dallas*, *I Remember Mama*), than can we also posit that the feminist critique of sex-role stereotypes and, specifically, of familial arrangements and the institution of motherhood, has offered up new fictional renderings of the mother/daughter couplet? Have the institutions of the mass media moved beyond the limiting genres of "mother-blame" or "maternal sacrifice"?

Certainly, the innovations of the TV producers Norman Lear and Grant Tinker

in the 1970s (particularly *Maude* and *Rhoda* for the purposes of this study), seem to indicate a positive shift in that the issues of concern to feminists (how to be "liberated" but still maintain ties and intimacies with the mother) were aired and explored. On the other hand, the popularity of books such as Nancy Friday's *My Mother/My Self* and the film, *Mommie, Dearest*, paints a somewhat different picture of the 70s, where the ideology of "mother-blame" seems just as prevalent.

On another level, the question of change relates to the media forms themselves: is one medium (eg. television) more likely to present a more varied and "positive" view of the relationship than another medium, and why might that be so? For example, the structure of television sitcoms stresses character over narrative, thus mitigating the possibilities of structural change and substantive transformation. Does this mean that we might see more varied *character* development of mothers and daughters yet, at the same time, see less dramatic change in their relationship generally? On the other hand, television, particularly daytime television, is often considered a more "familial" medium, addressing a proportionately larger female audience. Does this mean that the thematic concerns of television will allow the mother/daughter relationship to be more fundamental and central to television content?

These questions are complicated and difficult, and not easily "answered." What they *do* indicate, I believe, is the complexity of this subject and the real need for an analysis that critically examines how our "common-sense" ideas about mothers and daughters develop, despite and within the inconsistencies and contradictions of their history and representation. This dissertation thus moves both synchronically - across different mediums and genres - and diachronically - through different historical and social shifts and transitions. In doing so, it places the mother/daughter relationship

firmly within culture in its most inclusive sense, and thus "denaturalizes" our common-sense assumptions about this relationship by pointing out in detail its social construction and its relation to specific ideological and political trends, such as the "cult of the domestic" in the 50s, and the resurgence of "familialism" in the Reagan years. By examining the mother/daughter relationship *culturally* and *historically* in this way, *Lives Together/Worlds Apart* hopes to shed new light on the mass media, feminism, and the mother/daughter relationship.

CHAPTER TWO

RETHINKING REPRESENTATION: FEMINIST CULTURAL THEORY

In elaborating the social construction of the mother/daughter relationship, the question of representation immediately emerges as central to this construction. For the relationship of mother and daughter does not simply materialize onto the social field, nor is it only produced through the machinations of explicit social policies and social theories.

Rather, the mother/daughter relationship is formed, at least in part, by the cultural images that give it meaning. In a world saturated, perhaps even dominated, by the image, it is close to impossible to understand any given interaction without reference to the multiplicity of cultural manifestations that often seem like only so much background noise to the "real" business of "social forces." It is precisely these representations that are addressed in this study.

The last fifteen years¹ have witnessed a phenomenal growth of work in the area of feminism and representation throughout all types of cultural analysis, including film, television, and advertising. Literary criticism,² in particular, has responded to the impact of a growing feminist movement and the introduction of women's studies into the academy, so that we can now almost point to an alternative feminist literary "canon." The language of feminist film criticism - particularly in its Lacanian versions - has entered into the critical vocabulary of film theorists on both sides of the Atlantic, and has found a home within film schools and media courses. And in recent years, feminist critics have examined that peculiarly home-based and ubiquitous medium of television and are beginning to explore the complex relations between TV families and "real" families, between soap opera and everyday life. Women's magazines - long ignored and trivialized - have now been recognized as the powerful forces they are in shaping and structuring common-sense understandings of femininity. And the everpresent figure of the advertising image that appears as so much "background" information, has been deconstructed and criticized both for its portrayal of women as well as for the consumerist ethos it so vividly and successfully promotes. It could be argued, in fact, that the most stimulating and provocative feminist theory of the last ten years has emerged within the broadly defined field of cultural studies,

¹ The early and mid-1970s really marks the beginning of a literature on women and representation, coterminous with the growth of the women's movement, as is discussed below.

² This chapter is limited to theories of visual representation and culture generally, and thus avoids dealing with the enormous literature that makes up the field of feminist literary criticism. Feminist literary criticism has, to some extent, stood separate from the more general work on women and culture and women and representation. The relationship between this field of literary criticism and feminist theories of visual representation awaits further analysis.

rather than within the more traditional academic disciplines of political science, sociology, philosophy, economics.

But there is also a larger context: the context of the "media society" itself. As early as 1967 Guy Debord put forward the by-now-accepted postmodern claim that we live in a world increasingly defined by the image; we live in a *Society of the Spectacle*.³ In more recent years, the French postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard has expanded on this theme and stressed the dominance of the "simulacra" in a world where everything is reduced to an appearance, a simulation of the real which doesn't even exist anymore.

Whether postmodern or simply modern, most cultural critics have acceded to this claim that our world is increasingly marked by the presence of communications technologies in all areas of life - from the family clustered around its "entertainment center" complete with color tv (with all-night cable channels, of course), remote control video and compact disc player, to the student or businessperson staring into the green screen of their home computer, the new technologies are an everpresent part of American reality. Whether you see these phenomena as simply an extension of the logic of consumer capitalism, or as a fundamentally new shift requiring new theories and political alignments, is itself a subject of much debate.

Yet the sheer growth in new media technologies and their increasing presence in the everyday life of all of us is an inescapable reality, brought home to many of us by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 which saw an old "B" movie actor become the first truly media savvy US President. It is no accident that the widely-read

³ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977).

cartoon "Doonesbury" chose to parody Reagan by placing him as a sort of addled android filling the tv screen of which he seems to be an integral part. Arguably, no election has been the same since.

Thus, it can surely be no coincidence that, as this media frame grows larger and larger, encompassing more and more areas of social practice, an outpouring of cultural critique of all stripes emerges from even those formally concerned with the most orthodox of endeavors. On the left, this can be seen as a shift (still going on) from a Frankfurt School condemnation of mass culture to a more tentative and perhaps even optimistic version of cultural resistance and political possibilities. Since the Frankfurt School declared mass culture to be the last, decadent gasp of a culture in decay, numerous attempts have been made to re-evaluate popular culture and to challenge this view of it (shared by many conservative and mainstream theorists along with the Marxists Adorno and Horkheimer) as debased and necessarily aiding in the wholesale reproduction of capitalism and its associated repressions. Popular culture came to be seen as a legitimate area of social analysis that was not simply reducible to a variety of brainwashing metaphors and terms of denigration. New methods and analytic frameworks that were responsive to the specifics of *mass* culture - as opposed to "high culture" categories and values - were needed to fully understand the scope and meaning of "the popular." Indeed, Laura Kipnis may be right when she argues that "mass culture" has now become the privileged subject of left academia.⁴ As courses in popular culture pop up on the university campuses and reputable academics turn

⁴ Laura Kipnis, "'Refunctioning' reconsidered: toward a left popular culture," in *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing popular television and film*, ed. Colin MacCabe (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 15.

from their dusty books to expostulate on the bewildering popularity of "The Cosby Show," cultural studies emerges as a popular form itself.

In any case, it is surely no longer possible to understand the media as somehow "outside" society, or an adjunct to "larger" social concerns. Arguably, the media have so inserted themselves into the everyday life of most Americans (indeed, most *people*) that they have come to construct our very sense of what it means to live in the modern world. This new emphasis on mass cultural criticism is, for many theorists, itself indicative of the move to a postmodern culture, "...the shift from a refusal to an embrace of the popular in theoretical discourse marks a break between modernism and postmodernism."⁵ The media *are* everywhere, and as such can no longer be relegated to secondary status in any critical analysis of contemporary society.

Feminist critics have been quick to point out that the representation of *women* in this media saturated society is particularly fraught with contradictions and dilemmas. For it is women, as we shall see throughout this chapter, who more often than not are the "imaged" in our culture. In this society of the spectacle, it is women's bodies that *are* the spectacle upon which representation occurs. Yet women are in this strange and unique position of also being spectators, consumers of their very own image, their very own objectification. At the same time that we witness our own representation, we are also denied a place in that process of representation, we are denied a voice, so that more often than not, those images of ourselves that stare at us from the pages of the women's magazines are not of our own creation. They are, in more senses than one, truly "man-made."

⁵ Ibid., 17.

Indeed, the feminist project - right from the beginning - has always been deeply concerned with "the cultural"; even the first, founding texts of this "second wave" of feminism delved into the ways in which the everyday objects of cultural consumption are as much a part of the maintenance of patriarchal social relations as are the inequities of a sexist workplace:

...one of the major theoretical contributions of the women's movement has been its insistence on the significance of cultural factors, in particular in the form of socially dominant representations of women and the ideological character of such representations, both in constituting the category 'woman' and in delimiting and defining what has been called the 'sex/gender' system.⁶

Speaking specifically about film criticism, Ann Kaplan points out that feminist cultural work has a long history, beginning with the first moments of the women's movement in the 60s:

The study of images of women in film dates back to work by the National Organization for Women in the late 1960's; to the pioneering journal, Women and Film, published from 1970-1972; to film journals like Jump Cut that made feminist approaches a central part of their format; and, finally, to the emergence in 1976 of a journal, Camera Obscura, specifically devoted to feminist film theory.⁷

In some senses, then, feminist cultural criticism is a double-edged project. It is both a critique of existing (patriarchal) representations, as well as a construction of alternative or oppositional cultural images and practices. This is, I believe, a distinctive aspect of feminist criticism; within the critique itself there is also the question of what this deconstruction means for creating *feminist* images. The line

⁶ Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 4.

⁷ E. Ann Kaplan, "Feminist Criticism and Television," in *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism* ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 215.

between cultural criticism and cultural practice is indeed a fine one for feminists.⁸ Rosemary Betterton goes so far as to argue that feminist criticism is a challenge to *representation itself* because of the interdisciplinary nature of feminist criticism and the ways in which the feminist movement has challenged the traditional divisions between high art and mass culture, and has challenged ideologies of objectivity and neutrality by positioning women as viewing subjects.⁹ Other feminists have also argued for the unique relationship between women and popular culture.

Tania Modleski points out that notions of mass culture and notions of the feminine have historically been bound together, mass culture being seen as feminized culture and denigrated on those terms, setting up a hierarchical opposition between femininity/consumption/reading and masculinity/production/writing.¹⁰ And Judith Williamson claims for women a position as a sort of transcendent signifier for other "differences." In an article on the relationship between femininity and colonization, Williamson argues that sexual difference "carries" other differences because "woman" is seen as the "natural" to which other differences (less easily naturalizable) can be

⁸ The overlap in this area - between theory and practice - is substantial. Examples of this include the films and theoretical work of Laura Mulvey, and the early work of Mary Kelly in her "Post-partum Document" which is both theory and cultural product. In addition, much of feminist artistic practice contains within it an explicit critique of the patriarchal construction of images. See particularly the photographers Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger.

⁹ Rosemary Betterton, "Introduction: feminism, femininity and representation," in *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, ed. Rosemary Betterton (London and New York: Pandora Press, 1987)

¹⁰ Tania Modleski, "Femininity as Mas(s)querade: a feminist approach to mass culture," in *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing popular television and film*, ed. Colin MacCabe (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

grafted.¹¹ If women *do* have a unique position within popular culture, than *feminist* theories of representation might themselves occupy a privileged space within the discourses on culture. We will return to this question of the "uniqueness" of women's relationship to popular culture later.

But first, a few explanatory notes concerning the orientation of this chapter. This chapter is *not* intended as an overview of all the numerous debates within cultural studies and between cultural studies and the more traditional methods of communications research. Instead, this chapter is an attempt to chart the development of specifically *feminist* theories of representation. Clearly, this cannot be inclusive of all possible positionings within feminist work on the mass media and popular culture. Yet I think that it represents the broad historical development of feminist cultural theories, insofar as they interact both with the dominant trends in mainstream communications research as well as the prevailing left and alternative theories of culture. As a review, this chapter will not go into great detail on all the theoretical perspectives; these will be made clearer, throughout the dissertation in the examination of specific media texts. So, for example, while I touch here on the question of melodrama and "feminine forms," those issues will be examined in much greater detail throughout the course of the media analyses themselves.

A few provisos, though, do need to be made. It is by now commonplace to assert that there is no single "feminism" but rather a number of theories, analytic frameworks and political practices that all draw on different traditions and bodies of knowledge.

¹¹ Judith Williamson, "Woman is an Island: Femininity and Colonization," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986).

Indeed, "feminism" was - to begin with - a multiple birth, in its originary moment both a theory (or theories) and a politics, whose trajectories have often followed different paths and appealed to different women. To the extent that this is true, it is also the case that these "feminisms" that *are* formed within the academy traverse the usual academic boundaries of discipline, subject area, methodology. Feminism - from its very inception - has been marked by its interdisciplinary nature. So, in setting out these different feminist theories of representation, I have necessarily resorted to a sort of categorization, a sort of typology, that in some ways overlooks the often frustrating, overlapping quality of most feminist cultural criticism. In other words, there is no simple, historically coherent "progression" to be deciphered here, no unilinear model of theoretical development. For example, many studies drawing on the traditions of the early feminist research continue to be done, particularly within mainstream American communications and sociology departments. And the debates *against* those practices have in no sense been completely "argued out," much less "won." Yet the challenge to the sociological, empirical model has been serious, and has been most thoughtfully received and assimilated amongst left cultural theorists. Since this particular project on mothers and daughters is located generally within a left/critical theory of culture, the emphasis will necessarily be on these "newer" semiotic, structuralist and psychoanalytic interventions that have been developed within that general left framework. But more on *that* later.

With all this said, it is still possible to chart a series of transformations within a rather larger shift that has occurred within feminist cultural criticism. In this charting, subtleties and overlappings will be missed, in the attempt to point to what I believe have been the *significant* changes that have occurred within this wide and

varied body of work. First, I examine what I term the "images" perspective of early feminist communications research. In this perspective, meaning is perceived as readily apparent and judged in terms of its sexist (or non-sexist) content and characterization. This position is shown to be both limited *politically* by its liberal assumptions about the nature of social change, and *intellectually* by its reflection model of cultural production and consumption. While it has often provided useful data and stressed the necessity of empirical research, it remains locked into an overly simplistic understanding of the mass media. Subsequent analyses have been enriched by the critical influence of semiotics, structuralism, marxism and psychoanalysis; nevertheless, the earlier work remains important both as a counterpoint to later work and in relation to the historical development of differing models of communications/media research.

Finally, I argue that these two positions (if one can roughly divide them up that way), although seemingly in opposition, have more in common than is immediately apparent, particularly as concerning their theorizing of the relationship between culture and social relations. This chapter concludes with some tentative suggestions for constructing an alternative feminist cultural theory. Here I examine the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham in England as expressing an "affinity" with feminist critique in its insistence on an interactional and experiential definition of "culture." Although this model should not be adopted wholesale (and it certainly isn't in *this* study of mothers and daughters) it does offer interesting possibilities for the development of feminist cultural studies.

Throughout this chapter, I am concerned in elaborating the specificity of feminist cultural criticism, both in relation to social theory in general and in relation to the mass media at large. To a great extent, this is a question of methodology, (e.g.

what makes a cultural theory "feminist"), a question that continues to plague feminist theorists eager to construct new methodologies and deeply wary of the risks of "borrowing" from other theoretical frameworks. But it is also a question of the relationship of women to images and to the process of representation in general: do women have a *particular* relationship to cultural imagery, as has been suggested by theorists like Williamson and Betterton? And what, in fact, is the relationship between *women* as real historical beings and *woman* - that contradictory and frustrating image of ourselves that is represented in popular culture? These questions will in no way be fully answered in this chapter; rather, they will serve as a type of litmus test to gauge the usefulness of particular feminist analyses. It is on this last question, in particular, that feminist theories of representation will either stand or fall.

ADJUSTING THE SET: IMAGES OF WOMEN

I want to begin here by arguing for the importance of the fact that early feminist cultural criticism developed alongside the "second wave" of American feminism in the later 1960's and into the 1970's. In a sense, then, it is not really separable from the larger history of early feminist politics. Not coincidentally, the burgeoning of "sex-role research in the mass media" that begins to appear in the pages of academic journals, arrives simultaneously with the explosion of the women's movement on to the social and cultural scene. Annette Kuhn sees 1972 as the "watershed" year for feminist film theory in particular:

In North America, a number of women's film festivals - the first New York International Festival of Women's Films (1972) and the Toronto Women and Film Festival (1973) - coincided with the publication of three books of feminist film criticism: Molly Haskell's From Reverence

to Rape (1975), Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* (1973) and Joan Mellen's *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film* (1974).¹²

In addition, the journal *Women and Film* was inaugurated in 1972.

Central to these early years of feminism was what might be termed the "deconstructive" impulse: the need and desire to "tell all" about women's situation, to expose the blatant and exploitative sexism of a male dominant society, to *describe* patriarchy. Naturally, then, a central part of this "description" of patriarchy had to do with exposing the myriad ways in which our culture perpetuated and reproduced sexist and male-dominant understandings of women and women's lives. Literature, art, film, ads and, more obviously, pornography, were subjected to feminist intellectual and political attack. As with any marginal movement struggling to find a place for itself, the women's movement was confronted with either the apathy or outright ridicule of the mainstream media. The growing self-consciousness of the women's movement about the power of the media in portraying the feminist struggle led to an awareness of the need to analyze the media from a feminist perspective. Indeed, significant studies such as Gaye Tuchman's article in *Hearth and Home* on the treatment of the women's movement in the newspapers¹³ explicitly deal with the role of the media in the denigration of the women's movement.

The feminist awareness of the importance of the media in defining the terrain upon which the struggle was to be waged also led to a number of "encounters" with the media by feminist groups eager to have some visible role in mapping that terrain.

¹² Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 75.

¹³ Gaye Tuchman, "The Newspaper as Social Movement's Resource," in *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*, ed. Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Benet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 186-215.

Feminist political activism, from its earliest days, often targeted systems of representation as the most visible and often the most blatant perpetrators of the objectification and denigration of women and the women's movement. The Atlantic City action around the "Miss America" contest in September 1968 is a classic example of feminists using the media, capitalizing on an already established media event, to protest the representation of women in general, typified by the cattle-auction objectification of women in beauty contests. The "No More Miss America!" document of August 1968 suggests the dual aim of both protesting the dominant images of women as well as exhibiting alternative images of liberated women embodied in the feminist protestors:

On September 7th in Atlantic City, the Annual Miss America Pageant will again crown "your ideal." But this year, reality will liberate the contest auction-block in the guise of "genyooine" de-plasticized, breathing women.... We will protest the image of Miss America, an image that oppresses women in every area in which it purports to represent us.¹⁴

In more recent years, attacks by feminists on systems of representation have centered on pornography, from the picketing of record stores which display albums with covers of abused women, to the fire bombing of porn stores and movie theaters. In a more liberal vein, feminists have consistently argued for "better" representation of women in all media forms and have successfully exerted pressure on media professionals and government officials to initiate changes or, at the very least, to initiate studies and research.

¹⁴ Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1970), 584-585.

Thus, early feminist criticism grew out of, or was at the very least connected to, feminist politics and interventions. Clearly, the more radical feminist politics such as the "Miss America" action was not directly informed by social science research into the images of women in quite the same way that the government studies like *Window Dressing on the Set*¹⁵ were. But this feminist activism did provide a context (or at least part of the context) for the research that began to emerge.

Indeed, even early feminists outside of the communications field such as Kate Millet and Betty Friedan analyzed literature and women's magazines, respectively, in a manner similar to the content studies of the feminist communications researchers. That early feminist researchers turned first to content analysis is no accident. In attempting to expose the existence of male dominance to an audience used to ideologies of equality and "equal representation," early researchers turned to a methodology both readily available and helpful in detailing the pervasiveness of stereotypical imagery.

Often discussed under the general heading of "sex-role research in the mass media", this type of work therefore had its origins both in early feminist critique as well as more mundane, sociologically oriented communications research. Taking as its object of analysis the "images of women" in the mass media, researchers explored sexism and sex-role stereotyping in a wide variety of media forms, including television, film, comic books, newspapers and others. This exploration of sex-roles and stereotypes was thus generally concerned with documenting the existence of

¹⁵ *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*, A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, August, 1977.

sexism in the mass media, either through the study of "effects" of sexism in the media on audiences (particularly children), or through content analyses:

...designed to measure certain aspects of a media message (e.g. how many male to female characters; what types of behavior patterns do female characters exhibit as compared with male characters)....¹⁶

The "images" perspective of much early feminist communications research therefore differed little from the dominant paradigms of communications research prevailing at the time. In other words, this early feminist research closely followed the dominant trends in US mass media analysis, both in terms of their theoretical frameworks and their methodology. The theoretical assumptions behind their work assumed an understanding of the media as:

A) a reflection of dominant social values: i.e. media images as the symbolic manifestation of prevailing social norms and ideals, and

B) a primary, or even *the* primary, socializing agent for all Americans, but most particularly with children; i.e. the mass media as a teacher, a transmitter of messages and meanings.

Methodologically, the commitment was firmly to quantitatively based content analyses and effects studies, themselves embedded within the tradition of American positivist sociology.

With 1980s feminist hindsight, the results of these studies seem fairly obvious. In her 1975 article on sex-role research in the mass media, Linda Busby reviewed the findings to date within content analyses and effects studies. Her thorough review

¹⁶ Helen Baehr, "The Impact of Feminism on Media Studies - Just Another Commercial Break?" in *Men's Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines*, ed. Dale Spender (New York: The Athene Series/Pergamon Press, 1981), 146.

includes work done on daytime and prime-time tv, tv commercials, magazine ads, magazine fiction, and children's programming. The findings are as one would expect: stereotypical and traditional images of women predominate in all media forms, although a few studies do indicate a higher percentage of strong female characters on daytime tv. The findings of the effects studies are correspondingly bleak:

- * Media users personalize media content and thereby become directly involved in it.

- * Sex of the media user is an important factor in the user's utilization and recall of the media content

- * Youngsters use media to gain insight into roles they will fill in later life.

- * Youngsters model behavior they see in the media¹⁷

These early studies describe the persistence of sexist imagery and the relegation of women (who are consistently *underrepresented*) to a limited set of roles largely defined within the world of the family and the home. Busby concludes that the content analyses show that: "...sex roles in the mass media are traditional and do not yet reflect the impact of the recent women's movement."¹⁸ These limited and stereotyped roles are argued to be at odds with the changing reality of American society and, in fact, are "...preparing youngsters for a world that no longer exists."¹⁹

¹⁷ Linda Busby, "Sex-Role Research on the Mass Media," *Journal of Communication* 25, no. 4 (Autumn 1975): 122.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gaye Tuchman, "Introduction: The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," in *Hearth and Home*, 6.

This last point is important, for much of this early work - tied as it was to the women's movement - was concerned with this question about the impact of the movement (and the impact of the real social changes fostered by that movement) on the images of women in the mass media. Feminist researchers often attempted to "track" the relationship between this new social movement and the mass media: were new, "positive" images being created? Was there a backlash to the women's movement? Did the media reflect the new demographics and include working women in its repertoire of socially-acceptable portrayals? And was the movement itself being systematically ignored by the mainstream press and news agencies?

For Gaye Tuchman, in her much referenced article on "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," the verdict on these questions is painfully clear. Reviewing the research in the field, Tuchman concludes that the mass media maintains sex- role stereotyping even in the face of a changing social reality in which women are increasingly active in the work force and are beginning to define themselves not only as wives and mothers but as workers as well. Tuchman analyzes this in terms of a "culture lag" between the mass media's portrayal of women and the reality of life for women in contemporary society. In other words, while Tuchman maintains a reflection hypothesis, she also claims that:

The mass media deal in symbols and their symbolic representations may not be up-to-date. A time lag may be operating for nonmaterial conditions, which shapes symbols, change more slowly than do material conditions. This notion of a time lag (or a "culture lag," as sociologists term it) may be incorporated into the reflection hypothesis.²⁰

²⁰ Ibid., 8.

George Gerbner, in his piece on "The Dynamics of Cultural Resistance" in *Hearth and Home*, actually argues that things have been getting *worse* for women in the mass media, in large part due to a backlash against the women's movement. For Gerbner, as for Tuchman, women are "symbolically annihilated" in the mass media through a variety of strategies used to diffuse the impact of the women's movement and render it neutral and trivial.²¹ Gerbner's "Cultural Indicators" project at the Annenberg School - the first really massive and full-scale TV content studies - often provided the data for the studies of images of women that were done by feminist communications researchers in the early seventies. His general conclusion - that males greatly outnumber females and that the tv world portrays both women and nonwhites as victims - are quite often the accepted starting points for more detailed feminist analyses.

So, on the one hand, we have an almost conspiratorial notion of the mass media: women are *actively* being "annihilated" within representation. But, although this conspiratorial tone often crops up, more important still is that feminist communications researchers generally assumed an understanding of the media as a *transmitter* of our social and cultural heritage. As the mass media took on increasing importance, communications researchers such as H.D. Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld and Gerbner argued that the contemporary mass media have replaced churches and other social institutions as the primary socializers of youth.

In *Hearth and Home*, Gaye Tuchman sums up this somewhat contradictory approach which stresses *both* the reflection model and the socialization model:

²¹ George Gerbner, "The Dynamic of Cultural Resistance," in *Hearth and Home*, 46-50.

The mass media perform two tasks at once. First, with some culture lag, they reflect the dominant values and attitudes in society. Second, they act as agents of socialization, teaching youngsters in particular how to behave. Watching lots of television leads children and adolescents to believe in traditional sex roles: Boys should work, girls should not. The same sex-role stereotypes are found in the media designed especially for women. They teach that women should direct their hearts toward hearth and home.²²

The Tuchman/Gerbner type of work thus at least attempts to study the portrayals of women in the emerging social context of feminism. While their methods and findings are highly problematic, their concern with giving the women's movement a "fair shake" in the mass media were genuine and important. Most of the research, though, remains at the quantitative and descriptive level.

When theorists of this sort do venture beyond the head-counting, descriptive level, their remedies are often *prescriptive*, urging tv execs and government officials alike to institute policy changes that both put more women in the media business as well as portray them in more "accurate" and less stereotyped ways. The "prescriptiveness" was thus oriented to the professional/managerial class, who were urged, in the name of "science" (the statistics) to respond to the demands of the researchers for "better" images. This prescriptive focus again assumes an understanding of the media as the all-powerful "gatekeepers" of public opinion, and further locates these gatekeepers as predominantly white men. In keeping with this emphasis on the gatekeeping role of media professionals, there has also been an examination of the relationship between the male hegemony of the "consciousness industries" and the sexist content of the

²² Gaye Tuchman, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," in *Hearth and Home*, 37.

images produced, thus making an argument not only for more "positive" images, but for more women media producers as well.

Most of this early research, oriented as it was towards traditional social science based mass communications studies, focused largely on ads, magazines, TV and newspapers. Film studies, attached to a more humanistic tradition, received much less attention. Molly Haskell's 1973 study of women in film, *From Reverence to Rape* and Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus*, published in the same year, are the rare exceptions, yet they do not really fall into this sociological mode at all, though they are often associated with it. Haskell and Rosen *are* concerned with stereotypes, yet their approach is historical and rather anecdotal, attempting to weave in "social context" with an analysis of women's roles within film. They make use of the feminist understandings of sex-roles and stereotypes, but in a way that is qualitatively based, rather than quantitative.

It is easy to reject this early research out of hand, and to criticize it for its obvious simplicity and adherence to dominant research traditions. But this early "images of women" work, to its credit, was often used very directly in the service of consciousness raising and pressure group politics, or more indirectly in the more radical feminist encounters with the media such as the "Miss America" action. It was felt that a contribution could be made to the process of consciousness-raising by documenting sexism and male dominance where previously it had been ignored or taken for granted. For example, studies by the newly formed National Organization for Women helped to point out the prevalence of stereotypes and sexist imagery in the context of a broader campaign for increased political awareness of sexism. And, clearly, the whole issue of pornography that has continued to remain a contentious

point within feminist politics and theory has been tied up with a concern over the images of women in the media.

In addition, it is vital to remember that studies such as Tuchman's and Haskell's - flawed as they are - helped pave the way for the flourishing of feminist cultural criticism that we are witnessing today. In this opening up of new ground, these researchers often paid more attention to the historical and social context in which those images were produced than do the more "qualitative" researchers of today, a point we shall return to later. In sum, the importance of this work should not be underestimated:

...it is important to recognize the value of such studies, both as a point of departure for students first encountering the subject and for historians and sociologists who seek more detailed information about the relation of stereotypical images to the epochs that produced them.²³

FROM IMAGES OF WOMEN TO WOMAN AS IMAGE

The critiques of the "images of women" approach have been many and varied and have taken on a number of different forms, both feminist and non-feminist. In this section, though, I want to briefly review what seem to be the central points of criticism that have been assumed in this larger shift from "images of women" to "woman as image." These points will take on particular meanings and inflections in, say, a psychoanalytic film theory account as we will later see, but they remain central to any critique of the "images" approach.

²³ Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, eds. *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 6.

Again, let me stress that this shift is by no means a simple and chronological one. In fact, it is perhaps more accurate to see these different perspectives in an international context, for it was the countries across the Atlantic that first championed feminist uses of semiotics, structuralism and psychoanalysis in cultural critique. The reasons for this are in some senses quite obvious. The stubborn dominance of positivism and quantitative methodology in American social science has been well charted by critical theorists.²⁴ Early studies of the mass media found their home in the social sciences and thus developed alongside and within the dominant paradigms of mainstream social science. Conversely, on the continent, and to a lesser extent in Great Britain, cultural criticism was linked more to a humanities tradition and thus more influenced by *intellectual* traditions and "high theory" than the rigidly quantitative and somewhat anti-theoretical position of American social science. In any case, it was in fact *British* feminists such as Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston who were amongst the first to appropriate the "new" cultural paradigms for feminism, roughly around the same time (mid 1970's) that American feminists were developing the critique of sex-roles and stereotypes outlined above. So, while the positions are in some ways synchronic, the work discussed below certainly did present itself (at least initially) as a polemic against the "images of women" work. In addition, while "images of women" work continues to be done in a variety of academic and political locations, it has, I believe, been largely discredited by *left* cultural analysts.

Probably the major critique of this model lies in the way it has understood the mass media and how the process of meaning works. As has been pointed out above,

²⁴ For how this relates to cultural studies and media research, see particularly the special issue of the *Journal of Communication*, "Ferment in the Field."

early feminist communications research often relied on a reflection model of culture; the media "reflect" "reality" like a mirror, exemplified in the very term "image:"

The very concept 'image' assumes the media can somehow directly reflect 'reality' rather as if they were a mirror on the world. This view of the media inevitably leads to dismay and affront if the media 'falsify,' 'omit' and 'distort' - i.e. create 'unrealistic' images of women (King and Stott, 1977; (Ed.) Tuchman, 1978; Friedan, 1963; Epstein, 1978; Weibel, 1977 and others).²⁵

The assumption is that there exists - somewhere out there in the world - a "real" woman who can be revealed to us through imagery if only the false, negative, inaccurate, untrue imagery is stripped away:

The term implies a juxtaposition of two separable elements - women as a gender or social group versus representations of women, or a real entity, women, opposed to falsified, distorted or male views of women. It is a common misconception to see images as merely a reflection, good or bad, and compare 'bad' images of women (glossy magazine photographs, fashion advertisements etc) to 'good' images of women ('realist' photographs of women working, housewives, older women, etc).²⁶

Media images are seen as having a direct and unmediated relationship with the "reality" they either distort or reflect. The mirror that media hold up to the world can be either undistorted and clear or fractured and fuzzy, but it is a mirror nonetheless. In this approach, the media are seen to reflect a sexist society and/or the interests of male media professionals:

The frame of reference for all this work is defined by a shared and usually implicit assumption concerning the relationship between cinematic representation and the 'real world': that a film, in recording or reflecting the world in a direct or mediated fashion, is in some sense a vehicle for transmitting meanings which originate outside of itself -

²⁵ Helen Baehr, 148.

²⁶ Griselda Pollock, "What's Wrong with Images of Women?" *Screen* 24, (Autumn 1977), 26.

within the intentions of film makers, perhaps, or within social structures.²⁷

The flip side of this reflection model is a view of the media derived from theories of sex-roles and socialization. If the reflection model posits the media as a mirror to social "reality," the socialization model argues that the media teach us sex-stereotyped roles and behaviors. While there is of course a certain common sense truth to both these assertions (the media do have *some* relation to the social world, the media *do* teach us *some* things in some ways), meaning is still seen as "read-off" the images themselves in a direct, coherent and uncontradictory way. The socialization hypothesis (in its most stark form, often called the "hypodermic model") assumes a one-way flow between image and viewer, with the image acting on the viewer by prescribing roles and behaviors to a largely unspecified and undifferentiated "receiver" of the cultural message. In other words, there is no sense of the role of the spectator in constructing meaning; an image simply "means" something (determined by its characterization and content) which then is unproblematically "picked up" by the viewer:

Recourse to the concept of socialization alone... can only provide a partial explanation. It cannot fully explain the different ways in which certain images affect us...nor on what basis we might make critical distinctions between different images. It also does not explain why women might respond to the same image in different ways.²⁸

The concept of socialization also assumes an individual model of learning, development and psychology; individuals are socialized into their appropriate roles.

²⁷ Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 75.

²⁸ Rosemary Betterton, "How do women look? The female nude in the work of Suzanne Valadon," in *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, 219.

Yet sex-role stereotypes only have meaning and only "work" because they refer to *collective* identities, and collective, or group, experiences of the construction and placement of roles and identities.

The focus on *sex-roles* also misses an essential point about representation, Saussure's point that meaning is made through *difference* and thus needs to be seen *relationally*. Quantitative content analysis might give us a good picture of women's limited roles, but these static roles cannot translate into an understanding of women's *lives* without an interactive/relational dimension to your analysis. In other words, the static concept of roles doesn't allow us to understand the more flexible and relational positionings created by mass media images, and the ways in which women's different "roles" often come into conflict and contradiction with each other.

Along with reflection and socialization, the third fundamental aspect of the "images" perspective has to do with stereotypes. Central to the early critique of images of women was a description of the *stereotypical* representations of women and how these stereotypes limited women's options and possibilities in the "real world." (eg. Tuchman) While it has been much easier to criticize the reflection and socialization models for their simplistic understanding of how meaning is produced, the question of stereotypes remains much more difficult. While many theorists in recent years have attempted to "reclaim" the idea of "stereotypes" for a more critical feminist analysis²⁹ it continues to be a point of contention among feminist analysts of culture. The focus on stereotypes in the early work - while important - failed

²⁹ See especially T.E. Perkins influential article, "Rethinking Stereotypes," in *Ideology and Cultural Production*, ed. Michele Barret et al (London: Croom Helm, 1979).

fundamentally to address their social origin and thus ignored the most interesting aspect of the analysis of stereotypes: how is it that they have meaning for us? Stereotypes work only because they must, in some way, speak to at least perceived "real" attributes or qualities. Their ideological effectivity is based on the experience of them as not simply "erroneous" or "false," but rather as structurally reinforced ideological forms of repression.³⁰ While stereotypes certainly "exist" in the mass media, it is important to ask more complex questions about how, exactly, we come to recognize certain images and representations *as stereotypes*. Does the identification of a stereotype by a critic help us to understand how that image is "read" by spectators? Who is to say what is a stereotype and what is a more "realistic" portrayal? And this, of course, gets to the key problem in the images approach. For if meaning is seen as readily available to the cultural consumer and to the cultural critic (eg. woman in kitchen means housewife means stereotype means "negative" image) than the process of changing representation becomes one of "adjusting" images so that they provide a less stereotyped and more "positive" and more "real" version of women's lives. The problems with this should be obvious. In the first place, who is to say what is more "real" or "positive"? But, more importantly, this emphasis on the transparency of images ignores the social context of image production, the role of the viewer in creating meaning, and the specificity of the mass media form itself.

Many feminists have also taken issue with the reformist strategy suggested by the prescriptive focus of early "image" critics, a strategy that falls into the same

³⁰ Ibid., 136-138.

problems as liberal feminist politics and theory. "More women" or "better images" will not fundamentally challenge the patriarchal "ways of seeing" embedded within the process of representation. To argue for less stereotyped images avoids an attack on the deep structures of the signifying practices which produce those images in the first place. It also avoids an attack on the larger social context of patriarchy in which those image-making systems are embedded.

In addition, a reformist strategy implies that by changing the images themselves you will have changed the reception of them; that "positive images" means that little girls will be socialized in "better" and less sexist ways. This assumes a simple one-way flow that completely ignores any role for the audience/spectator in producing meaning in an *interaction* with the image. One strategy of "better images" - getting more women in the media industries - also elides the distinction between "women" and "feminist": will more women in the media institutions necessarily produce more *feminist* images?

The spectator is also left unanalyzed. For example, a single woman in New York City might "read" "Cagney and Lacey" differently than a suburban housewife and mother in Iowa, and a black welfare mother might experience the opulence and power of Alexis in "Dynasty" as a judgement on her life, while a boardroom executive might find it thrilling and affirming. All this is by way of exposing the problems inherent in a model of socialization that assumes a direct and unproblematic relationship between images and how people actually behave and what they actually think. As later theorists have argued, the relationship between images and everyday life, between "culture" and "society," is hardly so simple and unmediated.

Central to this shift, then, was a new concern with the *productiveness* of images. If images of women were no longer to be seen as simple reflections (or mis-reflections) of "real" women, then feminists had to develop a new analysis that stressed how representations actually *construct* sexual difference, rather than simply reflect it. Although there are similarities here with the socialization work of earlier years, this emphasis on the constructiveness of images is quite different in that it focuses - particularly in feminist film theory - on the specific "signifying practice" of a medium itself. The question then becomes not so much *what* sexist images are produced, but *how* they are produced and thus come to have meaning for us.

One can thus broadly characterize this as a shift from a "images of women" approach to a critical practice that stresses the constructedness of "woman" as image or woman as "sign." The debt to semiotics is obvious, as a new emphasis is put on popular culture as a complex sign-system that can be analyzed in terms of repeatable and recognizable codes:

...the title 'Images of Women' needs to be challenged and replaced by the notion of woman as a signifier in an ideological discourse in which one can identify the meanings that are attached to woman in different images and how the meanings are constructed in relation to other signifiers in that discourse.³¹

The claim is, therefore, that the entire cultural notion of "woman" is itself constructed in and through images rather than somehow "residing" in the images themselves: "Where photography takes woman as its subject matter, it also constructs 'woman' as a set of meanings which then enter cultural and economic circulation on their own

³¹ Griselda Pollock, "What's Wrong with Images of Women," 26.

account."³² Whereas in the previous paradigm of feminist cultural criticism, "woman" herself was taken to be unproblematic, this new work argues that the representation of women in a patriarchal culture entails a split between real, social women and "woman" as image constructed for male desire; woman as sexual spectacle. In other words, they are claiming that it is very difficult, and perhaps impossible, to represent *women* (here meaning actual, embodied women) within patriarchy, and that we instead have to reckon with that which is represented: "woman" as sign, as image, as spectacle. This "woman/women" distinction has proved central to the feminist analysis of culture, but remains a quite difficult and problematic construct which will hopefully become clearer as the chapter progresses.

GENDER AND LOOKING: THE MALE GAZE

Much of this new work in feminist cultural analysis has been introduced around issues of the relationship between gender and looking. Since "looking" or "sight" is obviously such an important part of the reception of an image, it made sense to examine the ways in which "looking" at images is constructed by gender divisions and the social relations of patriarchal power. Again, this was connected to that shift in thinking that was concerned with the *mechanisms* by which the representations of women worked; if it is true that women are so often represented as sexual spectacle, as "on display" for men - which much of the early critique demonstrated - than how does that "work", what are the processes that produce woman as sexual spectacle?

³² Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 19.

Curiously, one of the first theorists to really address the complex question of looking and its relation to gender was the marxist cultural critic John Berger in his book and tv series, *Ways of Seeing*. For Berger, patriarchal society entails that women be constructed as an object for the "look" of the male spectator, or the male voyeur. Berger focuses on how, in our patriarchal culture with its imbalance between male and female, women are positioned as the passive object of the male look and come to internalize this look:

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life....men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object of vision: a sight.³³

Berger was really the first to argue that "looking" - which many might consider a relatively neutral activity - actually carries with it relations of power, access and control. *Ways of Seeing* remains an important text for feminist cultural theorists, even though its framework was rooted in the work of the Marxist cultural theorist and literary critic, Walter Benjamin and was by no means explicitly feminist in its aims. Rather, its uniqueness lies in its creative and determined efforts to break down the categories of "high art/mass culture" and to show how these categories and "ways of seeing" are themselves highly ideological and mystifying. In this sense, Berger paved the way both for feminist theories of "the gaze" as well as the marxist re- thinking of popular culture and ideology.

³³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1972), 46-47.

This idea of the male as bearer of the look, as occupying a privileged space in the process of constructing "ways of seeing," has been taken up by feminists of many different intellectual persuasions. Perhaps the most significant, though, has been the psychoanalytic inflection offered through the work of Laura Mulvey in her important article for *Screen* in 1975, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." If Berger convincingly argued that woman has been placed on the passive side of a gendered division of looking, Mulvey raises the theoretical stakes by asking the crucial question of why this is so; what is it about representation in our culture that insists on this active/passive distinction and that perpetuates the dominance of the "male gaze"? Mulvey turns to psychoanalysis, specifically Lacanian psychoanalysis, to provide a complex answer that locates the male gaze both in the particular processes of classic narrative cinema as well as in the psychic processes of scopophilia, voyeurism and fetishism. Mulvey and others have argued that there are two main pleasures of looking in Hollywood film: voyeurism and fetishism. The voyeuristic look gets pleasure in seeing without being seen oneself and this is associated with power and control over the image. A classic example of this would be Tony Perkins looking through the hole in the wall at an undressing Vivian Leigh in "Psycho."

The fetishistic look has to do with the endowment of something with a sexual meaning. In film, this often takes the form of a sexualization of women's bodies or part of their bodies, ascribing a phallic connotation to a female body part (legs, breasts) in order to recuperate her and rid oneself of the threat of otherness generally, and the threat of castration specifically, "...woman as representation signifies castration,

inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat."³⁴ This fetishistic look is also clearly part of the representation of women in advertising, to the point where women are represented only as a body part:

In ads women are frequently represented in a 'fragmented' way...Women are signified by their lips, legs, hair, eyes or hands, which stand, metonymically - the part for the whole - for, in this case, the 'sexual' woman. Men, on the other hand, are less often 'dismembered'....³⁵

The darkened room of the movie theater sets into motion a set of psychic responses that encourage both a voyeuristic/ scopophilic position as well as a ego-identification with the characters on the screen. Mulvey argues that woman is created as a spectacle for male desire both through the gaze of the camera (seen here as a phallic substitute), the gaze of the men within the narrative, and the gaze of the male spectator, governed by his fear of castration and subsequent fetishization of the female body. This position is summarized here by Teresa de Lauretis:

The woman is framed by the look of the camera as icon, or object of the gaze: an image made to be looked at by the spectator, whose look is relayed by the look of the male character(s). The latter not only controls the events and narrative action but is "the bearer" of the look of the spectator.³⁶

An important aspect of her argument is her contention that there is no space for a female gaze, because the spectator is inevitably addressed as male and female viewers are forced to look with the male protagonist:

³⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Popular Television and Film*, ed. Tony Bennett et al (London: British Film Institute in association with the Open University Press, 1981), 213-214.

³⁵ Janice Winship, "Handling Sex," in *Looking On*, 25.

³⁶ Teresa deLauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 139.

...woman as spectator is offered the dubious satisfaction of identification with the heterosexual masculine gaze, voyeuristic, penetrating and powerful....The problem with this is that it cannot offer any positive explanation of women's pleasure as different from male pleasure.³⁷

But we will return to this question of the spectator later, as it has proved to be a site of controversy in recent debates.

There has been a great deal of debate over the extent to which the concept of the "male gaze" can be extended to media other than film. While the concept of "the gaze" has successfully been applied to the analysis of ads, which so clearly present women as sexual spectacle, it is more difficult to translate to the medium of television. In its psychoanalytic version, the concept is so connected to signifying practices that depend on a darkened room and a relatively passive and fixed audience that it is questionable to what extent it applies to a medium such as television, where the tv image blurs with the familial surroundings, making the intensity of the directed male gaze much more problematic:

...how do theories about the "male gaze" apply to watching television, when usually there is no darkened room, where there is a small screen, and where viewing is interrupted by commercials, by people moving about, or by the viewer switching channels?³⁸

John Ellis, among others, has persuasively argued that "the gaze" is an inaccurate concept for TV analysis because the viewer is *not* in that voyeuristic position that the cinema viewer is because TV *itself* has "the look":

The viewer for TV is very far from being in a position of producing a totalising vision of the truth from the initial stance of curiosity. For

³⁷ Rosemary Betterton, "How do women look?...", 219.

³⁸ E. Ann Kaplan, "Feminist Criticism and Television," p. 230.

broadcast TV, the regime of viewing is rather one of complicity with TV's own look at the passing pageant of life.³⁹

Clearly, Berger's original point about women as the "surveyed" of our culture rings true across media forms, but the specific concept of the male gaze as it has been used by psychoanalytic feminists might raise more problems.

NARRATIVE AND THE POSITIONING OF WOMEN

Another important area of the new feminist cultural criticism centered around the textual analysis of classic Hollywood film. Narrative theory has a long history, both within film theory and, of course, within literary criticism. Here I want to focus on the specifically *feminist* appropriations of narrative analysis, without reviewing narrative theory in-depth as that is beyond the scope of this research. Although narrative has been central to the analysis of culture in general, in more recent years this concern with narrative has mostly been raised within film theory, and is intimately connected with the rise of structuralism within film studies:

Work on narrative structures...is based on the assumption that any one narrative will share common structures with innumerable others. In other words, the presupposition of Formalist approaches to narrative analysis is that individual narratives are simply expressions of underlying structures, or ground rules, common to whole groups of narratives.⁴⁰

Since Althusser,⁴¹ and Lacan via Althusser, questions of narrative have been closely

³⁹ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 160.

⁴⁰ Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 28.

⁴¹ The importance of Althusser for cultural studies cannot be underestimated. Althusser's work on ideology opened up a new and invigorated concern with those areas (culture, education, family, subjectivity) typically considered by left critics as "subordinate" to the more crucial areas of the economy and the workings of capital. Ideology becomes, in Althusser's re-reading of Marx, not something simply "false"

related to questions of subjectivity. In the Althusserian and post-Althusserian film theory, the subject is defined, indeed even constructed as a (fictive) subject, in and through narrative. In this structuralist sense, narrative is not simply "the story," but is the vehicle through which the processes of identification and the construction of subjectivity come to occur. Althusser's claim, borrowing from Lacan, that ideology works by "hailing" us as subjects (the process of interpellation), was thus applied to theories of narrative. In other words, we are positioned and constructed by the operations of the narrative itself, particularly by what was called the "classic realist narrative":

Classic realist texts, it was argued, reproduce bourgeois ideology because they implicate the spectator in a single point of view onto a coherent, hierarchically ordered representation of the world, in which social contradictions are concealed and ultimately resolved through mechanisms of displacement and substitution. In this process, the spectator is 'interpellated' as the 'individual subject' of bourgeois ideology.⁴²

The discussion of narrative, then, was not only related to a discussion of subjectivity but also very influenced by a critique of realism itself. In this reading, the realist narrative is seen as deeply ideological, masking both the conditions of its own production as well as the contradictions of a patriarchal and capitalist society. This

and imposed on the "masses" by the ruling class, but instead something quite real that we all "live through." In allowing ideology to be somewhat "set off" from the economic base, Althusser gave much more credence to the analysis of the production of meaning through cultural activity. Much has been written about the impact of Althusser on left cultural criticism; see especially Richard Johnson, "What is Cultural Studies, Anyway?" in *Social Text* (1987).

⁴² Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home is where the heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 8.

narrative "transparency" has been heavily criticized by feminist and non-feminist film critics alike:

...meaning also presents itself as 'already there' in the story, rather than as an outcome of active processes of signification. In dominant cinema, it might be said, signifiers work un-obtrusively in the service of the narrative.⁴³

In narrative realism, then, there is the impression of a "point- of-view-lessness," "It appears that events narrate themselves. There is no voice which tells the story, there does not appear to be a controlling consciousness that is writing the narrative for the audience...."⁴⁴ Feminists, of course, have pointed out that this apparently anonymous and neutral voice happens to be in a decidedly masculine register.

If the narrative structure of dominant cinema utilized certain realist conventions and implied circumscribed spectator positions, then the need to study individual audiences became a rather moot point, and close textual analysis became the dominant form of film criticism. In more recent years, there has been a change of focus within narrative analysis itself to an increased concern with the *subjective* aspect of film-going and the 'effects' of narrative:

Since the early structural analyses, semiotics has developed a dynamic, processual view of signification as a work(ing) of the codes, a production of meaning which involves a subject in a social field. The object of narrative theory, redefined accordingly, is not therefore narrative but narrativity; not so much the structure of narrative (its component units and their relations) as its work and effects.⁴⁵

⁴³ Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 36.

⁴⁴ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, 74-75.

⁴⁵ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 105.

Feminist film critics, in particular, have been transformed by "the structuralisms" and have therefore redefined the "object" of their analysis, as Annette Kuhn indicates:

No longer is 'woman' regarded as a concrete gendered human being who happens to exist on the cinema screen rather than in 'real' life: 'she' becomes, on the contrary, a structure governing the organization of plot in a narrative or group of narrative.⁴⁶

Questions such as, how does the way a story gets told help to construct certain representations of women?; how do certain types of texts (particularly the classic Hollywood narrative) serve to position women in consistent and circumscribed ways?; and does the narrative structure of classic Hollywood cinema with its pattern of unity-disruption-resolution and its gendered division of looking inevitably reinforce patriarchal ways of seeing?, have been central to the feminist re-thinking of the relationship between woman and narrative.

These and other questions have been addressed both by psychoanalytic film theorists such as Laura Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan, as well as the more semiotically inclined theorist Teresa deLauretis, in an attempt to untangle the relationship between narrative and the representation of women. In general, feminists have argued that the classic realist narrative is typically structured around a feminine enigma, and thus the woman is placed as the unknowable Other who needs to be known/resolved. The masculine agent often has the same knowledge that we the audience do; it is from his point of view, and rarely the woman's, that the story is oriented. Yet it is the woman who disrupts this filmic universe, "...female discourses/female sexuality are the threats which disturb the narrative and it is these which must be contained through narrative

⁴⁶ Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 32.

closure."⁴⁷ De Lauretis claims that woman actually *represents* narrative closure, that the movement of the narrative towards resolution depends on the image of woman.⁴⁸

And, most importantly, the classic narrative resolves the disrupted universe by bringing the woman back into line through some sort of punishment (death, disgrace) or through marriage and the safe enclosure of the nuclear family:

There seems...to be a tendency on the part of the classic Hollywood narrative to recuperate woman. Moreover, it is often woman - as a structure, character, or both - who constitutes the motivator of the narrative, the 'trouble' that sets the plot in motion.⁴⁹

But, as Kuhn has argued, the narrative is not always successful in recuperating woman:

Such excess of narrative disruption over resolution has been seen as signalling Hollywood's intermittent failure to contain woman within the confines of the classic narrative structure.⁵⁰

Much of the feminist work on film (and recent work on literature as well) has been about an attempt to discover this excess in order to "recuperate" classic cinema for feminist interpretations. Crucial to this process the notion of "reading against the grain," where films are "read" for their absences and ruptures in an attempt to reveal the internal contradictions and produce a reading or interpretation that challenges both the dominant reading of the film as well as its coherency and closure. Recently, feminists have challenged the view of classic narrative that sees it as impenetrable and

⁴⁷ Gillian Dyer, "Women and Television: an overview," in *Boxed In: Women and Television*, ed. Helen Baehr and Gillian Dyer (New York and London: Pandora Press, 1987), 11.

⁴⁸ Teresa deLauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 140.

⁴⁹ Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

completely unified and coherent. Questions have been raised concerning the ability of the narrative to bring women "back into line." It has been observed that there is often a disjuncture between the ideological desire to place women in "her place" at the end of the film and the actual structure of the narrative which sometimes contradicts that resolution. It is in these contradictions, these excesses, that feminist film critics have often located the possibility of re-reading the film so that these moments become highlighted and revealed.

Television critics have also focused on narrative, and have stressed that the structure of the ongoing TV serial, for example, needs to be seen in different narrative terms than classic film narrative:

The movement from event to event characteristic of cinematic narration is radically reduced in favour of the multiplication of incident, of action-clinch and of conversation. These take place in relatively self-contained segments. segments are bound together into programmes by the repetition device of the series. This constitutes a basic ongoing problematic, which rarely receives a final resolution.⁵¹

Because soaps and some serials have no real resolution or closure, it is necessary to rethink the position of women in relation to this lack of closure. Is there more space for women within the structure of television serials, and how does this relate to the familial environment in which one most often watches it?

GENDER AND GENRE

Of all the areas discussed thus far, the issue of genre is perhaps the most important one for this study of mothers and daughters. More and more, feminist cultural critics have been interested in the relationship between gender and genre,

⁵¹ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, 158.

between the construction of sexual difference and the specific signifying practices of a particular type of representation. The central question remains, do some genres that have typically been presented for a female audience (melodramas, soap operas, romances) offer themselves up more to a feminist reading? Is there such a thing as "feminine forms" of representation and, if so, do they construct women differently? In *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski sees a feminist potential in television soap operas precisely because of their generic conventions and narrative structure:

...their characteristic narrative patterns, their foregrounding of 'female' skills in dealing with personal and domestic crises, and the capacity of their programme formats and scheduling to key into the rhythms of women's work in the home all address a female spectator.⁵²

Modleski thus sees a possibility in these genres for the creation of female "ways of seeing" that are not constrained by the male gaze and its associated dominance over female subjectivity. In fact, she even argues for the *radical* potential of forms such as the soap opera:

The disorder of the form conveys a structure of feeling appropriate to the experience of the woman in the home whose activities and concerns are dispersed and lacking a center. But precisely because of its decentered nature this most discredited genre can be aligned with advanced feminist aesthetics and advanced critical theory as a whole.⁵³

Much of this discussion over "female forms" has centered around film and television melodrama. In some ways, the new feminist concern with melodrama has an historical and political aspect to it, as melodrama or "the women's film," or "the weepies" as they were often called, have historically been seen as the "lowest" form

⁵² Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (Jan-Feb. 1984): 20.

⁵³ Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: mass-produced fantasies for women* (New York and London: Methuen, 1982), 111.

of mass culture, not worthy of the critical attention paid male genres such as the Western or film noir. It is not surprising, of course, that genres associated both with a female audience and with "feminine" subject matters (the family, personal relationships, love, etc.) should be found unworthy of critical attention by male cultural critics. But feminist critics have reclaimed these films and television shows and novels as worthwhile subjects for analysis, and some of the most interesting work in recent years (Tania Modleski's on romance, gothics, and tv soaps; Janice Radway's study of female romance readers; Charlotte Brunsdon's work on British soap operas, etc.) has come out of this attempt to deal with the question of "gender and genre."

Melodrama, in particular, has come under close scrutiny, because of the possibilities in a genre that both "speaks" to a female audience *and* foregrounds women in its narrative:

One of the defining generic features of the woman's picture as a textual system is its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view.⁵⁴

Many feminist critics have argued that this foregrounding of a female point-of-view renders the genre both open to a feminist reading and available to a female audience:

Because the "woman's film" obsessively centers and re-centers a female protagonist, placing her in a position of agency, it offers some resistance to an analysis which stresses the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the woman, her objectification as spectacle according to the masculine structure of the gaze.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres:" 18.

⁵⁵ Mary Anne Doane, "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address," in *Re-Vision*, 70.

Melodrama, then, is often seen in terms of its *excess*, its inability to fully enclose and recuperate the woman. It is in this "excess" and in the contradictions inherent in the subject of the genre (relationships, family, love, sex), that contestation can be located and analyzed:

Thus in twentieth-century melodrama the dual role of woman as symbol for the whole culture and as representative of a historical, gendered point of view produces a struggle between male and female voices: the symbol cannot be owned, but is contested.⁵⁶

Now, whether these contradictions opened up by the melodrama actually serve as "progressive" forces in women's lives, or whether they are merely "escape-valves" for women's frustrations and anxieties, has been hotly contested by feminist critics.

One of the important issues, though, raised by this whole new discussion of "female genres," has been a re-evaluation and re-thinking of the female spectator and her possibilities within a patriarchally constructed system of representation. Much of the significance of the study of feminine forms and women's genres has to do with the possible "subject positions" they offer women spectators. It has been argued, by theorists as diverse as Modleski, Feuer, and Kuhn, that both "women's films" and the melodramatic television serial, "...seems(s) to offer an especially active role for the spectator...."⁵⁷

But, before getting into this question, it is important to review some of the feminist thinking on audience/spectators. First, it is important to make a distinction between those two terms - audience and spectator - because not only are they tied

⁵⁶ Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: an investigation," 37.

⁵⁷ Jane Feuer, "Melodrama, Serial Form and Television Today," *Screen* 25., no. 1 (Jan-Feb 1984): 15.

to different intellectual traditions, but they are used quite differently in the analysis of representation and reception. The concept of "audience" is much more connected to the sociological tradition of communications research discussed in the beginning of this chapter. It refers, typically, to the actual people who sit and watch - who consume - a media production. The concept of "spectator" - particularly as it has been used by feminist film critics - refers to the *subject position* constructed by the representation. The "spectator" is not here a "real woman" but is instead a viewing position constructed by the signifying practice itself. The text constructs us as *spectators*, that is, as sites or locations for the enactment of specific psychic processes such as voyeurism. Annette Kuhn makes a distinction between the "social audience" as a "...group of people who buy tickets at the box office, or who switch on the TV sets; people who can be surveyed, counted and categorised according to age, sex and socioeconomic status."⁵⁸ and the "spectator" who is constructed in relation to the text. This distinction entails profoundly different methodologies. Psychoanalytic critics impute "spectator positions" from an analysis of the text because they believe that the text itself situates women and men in universal and repeatable ways. Thus a "spectator" will "read" an image according to their positioning by the textual operations. As Ann Gray notes:

...such analyses have tended to assume an ideal (female) reader, inscribed within the feminine subject position offered by the text and further emphasised by the assumed cultural competencies of the reader. The risk inherent in this enterprise is the conflation of the 'implied' and the 'real' reader.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres," 23.

⁵⁹ Ann Gray, "Reading the Audience," *Screen* 28, no. 3 (1987): 33.

Feminists concerned with the "social audience" often engage in ethnographic research where they interview women to ascertain exactly how they consume a representation and what they do in the process of making meaning out of it. In this position, "subject positions" are not wholly determined by the signifying apparatus, but are contested and struggled over by actual women in the process of reading/viewing/consuming.

Kuhn tried to bring these two positions together by seeing them as part of a continuum where the construction of one is dependent upon the other:

Social audiences become spectators in the moment they engage in the processes and pleasures of meaning-making attendant on watching a film or TV programme. The anticipated pleasure of spectatorship is perhaps a necessary condition of existence of audiences. In taking part in the social act of consuming representations, a group of spectators becomes a social audience.⁶⁰

Women's genres, then, can be said to address both a social audience of women (marketing to people who are already constructed as women) as well as a feminine spectator:

If soaps and melodramas inscribe femininity in their address, women - as well as being already formed for such representations - are in a sense also formed by them.⁶¹

If Mulvey's early psychoanalytic position claimed the impossibility of a female "look," trapped as we are by the male gaze and its attendant voyeurism, recent critics (including Mulvey herself in an article rethinking "Visual Pleasure and Narrative

⁶⁰ Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres:" 23.

⁶¹ Ibid., 24.

Cinema"⁶²) have attempted to find space for a female gaze, to open up this seemingly hermetically sealed relation between viewer and image. Interestingly, this concern for discovering a female gaze or female spectator position has close links with a newly invigorated tendency towards ethnographic research. Janice Radway, Ien Ang, Charlotte Brunsdon and others have all - in very different ways - attempted to get beyond the limits of textual analysis and imputed spectator-positions to understand how "real women" actually do engage with representations:

The analytic focus must shift from the text itself, taken in isolation, to the complex social event of reading where a woman actively attributes sense to lexical signs in a silent process carried on in the context of her ordinary life.⁶³

These newer developments in feminist cultural theory are promising, as they begin to offer a way out of the unsatisfying options of empiricism or textual analysis. In what follows, I hope to return to these issues in an attempt to rethink the project of feminist cultural studies.

MATERIAL GIRLS: TOWARDS A FEMINIST CULTURAL THEORY

In the course of this review, several questions and concerns should have emerged. In some ways, the most obvious question concerns the relationship between the two positions roughly sketched out in the preceding pages. Are the "images" and "signification" perspectives really so dissimilar? While, of course, there are fundamental differences in the two - both theoretically and

⁶² Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'...Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun'", *Framework*, nos. 15/16/17, (1981): 12-15.

⁶³ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 8.

methodologically - there seem to be some equally fundamental shared assumptions and analytic practices. Most important, perhaps, is the issue that crops up in most debates on cultural criticism and that presents the major stumbling block in the search for a truly critical cultural theory; that is, the question of social relations. For both image and signification theorists, social relations - and all that implies about social context, history and politics - is noticeably absent in all but a few of the more recent ethnographic and audience-based studies.

Although the move to close textual analysis, influenced by semiotics and narrative theory, has been heralded as something new and radical, it remains dubiously linked to the content studies of earlier generations. For both the "image" theorists engaged in content analysis and the "signification" theorist engaged in textual analysis, the media text becomes reified: the text becomes the beginning and end of cultural critique, both the subject and object of analysis. Interestingly, the more mainstream feminist communications researchers often paid more attention to social context, albeit in a limited way. Effects studies, problematic as they are, at least address themselves to a question central to any critical cultural analysis: what are the "effects" of the media on people's lives? Now, clearly, theorizing the media in terms of "effects" assumes a one-way flow model of indoctrination that has rightly been criticized in recent years, particularly by critics on the left. But, nevertheless, much of early feminist work (eg Tuchman) was explicitly concerned with the social effects of media images. This cannot be said of the signification research.

In addition, both "sides" avoid (exceptions again include the more recent feminist work on audience) the specificity of the audience member. In the psychoanalytic work, she is either presumed male or, more generally, *positioned* by the workings of

the text and the generic psychic patterns of the implied spectator. Similarly, the "images" work either ignores the viewer altogether (eg content studies) or renders her generic and anonymous in the haze of numbers that pour forth from the effects studies. In either case, the specificity of the female viewer in terms of race, class, sexual preference, national identity, etc., is overlooked, rendering her either absent or implied by the textual operations.

This evacuation of social relations - shared by both groups of critics - means that the historicity of media images is denied or, at the very least, avoided. Cultural criticism, in both these forms of analysis, prefers to position itself as an island, a world unto itself. The *social context* of the production, distribution and reception of certain images is thus largely ignored or left to more journalistic and popular interventions such as Haskell and Rosen.

For all these similarities, feminist signification theorists *have* greatly added to the body of knowledge within cultural analysis. The concern with the position of women in narratives and within particular genres; the attention to the ways in which patriarchy not only structures content, but informs our very "way of seeing" as well; and the emphasis on the "constructedness" and "productiveness" of images, have provided the tools for numerous revealing and deconstructive analyses of media texts. Nonetheless, serious problems remain.

The most fundamental problem, I believe, stems from the issues raised above concerning the absence of social relations. One would expect feminist theories of representation to articulate a decidedly *woman-centered* framework for the analysis of cultural phenomena. In other words, one would expect an analysis that *begins* from the premises of feminist theory and analysis. Yet this discourse - drawing as it does

so fundamentally from Lacanian psychoanalysis and linguistic and semiotic models, often seems more engaged with detailing the internal system of "filmic texts" than with advancing the feminist project. In struggling to make apparent the difference between "women" as real historical beings and "woman" as she is constructed in and through the male gaze, the former is often lost, or at the very least held in perpetual suspension. For even while a great many of these feminist signification theorists claim to make the distinction between "woman" and "women" and say they're interested in delineating the relationship between the two, they never seem to get to women qua women. For if there is not a "real" or "true" image of "woman", there is - after all is said and done - real flesh and blood women out there in the world, a point that feminist *social* theory has continually reiterated in its stress on experience and the attempt to theorize from a feminist *standpoint*.⁶⁴

But why are *women* absent in so much of feminist cultural criticism? It seems to me that the reasons are many and varied. Clearly, the absence of women in the discourse of feminist film criticism, for example, must have something to do with the formalistic tendencies of most of that work. Talking about "women" would entail a social and historical analysis that breaks out of the formal and ahistoric categories of most current talk of the "signifying process." The notion of "signifying system" - especially in film theory - tends to become a self-enclosed, overly formalistic mechanism for detaching the celluloid from the social. The only historicity we can

⁶⁴ Further work in this area would include an attempt to make more explicit connections between feminist *social* theory and feminist theories of *representation*. Up until now, the two have been curiously separate. Nancy Hartsock's idea of a "feminist standpoint" could perhaps be taken up by feminist cultural critics to explore the specificity of women's relationship to cultural imagery.

find is the historicity of the film practice itself, stripped away from the social practices from which it emerged. As Michele Barrett puts it, "...in so far as a knowledge of real social relations is denied, it must follow that discourse itself must be the site of struggle. We do not seek a cultural revolution; we seek a revolution in discourse."⁶⁵

But, most importantly, women are absent because politics (and therefore, of course, history) are absent. If the discourse of feminist film criticism is itself embedded within a larger discourse that we may call post-structuralism, then we may do well to question the politics of post-structuralism. But let us go back to the referent, and think this question of post-structuralism and politics through the eyes of women, real women, women who have historically been denied their subjectivity. We may wonder then, about what a politics that posits no referent has to offer women. It seems both dangerous and unwise for women to accept the concept of the loss of the subject, the demise of the referent. It is quite easy to whistle a fond farewell to the subject when one is assured that, after all, one *is* one (white men, for example), or, as Tania Modleski so succinctly puts it: "The death of the social is another of phallogentrism's masks, likewise authorising the 'end of woman' without consulting her...."⁶⁶ But for women, whose very existence has been defined ideologically in terms of our very *lack* of that subjectivity, the issue remains much more complex:

The viewing subject has to a certain extent displaced the social audience
- both as object of knowledge and site of social transformation.
Heterogeneity has been invoked as a conceptual tool to put the subject

⁶⁵ Michele Barrett, "Representation and cultural production," in *Ideology and Cultural Production*, 72.

⁶⁶ Tania Modleski, "Femininity as Mas(s)querade...", 51.

in crisis - the viewing subject.... But one gains the impression that the audience...has assumed an unquestioned homogeneity in part guaranteed by unanimous agreement that the subject must be put in crisis, decentered, thus ironically ensuring a very safe, central and functional place to the concept of the subject as an imaginary category. An assault on the ideological concept of audience...has resulted in a retreat from the social.⁶⁷

In an ironic sort of way, signification theorists - with all their emphasis on heterogeneity and plurality, excess and transgression - seem to posit an almost Weberian ideal type in referring to the spectator. Real social differences - of class, of race, of sexual preference, of ethnicity - are erased in the ideal type categories of masculine and feminine subject positions and constructions of desire. While "women" are avoided, "femininity" and the "feminine" are constantly evoked. But, femininity does not "equal" women, although it is clearly a part of the construction of a female identity. And again, "femininity" evoked as an all-encompassing, transhistorical term to describe the condition of women under patriarchy avoids a more nuanced and detailed discussion of different "femininities" and other forms of female behavior that perhaps don't neatly fit into that category. Thus, once again, the specificity of the reader/spectator - a specificity which is *theorized* and stressed in their discourse - is effectively denied in their critical practice.

Here too, the reliance on a psychoanalytic framework for analysis (mostly Lacanian these days), relegates the complex *social* practice of representation to a few grand metaphors. It is a problem for women when "Oedipal" becomes the dominant metaphor through which our relationship to representation is defined. The production of difference *does* occur in representation, but to locate it so narrowly within timeless

⁶⁷ Leslie Stern, "Feminism and Cinema: exchanges," *Screen* 20, nos. 3/4, (1979-80): 89-90.

psychic processes is to evade both the *social* construction of difference as well as the heterogeneity of differences present in any given audience. The use of the Oedipal metaphor as a sort of grand signifier of the workings of representation, particularly as it relates to narrative (eg de Lauretis, narrative=desire=Oedipus) loses sight of the social constructedness of the Oedipal conjuncture itself.

Often, I think, psychoanalysis is offered as an explanation for the seemingly intractable commitment to relationships and modes of behavior that are clearly "bad" for us. In other words, if we have now done away with the mechanistic and degrading concept of "false consciousness," we must have some other way of explaining our investment in ideologies and practices that serve only to reinforce our own oppression. Modleski says as much in her justification for her own use of psychoanalytic concepts in her analysis of various forms of romance. Psychoanalysis, she writes,:

...helps explain, for example, why the sales of Harlequin Romances have not simply remained steady in recent years, but have steadily increased along with the growth of feminism. Only by taking psychoanalytic insights into account... can we begin to explain why women are still requiring what Jameson calls the "symbolic satisfactions" of the texts instead of looking for "real" satisfactions.⁶⁸

The "goal" here is no different than that of earlier, orthodox Marxist cultural critics: to find out why people are duped, why they are satisfied with fantasy at the expense of pursuing a new reality. This in itself is problematic, as it assumes a compensatory function for mass culture. But even more problematic is her assumption that the cultural critic, when faced with her own bewilderment over the dubious pleasures of mass culture, "must" take psychoanalytic insights into account. Psychoanalysis is thus

⁶⁸ Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 29.

placed as the "truth" that underlies the surface realities of women's lives; the feminist critic can now "explain" false consciousness with the "truth" of psychoanalysis in much the same way that an earlier marxist critic could "explain" it with the "truth" of historical materialism. But psychoanalysis (or historical materialism, for that matter) are not the only ways to explain enduring contradictions and the seemingly self-defeating investments so many of us make to structures of oppression. Indeed, using Modleski's own example, one might want to "explain" this phenomena precisely in terms of the changing social conditions fostered by feminism, thus placing these "symbolic satisfactions" in an historical and social context. I remain, then, unconvinced of the *necessity* of psychoanalytic constructs as an explanatory model, although this doesn't, of course, rule it out as one possible method among many.

In examining the work of the signification theorists, there is also the question of accessibility, a question conveniently "overlooked" in most "cutting edge" discourse but one which feminists can clearly not afford to ignore. In the rush to keep up with the newest in "post"- thought, cultural critique (once again) finds itself inaccessible to even the most forward thinking of the general public. And it seems to me that cultural criticism, more than any other method of critical thought, must struggle to make itself known. For if the image so often mystifies and degrades us, our criticism of that same image should not - must not - participate in further mystification. If the point of cultural analysis is to demystify, to make available alternative and oppositional reading of cultural objects that often appear transparent to us in their simplicity and innocuousness, then it hardly serves our purpose to regale ourselves with endless speculations on the floating signifier and musings on the impossibility of reading. If we want to reveal the ideological agenda or agendas that

are often inscribed in a cultural text, then to use language and analysis that is deeply inaccessible, severely jargon-laden, is only to further mystify and further remove those objects from the comprehension and control of those consumers who they are aimed at.

This inaccessibility is a result, I believe, not only of the increasing academicism of feminist cultural critique, but also of a certain narrowing of focus. This narrowing of focus has occurred on two levels. On the one hand, it has to do with the increasingly text-based studies and the absence of a broader context that implies, resulting in a sort of esoteric reductionism:

...we must avoid making the text itself our only basis for analysis...To restrict our analysis solely to the text itself is to turn the object of analysis into its own means of explanation...To reduce the problem solely to the text is a form of reductionism as unprofitable as reducing it to the mechanical expression of economic relations.⁶⁹

But it also is connected to the sort of tentative micro-analyses provoked by the post-structuralist critique of "grand theory" and "master narrative." While this is not the place to get into *that* whole question, it has to be said that it has made us all very wary of drawing links and making more general claims about, for example, women and representation *across* different media, lest we be accused of constructing an oppressive "totalizing" theory. While we *do* need, obviously, to be wary of reinserting the dominant "narratives" into our analyses, we *must* make connections and links between our particular cultural analyses and the larger social fabric if we are to be

⁶⁹ Michele Barrett, "Ideology and the cultural production of gender," in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 75.

political in our work. To paraphrase Marx: up until now, cultural critics have been content to read a text; the point however, is to write a new one.

Clearly, too, this question of accessibility is a particularly troubling one for feminists. If part of the feminist project has always been to ground theory and knowledge in the real experiences of women and to avoid the kind of abstractions that have historically been used to exclude the female voice, then a theoretical practice that is weighted with jargon occupies a suspicious place within feminist theory.

But if these two positions (the "image" perspective and the "signification" approach), while interesting and illuminating to a great extent, still remain inadequate to the project of developing a feminist cultural theory or standpoint, then what may be suggested in their stead? My criticisms of both the image and the signification theorists suggests a direction, although an admittedly unmapped one. Clearly, I don't think a return to the quantitative and descriptive approach of the early researchers on images of women in the mass media is a valuable way to address the problems raised by my critique of the signification theorists. And yet I also don't believe that the latter position needs simply to be deepened, or even politicized for my criticisms to become moot. What we need, I think, is a feminist cultural criticism that has the theoretical sophistication of the second position - a position that is deeply critical of the dominant representations of women - but that is informed by a committed feminist praxis.

If feminism is both a way of understanding the world and a politics, then shouldn't theories of culture - while of course borrowing from a variety of perspectives - develop fundamentally from *feminism*, particularly in terms of methodology? This is not to say that feminist cultural theorists shouldn't engage with

semiotics or other methods of decoding cultural objects, but that these approaches should be used to enhance *feminist* cultural theorizing, rather than the other way around. In other words, in arguing for a feminist *cultural* theory (not necessarily in opposition to a feminist film theory, or a feminist analysis of advertising, or a feminist theory of tv, but perhaps *inclusive* of them) I am suggesting that feminism has the analytic power to act as a significant decoder of the cultural products of late capitalism. Studies *across* different media are thus of the utmost importance:

While paintings, pin-ups, news photographs, fashion and photographic images vary considerably in the ways in which they are produced and consumed, they overlap and intersect in their representations of femininity and female sexuality. It therefore makes sense to look at the ways in which the feminine image is constructed across a range of differing cultural practices.⁷⁰

Indeed, I am going even further, in suggesting that women's unique position vis-a-vis mass culture (as both subject and object, as the one defined against that which she is not: "Man", as the body through which difference is produced) renders feminism *as a standpoint* privileged access to the arduous process of demystification and subversive interpretation.

Clearly, then, I am calling for not simply a new *focus*, but rather a new conceptualization of what the project of feminist cultural criticism can be. I think the work emanating from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham⁷¹ can begin to offer us ways to think of the project of cultural studies

⁷⁰ Rosemary Betterton, *Looking On*, 1-2.

⁷¹ The history of CCCS in its negotiation both with traditional academic life as well as with the theoretical grab-bag proffered with the "New Social Movements" of the 60s and 70s is a long and contested one. While there is not single "Birmingham School," the development has been characterized by certain central debates and issues, not least amongst them the question of structuralism and the "relative autonomy" of

that avoids the rigid and limiting orthodoxies of various reflection hypotheses as well as struggles against the dangers of a post-structuralist no politics.

But, before getting into that, it is necessary to take a brief detour into ideology, as it has been noticeably absent from this review. This is no simple oversight; rather, the reasons for its absence here are in fact quite revealing as to the state of feminist cultural studies. In reality, I can only offer a somewhat paradoxical explanation for this absence of ideology. For, on the one hand, the recognition of the ideological nature of images and the mass media in general is by now accepted amongst critical cultural theorists. The "role" that the media play in reproducing (and producing) the terms of dominant (patriarchal, capitalist) culture has been thoroughly acknowledged and assimilated into the analytic frameworks of most theorists who are vaguely on the left, including all the theorists discussed above. So, in a sense, "ideology critique" can be found across the broad spectrum of feminist criticism. For example, both E. Ann Kaplan and Rosalind Coward attempt to include ideological critique within a psychoanalytic framework, while Judith Williamson attempts to combine it with semiotics. Indeed, Annette Kuhn has explicitly argued that feminist textual analysis is, by its very nature, ideological criticism:

A textual analysis whose objective is to uncover this process of signification will, according to this argument, also - as an intended or unintended consequence - uncover the textual operations of ideology. That is to say, such an approach can constitute what has been termed an

culture, à la Althusser. For solid introductions to these debates, see: Richard Johnson, "What is Cultural Studies, Anyway?," *Social Text* 16 (Winter 1986/87); Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," *Media, Culture and Society* no. 2 (1980); and Centre texts such as Hall, Hobson, Lowe and Willis, (eds) *Culture, Media and Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980) and Hall et al (eds) *Resistance Through Rituals* (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

ideological analysis. Structuralist and semiotic approaches to textual analysis which take up this notion of ideology are founded, therefore, on the twofold assumption that part of the work of ideology is to conceal its own operation, and that this operation can have its own independent effects with cultural productions. ...Feminist textual analysis then, by examining ways in which films embody and construct patriarchal ideology, by undercutting these ideological operations and by offering alternative ways of looking at films, may be regarded as an intervention within ideology.⁷²

If ideology is everywhere, then, it is also, paradoxically, nowhere. In other words, the debates over the meaning of "ideology," prompted in part by Althusser but continued and heightened with Foucault and the "language turn" of post-structuralism, have rendered the term so problematic that the use of ideology has, to a great extent, been replaced by "discourse." Even when ideology is retained, its relationship to its Marxist heritage (ideology as partial knowledge, as mystifying, as the opposite of that which is true and material) is often lost or glossed over.

This wariness over ideology is, in part, a healthy response to the denigrating use of the term to describe the compensatory pleasures of mass culture (eg. false consciousness). The pleasures of popular culture could not be simply designated as the false consciousness of the masses held under the sway of capitalist ideology. Yet the post-Althusserian battle cry - "the materiality of ideology" - disengages both terms from any substantive meaning:

What seems to be happening here, and it is a worrying trend, is that by celebrating on the one hand an active audience for popular forms and on the other those popular forms which the audience 'enjoy', we appear to be throwing the whole enterprise of cultural critique out of the window.⁷³

⁷² Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 77, 95.

⁷³ Ann Gray, "Reading the Audience," 28.

In sum, while there are feminists who continue to produce what might be called marxist-feminist cultural criticism, such as Michele Barrett and Judith Williamson, one is hard pressed to come up with many feminists who are exclusively working within what used to be called "ideology critique." It often appears as if the psychoanalytic (or semiotic, or structuralist) framework comes first, and the analysis of ideology - such as it is - has to fit into this paradigm.

One of the essential components, therefore, of British cultural studies, is its refusal to do away with ideology as an important and compelling analytic category. More than that, it is its refusal to do away with Marxism altogether, not so easy a position to maintain in these days of post-everything.

British cultural theory represents a body of work that has been characterized by its persistent intervention upon Marxism and its struggle to develop a conceptualization of "culture" that does not succumb to either economic reductionism or a hazy, all-inclusive idealism. This attempt at reconceptualization has necessitated an interaction with orthodox marxism as well as the Marxist traditions embodied in the work of the Frankfurt School, Gramsci, Althusser, and the whole of what has come to be known as "western Marxism." What has emerged out of this process of critique and analysis is an ambitious and not unproblematic attempt at synthesis - taking insights culled from a variety of traditions both inside marxism (Marx and Engels, Althusser, Gramsci, Lukacs, etc.) and outside it (semiotics, Barthes, Lacanian psychoanalysis, film theory, post-structuralism).

In response to both pessimistic Frankfurt School mass culture theory and the "hypodermic model" of most early American communications studies, the Birmingham perspective offers a series of arguments, empirical studies, and theoretical

conceptualizations that are explicitly *anti-reductionist* in both method and tone. The search here is for an analysis of popular culture that sees both the moments of resistance and containment, the contradictory and dialectical movements of domination and subversion. The field of "culture" then - both in its more institutionalized forms in the mass media and in its less formal, local manifestations - is seen as a highly contested *terrain* of transformations and mediations. In its continuous re-thinking of the Marxian project, this interdisciplinary perspective can offer feminists new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between marxism and feminism, the previous discussion of which has produced a nowhere debate on the (unhappy) marriage of marxism and feminism - an unfortunate metaphor to be sure.

The Birmingham approach to cultural studies thus originally appeared to me as the panacea for the twin evils of economistic Marxism and esoteric intellectualism, but also seemed deeply appropriate to what has since been called the "postmodern condition." It is, however, not without its problems. While I often felt there was an intellectual affinity between the British Marxist cultural theory and feminism in their shared emphases on "lived experience" and their commitment to releasing the muted and suppressed voices of those typically seen as somehow "outside" culture, nevertheless the emphasis remained resolutely class-based, with "women" or "girls" occasionally grafted on to and already established cultural framework.⁷⁴ The insights of feminism were often mentioned but rarely served to transform either the methodology or the choice of cultural objects to be analyzed.

⁷⁴ cf. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, "Girls and Subculture," in *Resistance Through Rituals* ed. Stuart Hall et al (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

Yet the affinity remains. Indeed, Janice Radway's work on women romance readers is a unique attempt to develop this affinity in critical feminist practice. Radway's subjects (much like the male working-class subjects of much Birmingham work) are neither duped consumers of cultural commodities nor are they simply enjoying themselves "innocently." Her attempt to integrate the critical and ethnographic impulses of Birmingham with a thorough feminist politics points to a quite interesting set of research possibilities for feminist cultural critics. This perspective can begin to provide us with ways of actually thinking about and *doing* cultural studies. Ethnographic research is certainly nothing new in the social sciences, but it does have a limited tradition in terms of the analysis of mass media and popular culture. Most of the empirical work done in cultural studies has, until recently, been quantitative and informed by conservative social theory. British cultural studies has consistently produced work that is deeply committed to an examination of how people actually experience their own cultural life:

...although our own interpretation as analyst is an inescapable, inevitable part of all mass culture research, it is nonetheless important and helpful to begin with a real audience's conscious, surface interpretation of a given form if we wish to understand how that form functions within the larger culture and, most especially, if we hope ourselves to contribute to the possibilities for challenging the material situation....⁷⁵

In simple terms, they actually look at *people* - a daring thing to do in an intellectual milieu that has boldly declared the end of social relations. But, more importantly, this ethnographic impulse is informed by a sustained and developed political sensibility, so that the studies have the richness and vitality that only an engagement with actual

⁷⁵ Janice Radway, "Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass Culture, Analytic Method, and Political Practice," *Communication* 9, no. 1 (1986): 9.

lived experience can produce. For it seems deeply contradictory for feminist film theorists (for example) to consistently avoid discussion of *women* while speaking eloquently of the construction of *woman* in and through representation. And again, if it has always been a patriarchal strategy to represent woman as image, as symbol, as metaphor for male desire (as the feminist film critics so thoroughly point out) then it behooves us to do more than reiterate this point (woman as "lack", as "absence", as signifier). While delineating the workings of patriarchy as it constructs woman as signifier is vital - and a first step towards any critical cultural analysis - it becomes vacant when the relationship between "woman" and Women" is forever held in abeyance.

This is not to say that ethnographic and audience-based research is not without its own set of problems. For example, Ien Ang's⁷⁶ study of the night-time soap "Dallas," turns her anonymous female respondents into so many "texts" for her critical analysis. Ang's "informants" - women who responded by letter to an ad placed in a women's magazine concerning their feelings about "Dallas" - have no history, no social context, no identity, and thus come to seem much like the statistical results of an "effects" study. The resulting analysis of "Dallas" and the meaning it has for women is correspondingly weak; one feels she could have come to the same conclusions *without* the letters. Similarly, Morley's study of *Family Television*,⁷⁷ while interesting and often entertaining, fails to provide a more layered and textured analysis

⁷⁶ Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985).

⁷⁷ David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Comedia, 1986).

that an encounter with "real audiences" should, in principle, do. His conclusions, like Ang's, could have been arrived at through *any* critical perspective.

Yet other studies, like Radway's, stand as examples of the possibility of reuniting text and context within a critical feminist perspective. In this regard, an emphasis on some sort of (non-empiricist) empirical research must be part of the project, particularly if one attempts to turn the feminist phrase "the personal is political" into a methodological principle. Methodologically, this would entail a move away from the focus on either the isolated text or the aggregate viewer, and a move towards an engagement with the lived experience of actual women, an engagement with "material girls." This seems to me a direction feminist cultural theory must move in, if it is to take seriously its desire to demystify dominant cultural products and to help construct a liberatory and expressive feminist culture.

CHAPTER THREE
FROM SACRIFICIAL *STELLA* TO MALADJUSTED *MILDRED*:
DE(CLASS)IFYING MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

In a recent film called *Night, Mother*, a mother is trying to prevent her daughter from shooting herself. In a climactic scene, the mother, clutching her breast and trying to comprehend her daughter's decision, screams in anguish, "I don't know what I did but I know that I did it!" In an otherwise forgettable film, these few words stand out as poignant and resonate with what we take to be the "truth" about relationships between mothers and daughter. For, whatever else occurs between the two women during this evening of the daughter's death, we know - like *Mother* -that somehow, in some way, she *was* responsible.

Representations of the mother/daughter relationship have survived many permutations to arrive at this juncture of blame and guilt. Yet it is possible to locate a specific moment where this new paradigm of inevitable conflict took hold in the popular imagination. Typically, we look to the fifties as the period in which circumscribed conceptions of mothering and "women's place" cohered within the

context of a new familialism and domesticity. Indeed, excellent feminist scholarship has detailed the ways in which the domestic ideologies of the fifties developed in the wake of enormous changes in women's relationship to work and family that occurred during World War Two.¹ Central to this "back to the kitchen" motif was a restructuring of the maternal role and the development of ideologies of mothering that left women little room for self-definition outside of those very narrow strictures.

Feminist scholarship, then, usually focuses on the "backlash" effect that emerged out of the wartime experience. Yet, in pushing our gaze back a bit - to the thirties and forties rather than the forties and fifties -we can discern the cultural changes that took place prior to the full elaboration of fifties domesticity. This earlier shift paved the way for that overblown version of the nuclear family that so thoroughly populated the cultural landscape of what we periodize "the Fifties."

The relationship of mother and daughter affords access to these popular conceptions and ideologies of women's identity, particularly her identity as mother. For it is frequently within the context of this relationship that questions of female sexuality, maternal activity, and subjectivity are often expressed. And Hollywood genre films, always a rich resource for popular knowledge, are central to the construction of domestic ideologies - particularly in their heyday in the late thirties and forties. The intersection of these two sites of discourses on female identity - mass audience

¹ There has been an outpouring in recent years of feminist scholarship on the 40s and 50s. Particularly helpful to me, with their emphasis on cultural representations of women during these years, has been the work of Maureen Honey (*Creating Rosie the Riveter*, University of Mass. Press, 1984) and Elaine Tyler May (*Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, New York: Basic Books, 1988)

Hollywood film and the mother/daughter relationship - illuminates the extent and seriousness of the transformation into the post-war world.

Here I will focus primarily on three films, *Stella Dallas*, made in 1937, *Now, Voyager*, made in 1942, and *Mildred Pierce*, made in 1945,² to examine the shift in discourses of the mother/daughter relationship from the context of Depression-era America to a nation absorbed with the war effort and already deeply concerned about the implications of "Rosie the Riveter." This shift - from a sacrificial model of mothering a daughter to a model of malevolence and psychopathology - speaks to an increasing anxiety towards the end of the war around women, sexuality, and the nature and status of "mothering" in a post-war society.³ The change in representation also signals a broader post-war desire to move away from class-based discourses (so prevalent during the 30s) and towards a sanitized version of the pluralistic American dream, replete with suburban idylls, postwar consumerism, and a rejuvenated familialism.

² These three films, though not the only that could be chosen for this study, are significant on a number of levels. First, all three, and particularly *Stella Dallas* and *Mildred Pierce*, are widely recognized as "classic" Hollywood depictions of mothering and the mother/daughter relationship. Secondly, all three films enjoyed enormous success and thus stand out as truly "mass" entertainment. And, lastly, all three films have been central texts within feminist film criticism and have been commented on widely. While this article is not intended as a summary of the various debates and positions articulated around these films, I will be referring to the work of Kaplan, Williams, LaPlace and others to elaborate my somewhat different reading of these films in the context of changing representations of the mother/daughter relationship.

³ Many historians have argued, convincingly, that the backlash that followed women's participation in the labor force had already begun mid-war, and that ideologies of maternal neglect and the deprivation caused by working mothers began almost as soon as women entered the wartime economy.

In many ways, then, the film *Stella Dallas* signifies an end not only to a certain kind of representation of mothering and the mother/daughter relationship, and an end to a kind of genre, which became increasingly unpopular as the years progressed, but also an end to a *social* representation of family relationships. Instead, what we increasingly see as the years progressed is the personalization and psychologization of the mother/daughter relationship, removing that interaction from the larger field of social and class relations, a field which continued to shape cultural production as late as the 1937 "weepie" *Stella Dallas*.⁴

In this film, Stella (played by Barbara Stanwyck), a fast-talking, upwardly mobile (she's taking night business courses to "improve" herself) working-class girl from a small New England mill town, hooks the upper class and correct Steven Dallas. From the beginning, Stella is depicted as different from her family, particularly from her mother, a hunched over, beaten down wife and mother whose visual resemblance to a depression era Dorothea Lange photo is striking.

The birth of their baby girl, Laurel, signifies the real beginning of this narrative. Stella's husband quickly moves to New York in exasperation over her refusal to become appropriately upper-class, and the girl is brought up by her mother, although the father remains very much in the picture.⁵ Through a series of events, Stella

⁴ Interestingly, *Stella Dallas* was first a 1915 popular novel which was then turned into a popular radio series before it was made into a film by Henry King in 1925 and then later by King Vidor in 1937. It's early 20th century origins may have a great deal to do with it's sympathetic rendering of maternal love, insofar as its reference is to a sort of preindustrial "Cult of True Womanhood" rather than psychoanalytic angst.

⁵ Interestingly, Steven Dallas' initial move away from his wife - his frustration with her working-class ways - is in direct contradiction to his earlier claims of wanting
(continued...)

"recognizes" that she is inadequate to bring up a "proper" girl and concocts an elaborate scheme to give Laurel away into the bourgeois family of her husband and his new wife. In the final scene, remembered by many spectators as both compelling and disconcerting, Stella stands in the rain outside the house where her daughter is being married, looking in on the scene of wedded bliss.

Crucially, the mother/daughter theme in *Stella Dallas* is worked through, or intersects with, a pronounced class theme, something that should not be surprising given the depression era in which it was filmed. Indeed, a whole genre of class conscious films were produced in the thirties, many of which focused on women and their families.⁶ Questions of maternity and questions of social class are intimately linked in many of the early maternal melodramas. In an time of deprivation and hardship - a time of sacrifice - a powerful narrative of social ascendancy asserts itself strongly, and is often dependent on some sort of parental sacrifice, typically the sacrifice of the mother. It is this linking - of class and motherhood - that has so disappeared in more recent films, as the mother/daughter relationship has increasingly come under the master discourse of popular psychology.

⁵(...continued)

her to remain "just as you are." Stella's desire to ascend is never masked: she is clear with Steven about her wish to "learn" from him the ways of the bourgeoisie, tellingly described as being "like the people in the movie." Yet he changes his tune as soon as her incorrigible working-class ways begin to impinge on his lifestyle.

⁶ Not only were there a great deal of class-conscious films during the thirties, but both film and magazine fiction depicted independent, courageous heroines struggling with careers and negotiating the urban jungle. (Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter* Amherst: University of Mass. Press, 1984; Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* New York: Dell Publishing, 1963.) Nevertheless, as both Honey and May (Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* New York: Basic Books, 1988) point out, if these career women ever attempted to maintain their independence after marriage, they were severely vilified.

Stella is first and foremost a *working-class* woman who is motivated by her desire to "move up" in the world. Significantly, in depression-era America, the message is that the mother's (Stella's) generation cannot transcend their class origins, but that they can enable their children to ascend. Notably, it is through the father that Laurel accesses bourgeois values and moves away from her (Depression) mother. E. Ann Kaplan thus rightly argues that Stella is doubly punished both as a mother and as a working-class person:

The film punishes her first by turning Stella into a 'spectacle' produced by the upper-class, disapproving gaze (a gaze that the audience is made to share through camera work and editing), but secondly, and most devastatingly, by bringing Stella to the recognition that she is an unfit Mother for her daughter.⁷

In this reading, *Stella Dallas* is understood as a virtually seamless representation of the mother/woman dichotomy that is such a mainstay of patriarchal thought and culture. Others, like Linda Williams, argue for a more contradictory reading of Stella, that center around the positive aspects of the mother/daughter love depicted in the film and the strangely triumphant look Stella walks away with at the end of the film:

We see instead the contradictions between what the patriarchal resolution of the film asks us to see - the mother 'in her place' as spectator, abdicating her former position *in* the scene - and what we feel as empathic identifying female spectators can't help but feel - the loss of mother to daughter and daughter to mother.⁸

⁷ E. Ann Kaplan, "Mothering, Feminism and Representation: The Maternal Melodrama and the Women's Film 1910-1940," in Christine Gledhill *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 133.

⁸ Linda Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart Is...*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 316.

Both analyses, though, center around the mother/woman dichotomy as the central problematic in the film. In other words, *Stella* becomes one more example of a representation supporting -and constructing - the belief that to be a mother is to be asexual. Many critics, such as Kaplan, have therefore understood Stella as "resisting" - albeit unsuccessfully - both her role as "mother" and the narrative's repression of her sexuality:

Stella's resistance takes the form, first, of literally objecting to Mothering because of the personal sacrifices involved (mainly sensual pleasures); second, of expressing herself freely in her eccentric style of dress and being unabashedly sexual; finally, in growing too attached and needful of her daughter.⁹

I would argue that, while this mother/woman dichotomy is a significant issue for all "maternal sacrifice" genres - indeed, for almost all popular representations of women - the relationship between class and ideologies of motherhood is perhaps more significant here.

Stella *doesn't* object to Mothering. Aside from an initial desire to get out and have some fun following the birth of daughter Laurel, all the rest of the film is in fact her devotion to mothering and her daughter at the expense of any other kind of life. Second, her way of dress and self-expression are signifiers of *class*, not of sexuality here. Significantly, when we see her "decked out" and making a spectacle of herself, being made a spectacle of, it is in the context of a rich resort to which she has taken Laurel for a vacation. It is not in the context of trying to express her own *sexuality* in a coherent way. Her dress reveals her to the rich patrons as "other," as lower-class. The audience here seems to be put in a strange position: on the one hand, we are

⁹ Ibid., 133.

invited to participate in the "specularization" of Stella: she *is* laughable. Yet we also see those who are ridiculing her as mean and vicious: (importantly, Laurel's boyfriend is kept out of the ridiculing, signifying that he is one of the decent upper-class, unlike the snobs in his midst) these children of privilege do not compare to the simple and honest Laurel. And, importantly, we witness the *daughter's* concern for her mother, and her desire to shield her mother from the slings and arrows of upper-class elitism. As Mary Ann Doane has pointed out in her trenchant analysis of *Stella Dallas* in her book *The Desire to Desire*, Laurel witnesses her mother's "otherness", her unsuitability, through the mediation of both an upper-class gaze (the rich kids in the soda fountain) and through the image of the mother reflected in the fountain mirror:

Her gaze mediated via the gazes of others and the mirror, Laurel finally recognizes an accurate or "proper," reflection of her mother's disproportion. It is as though the closeness of the mother/daughter relation necessitated the deflection of the gaze, its indirection, as a precondition for the establishment of difference.¹⁰

The central conflict is thus not so much between her wanting to be a "woman" - sexual, active, etc., and between her duties as a mother, but precisely between two different sensibilities about mothering itself. In fact, Stella sees her identity solely in terms of mothering, as she tells her pal Ed Munn when he, once again, implores her to be with him: "I don't think there's a man living that could get me going anymore. I don't know, I guess Lolly just uses up all the feelings I got and I don't seem to have any left for anybody else." Stella throughout is explicitly *nonsexual*, (she even treats her potential lover Mumm as yet another object of her maternal affection: he is alternately a "bad boy," and in need of maternal

¹⁰ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), 77.

admonishment, or a "sad boy" in need of care and nurture). In that sense she remains a "good" mother.

Yet she explicitly resists the kind of "appropriate mothering" that her husband and the medical establishment try to force her into, as she expresses in an early scene when she returns from the hospital. There, she refuses to allow her maternity to be pathologized and it is in the taking control of her own maternity that Stella's real transgression can be seen:

"Why is it that doctors and nurses and husbands always seem to think they know more about this maternity business. Don't you think a mother learns anything in that little room they wheel her into? Or is that just a kindergarten class? Let me tell ya something, I picked up quite a little experience in that room, and it wasn't out of books either. Experience."

Here Stella, as her daughter does later in the film, valorizes her own *experience* of birth and mothering over the upper-class learning and establishment ways. So the first conflict we have in the film is a conflict between Stella's version of "correct" mothering ("experience", she tells us), and the version promoted by the nurse and her husband (an interesting alliance of male interests and the pathologizing medical establishment). But this scene, which included a full close-up of Stella and is clearly from her point-of-view (we don't get a full shot, only a glance, of the nurse who attempts to boss her, the nurse's voice is almost disembodied) is immediately followed by another scene where Stella's way of mothering is called into question. Stella is obviously weary of being cooped up and domestic and insists on going out to a dance right after the baby is brought home from the hospital. As she complains to Steven about her boredom, he protests, and she expresses fervently the desire to be "other than a mother" ("Gee, I just want to get a wave and a manicure and get al dressed up again

and go hear some music and forget all about doctors and hospitals and nurses...") He, pointedly, asks "...and babies?" looking over at their newborn infant in the crib. Stella's ambivalence, an ambivalence that disappears after this point, is expressed as she looks over at the baby with Steven, says "no," and then follows this with a plaintive plea, "Oh Steven, please..." The next shot opens at the club: Stella has gotten her way, but it will be the last time. If Stella ever thought she would get out of mothering, she now realizes her destiny is sealed. And, importantly, the destiny to be "only a mother" is tied up with the destiny not to ascend the class ladder, to be "only working-class."

Laurel mirrors Stella's emphasis on everyday (coded here as both maternal and working-class) experience when she rushes home to her mother after she hears of her sacrificial plan to "give her up" to Mrs. Morrison: "But good times oh they aren't what make you belong, its other kinds of times, its when you've cried together and lived through things together, that's when you seem to love the most...it's different..." Laurel here validates the routine, commonplace events in domestic life she shares with her mother. Yet "everyday life", familiarity, continuity lose out to social ascendancy and the newness of Mrs. Morrison and all that her world has to offer. By discrediting that everydayness - which is, after all, the stuff of most women's lives, particularly in the thirties - the film thus further invalidates women's social reality. Experience loses out to progress, familiarity to newness, the prosaic to the novel.

Yet we are invited to empathize with Stella's anguish and pain when she realizes that it was her lowerclassness (Stella as embarrassment) that led Laurel to insist on leaving the resort. In fact, one of the most poignant moments between mother and daughter occurs in the train, one of the few moments of mutuality, of a

glimpse at the *shared* love between mother and daughter, but a love that is nevertheless doomed as Stella begins to see herself through her daughter's eyes and sees the social situation more clearly:

...it is this vision, through the daughter's sympathetic, mothering eyes - eyes that perceive, understand, and forgive the social graces Stella lacks - that determines her to perform the masquerade that will alienate Laurel forever by proving to her what the patriarchy has claimed to know all along: that it is not possible to combine womanly desire with motherly duty.¹¹

Or, more to the point, that it is not possible to combine a strong class identity with (appropriate, bourgeois) motherly duty.

The daughter feels the mothers' hurt, the mother translates her own hurt into the implications for her daughter: the sacrifice theme is initiated. But it is also at this moment - the moment of their greatest shared pain (for themselves, for each other); that they seem most intimate, most deeply connected. The kind of image seen here - the soft music, the daughter stroking the head of the mother lovingly, the daughter's head on the mother's shoulder as they sleep together on the train bunk - creates a *mise-en-scene* usually reserved for lovers. One wonders if the audience would sense this, feel slightly uncomfortable (both at the prospect of such intense female intimacy and at the incestuous implications) and then begin to construct in their consciousness the paramount need for separation: something is wrong with this picture: they must be torn asunder.

Not coincidentally, it is following this intimate love scene between mother and daughter that the mother's attempt to propel the daughter into the father's world is

¹¹ Linda Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart Is...*, ed. Gledhill, 312-313.

launched. Stella must try several times; her daughter will not leave willingly. To do so would render the daughter less likeable and the relationship itself more conflictual, thus de-emphasizing the sacrifice theme and replacing it with a more tortured, psychodrama motif (as in *Mildred Pierce*). When Stella goes to visit Mrs. Morrison to arrange her "gift" of her daughter,¹² we have a repetition of the previous love scene between Stella and Laurel. Mrs. Morrison is caring, concerned, overwhelmed and very moved by Stella's sacrifice. As the scene progresses, she moves closer and closer to Stella on the couch. By the end, she is almost in Stella's lap and is stroking her hand and gazing lovingly at Stella, as Stella's own daughter did to her on the train. In this world, the work of relationships is clearly women's work: they are both mothers, they understand each other, they empathize with each other, they know what is best. Indeed, it is Mrs. Morrison who has to explain to Steven Dallas why Stella is behaving the way she is (pretending to be having an affair to drive the daughter off). This "sisterhood," this "Mother Knows Best" is in marked contrast to what we will see in depictions of the relationship in the late 40s and 50s, when maternal decisionmaking is likened more to the opening of Pandora's Box than the knowing looks of two mothers.

The mother in *Stella Dallas* can't win: she is bad because she wanted more (be it some form of sexuality, as Williams and Kaplan argue, or to retain her class identity, or merely to have an intimate and passionate life with her daughter), but good because she didn't get it, ".. she proves her very worthiness to be a mother (the desire

¹² Again, this scene, like many others, sets up the intersection of class and mothering very explicitly. As Stella say "You're the kind of mother any girl could be proud of..." the entire mise-en-scene agrees with her: compared to the elegant and relaxed Mrs. Morrison, Stella *does* appear tacky, overdressed and socially awkward.

for her daughter's material and social welfare) by acting out a patently false scenario of narcissistic self-absorption...."¹³ The triumph in her eyes in the last scene is the triumph of sacrifice, a dubious triumph indeed.¹⁴

By the time we get to the 40s, this specific formula of the maternal melodrama as a genre in its own right, begins to recede. Forties films were either filled with wartime propaganda, or, as the war began to come to a close, with the urgent need to recuperate women back into acceptable post-war family life. It is this shift, from a more benign view of the mother/daughter relationship to one steeped in psychological condemnations, that seems fundamental here. This shift also entailed a movement away from a focus on class towards a focus on sexuality, as Michael Renov has pointed out:

...in the context of American social life during the World War II years, it was sexual difference rather than class conflict that constituted the crucial problematic to which countless cultural artifacts and public utterances were addressed.¹⁵

By as early as 1942, a year that witnessed the publication of Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers*, one of the most virulent attacks on women in the last 50 years, we get a very different sort of representation of mothers and daughters than in the prewar years. Wylie's book remains one of the most astoundingly misogynist tomes in recent memory. His basic thesis - that America was being weakened from within by a horde of omnipotent "moms" who turned men into sniveling company dolts and women into awful moms-in-training - found a prominent home in the mid to late forties.

¹³ Linda Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," 313.

¹⁴ The triumph here is very much like the triumph of the 19th century "True Woman."

¹⁵ Michael Renov quoted in Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 33.

Generally, the architects of "momism" focused on the deleterious effects of overprotective/domineering/smothering moms on the men of the nation. The concern was primarily with mothers and sons. While "moms" created cowardly men unable to fight bravely for their nation, the effect on girls is understood more as a reproduction of mom herself:

And it is not always the son who suffers. I have known many a young woman who has realized that she was being dominated by her mom, and upon the mom's death experienced a feeling of freedom and relief, but ultimately has lived strictly according to her mom's selfish code.¹⁶

For Wylie, Strecker, and their ilk, the psychic health of girls was of little concern when such weighty problems as the moral fiber of the nation were at issue. Daughters were thought to be victims of moms too, but the model here was one of endless generational reproduction, ("In most cases, a mom is a mom because she is the immature result of a mom"¹⁷) rather than specific and deadly aberration. Yet the implications of the ideology of Momism on the mother/daughter relationship are profound and far-reaching, as the following discussion elaborates.

Now, *Voyager*, (1942) pulls no punches in its portrayal of maternal evil and its deleterious effects on unwitting daughters. Interestingly, most critics have not focused on the mother/daughter aspects of this film, and have instead tended to see it in terms of the explicit psychiatric narrative or the hopeless love story of Charlotte (Bette Davis) with Jerry (Paul Heinreid). But, insofar as the story is a classic Cinderella one, with Bette Davis as the ugly duckling virtually imprisoned by her tyrannical mother,

¹⁶ Dr. Edward A. Strecker, "What's Wrong With American Mothers?" *Saturday Evening Post*, 26 October 1946, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

we must understand her quest, and thus these secondary narratives, as motivated by the desire to grow up and away from the maternal nest.

Now, *Voyager* contains an impressive cast that included Bette Davis, Paul Heinreid, and Claude Rains. It tells the story of Charlotte Vale, a spinster who lives in fear of her domineering and tyrannical mother who, since the death of her husband, has kept Charlotte a virtual prisoner in their Boston Brahmin mansion. Charlotte is everything a spinster should be, shy, unattractive, overweight, with strange and quirky hobbies¹⁸ that signify her "otherness": woman without man. Enter the hero, this time in the split form of a psychiatrist, who promptly diagnoses the mother's guilt and viciousness, ("Mrs. Vale, if you had deliberately tried to ruin your daughter's life you couldn't have done a more complete job...") and an inaccessible lover, who proves to be the ugly duckling that she is indeed a swan.

The discourse of psychiatry is pronounced and explicit here: Dr. Jacquith is presented right off as the expert who can cure Charlotte of the neuroses her mother has produced in her. But, importantly, it is the figure of the mother who is the block to emotional cure: she distrusts the medical profession as she informs Dr. Jacquith, and lets Charlotte know of her shame in meeting with a psychiatrist. In this scene, when the doctor is brought to the house by Charlotte's sister-in-law to examine Charlotte, Mrs. Vale lets it be known that she distrusts the profession and, in doing so, she reveals a decidedly outmoded understanding of psychiatry:

Mother: "Probably one of those places with a high-wire fence and yowling inmates."

¹⁸ Charlotte's most prominent hobby is making what appears to be cloisonne boxes. This film could not be more overlaid with Freudian metaphors - boxes, attics, stairways, the fetishizing of legs, etc.

Dr: "Well now, I wouldn't want anyone to have that mistaken notion. Cascade is just a place in the country. People go to it when they are tired..."

Mother: "The very word psychiatry Dr. Jacquith. Doesn't it fill you with shame? My daughter, a member of our family."

Dr: "There's nothing shameful about my work or frightening or anything else. It's very simple really what I try to do. People walk along the road, they come to a fork in the road, they're confused, they don't know which way to take. I just put up a signpost. Not that way, this way."

Throughout this speech, the doctor is first standing and the mother is looking up at him. This is a pattern that will be repeated throughout the film. Toward the end, though, he is positioned in between Charlotte's chair and the mother's chair, as if to signify his role as mediator between the two warring women, and the close up at the end of his little discourse on psychiatry further establishes his position of mastery. But, more importantly, this speech affirms the mother's backwards idea of psychiatry and produces a very benign and innocuous perception of the psychiatric enterprise: the sanitarium is just a place in the country and the doctor is simply a traffic warden of the soul.

This attempt to normalize psychiatry is consonant with the more general explosion of popular psychology onto the cultural scene.¹⁹ In a period in which "the advice of experts"²⁰ was increasingly becoming the common-sense culture of American

¹⁹ Indeed, there was in fact a whole genre of "psychiatrist" films, such as *Spellbound* and *Gaslight* where the psychoanalytic motif firmly entrenched itself in the American psyche.

²⁰ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English's book, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women*, (London: Pluto Press, 1979) examines thoroughly and thoughtfully how the reign of the experts developed alongside the rise of popular psychology in the 40s and 50s.

everyday life, the resistance to the doctor by the mother can be seen not only as a holding on to her daughter (which is wrong, of course), but as an impediment to progress (which is also wrong, of course, especially in a soon-to-be-postwar economy). If Stella was the impediment to social mobility and class ascendancy for her daughter, the aristocratic Mother Vale is the impediment to social health/social control; in holding back her daughter she may just hold back the nation. The "old-fashioned" common-sense parenting approach of the mother is shown to be overpowering, exclusive, smothering, unhealthy. It is associated with the rigidity the mother expresses in the first few minutes of the film as she berates the erring servants. While Stella's mothering was merely "not enough" for her daughter's social growth, the mothering of the evil Mrs. Vale is clearly malevolent. Charlotte needs treatment, expert help, so she may "grow free and blossom" as the Doctor puts it.

Indeed, the mother here is very visibly the figure of Victorian repression: she is consistently dressed in a costume clearly Victorian, with tightly buttoned collar and lace around her wrists and neck. She "matches" the Victorian furniture in her relic of a mansion. She is altogether anachronistic; an obsolete old woman who is the physical embodiment of an era long surpassed.

Charlotte *does* get "saved" by the good doctor, but medicine alone cannot right the wrongs of a woman-dominated woman: enter the *other* hero, this time in the dashing figure of Jerry (Paul Heinreid), a sorrowful and lonely man whose "sick" wife sounds suspiciously like Charlotte's neglectful mother. The curative powers are now placed onto Charlotte: they fall in love, Jerry is reborn, but will never leave his wife (duty before desire).

The shipboard affair between Charlotte and the long-suffering but noble Jerry is itself the first instance of many scenes which are repetitions: Charlotte here is repeating a disastrous sea journey she had as a young woman where her affair with a sailor was cut off by her repressive mother.²¹ Now cured, Charlotte repeats the journey: this time, her sexuality fully "blooms" sans the restrictive presence of her mother. But most importantly, Charlotte gets to "redo" her mothering, when she takes Jerry's lonely daughter under her wing (they meet, of course, at the sanitarium, where Charlotte has gone for a tune-up after her mother has conveniently died in a moment of rebellious confrontation) and makes her well through the love and attention both "girls" never received. In this film, the only good mother is a pseudo one: Charlotte gets the chance to "do mothering right" where two mothers have so profoundly failed:

While biological mothers in the film are distinctly lacking in mothering skills...Charlotte turns motherhood into a profession - part psychotherapist, part nurse, part charming companion.²²

But, in doing so, she must renounce her sexuality: Paul will never leave his wife. The film ends with the classic cigarette lighting scene where Charlotte tells Jerry, "Oh, Jerry, we have the stars, let's not ask for the moon," the stars presumably being the shining light of motherhood, and the moon the murky and changing passions of adult sexuality. Charlotte thus becomes an advertisement for the "constructed

²¹ In this flashback scene, the connection between Mother Vale's repressiveness and class becomes apparent. Charlotte's suitor is unsuitable, a common man who Charlotte must avoid like she must avoid the other tourists on board. Apparently, this aristocratic elitism was dissonant with the 40s wartime emphasis on a sort of pluralistic patriotism.

²² Maria LaPlace, "Producing and Consuming the Woman's Film: Discursive Struggle in *Now, Voyager*," in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, ed. Gledhill, 163.

mother": in this film, as in much of the culture at large, maternal instincts are depicted as often aggressive and destructive; one must *learn* how to be a good mother.²³ Charlotte has learned, as the happy child proves. And that, of course, is the happiness that Charlotte seeks.

The merger in this film of the psychiatric discourse and the discourse on mothering is striking. They depend on each other for their legitimation. The psychiatric discourse depends on the figure of the "unhappy couple" of the evil mother and the neurotic daughter to justify the therapeutic intervention. Indeed, the strong, male voice of the doctor serves as a omnipresent reminder to Charlotte on how to conduct herself. As Charlotte returns home from her 2nd sea voyage - the one in which she is reborn - she goes upstairs to see her mother. Right before she enters the room, the doctor's voice emerges to give her strength:

"Just remember that honoring one's parents is still a pretty good idea. You're going to be a shock to her. I advise you to soften the blow. Give her a little time to get used to you. Remember that whatever she may have done, she's your mother."

But Charlotte finds it difficult to resist the overpowering mother, and we sense a failure in her future. But she receives flowers from Jerry and thus finds the power to resist, to be her own woman. Thus, two men give a woman the strength to fight off another woman. Charlotte is now able to give her triumphant "I'm my own person"

²³ Maria LaPlace has convincingly argued that Charlotte is not only an advertisement for a psychologically "correct" motherhood, but that she is an advertisement for a complete "before" and "after" woman, replete with new clothes, hairstyle, and sophisticated demeanor. The relationship between *Now*, *Voyager* and both the new psychology *and* the new consumerism is striking indeed.

speech to her furious mother, who proceeds to toss herself down the stairs in defiance of her daughter's defiance.²⁴

What is so striking, though, is the explicitness of both discourses. Charlotte even mocks the psychiatrist when she first meets him ("She locks the door, Dr. Make a note of it. Its significance.") But it doesn't take much for the good doctor to break through Charlotte's "defenses" and whisk her away for a cure at "Cascade," mildly described as a "place in the country." Throughout the film, Charlotte refers to her "repression," her "inhibitions:" she herself becomes the advertisement for the new psychology, even going so far as to suggest Jerry send his daughter to Cascade.

Perhaps it is the aristocratic setting of the film - replete with Victorian mansion, servants, and ocean cruises - that allows for a more explicit discourse of psychology and maternal evil. Released from any financial concerns (except a mild anxiety over her inheritance) Charlotte and her Mother can now immerse themselves fully in psychological concerns. Indeed, while psychology has most assuredly replaced class here as a central narrative theme, the aristocratic upper-classness of Mrs. Vale is depicted as part of her anachronism. Her snobbery is part of what oppresses the daughter, although she seems to live off of her mother's beneficence without undue guilt.

In a crucial scene, when Charlotte refuses to be scared by her mother, refuses to give in, she uses this as ammunition: "Dr. Jacquith says that tyranny is sometimes

²⁴ In this scene, Charlotte is offstage during her grand speech and all we see is the back of the mother, tapping her laced hand on the daughter's bedpost, while Charlotte's voice emerges from an adjoining dressing-room. Charlotte's inability to face her mother signifies, I believe, the incompleteness of her cure. The full resistance can only occur after Charlotte herself is "full" with a man and child (Jerry and his daughter).

the expression of the maternal instinct." At the point in the film where Charlotte confronts the agent of her oppression, the mother has a heart attack, slumps in her chair, and dies. While Charlotte now believes she killed her mother ("I did it, I did it") symbolically the mother is killed by the burden of the new psychiatric "truth."

As Karen Anderson has pointed out in her book on wartime women, a good deal of the anxiety expressed around the working mother both during the war and with much more vigor afterwards, was related to the fear that the much vaunted "maternal instinct" - which had always been a bedrock of biological arguments about "women's place," was perhaps not so firmly ingrained as had been previously thought:

The fear expressed about women rejecting their children, especially by psychologists and social welfare officials, reflected a surprising anxiety about the presence or strength of the "maternal instinct." Similarly, the apprehension regarding the abandonment of feminine roles belied the conventional wisdom regarding an ostensibly immutable feminine personality.²⁵

Indeed, even many of the women's magazines, in the rush to adapt psychology to a popular, female audience, stressed that mothers ought not to rely so firmly on their "maternal instinct," but instead should depend on more reliable sources, as this article from a January 1945 *Good Housekeeping* entitled "Do you know everything in your daughter's head?" implies:

...the average woman tends to accept her offspring at face value and to depend on her Mother's Intuition to keep her informed of what's going on - and not, as she should, on observation, psychology, and the ability to face facts.²⁶

²⁵ Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II*, (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 92.

²⁶ Florence Howitt, "Do you know everything in your daughter's head?" *Good Housekeeping*, January 1945, 28.

So this mutation of *Stella Dallas*'s intuitive knowledge of what to do for her daughter, even how to sacrifice, to a new construction of inherently evil motherhood (maternal instinct as flawed and thus in need of medical intervention to set it straight) can be seen as an attempt to further avoid the implications of changing social/sexual relations, by deflecting the real transformations in the body politic off onto the question of maternal instinct.

Bad maternal instinct must be eradicated and replaced instead with the constructed/scientific mom (Charlotte) whose "good mothering" to her pseudo-daughter (Jerry's daughter) is very clearly the result of "observation, psychology, and the ability to face facts": they do, after all, meet in the mental institution, under the watchful (Charlotte even refers to him as "God") eyes of the expert/psychiatrist. In the war to liberate daughters from their fearsome mothers, psychiatry is clearly the best weapon.²⁷

Just three years later, another important mother/daughter film - with another powerful female star at its helm - emerges to complete the shift from benign to aggressive, from sacrificial to overpowering, from class conflict to psychopathology.

Mildred Pierce (1945) is a particularly interesting film not only because it is a strange combination of film noir (a traditionally "male" genre)²⁸ and melodrama (a

²⁷ In Whitney Stine's biography of Bette Davis, which included a running commentary by the star herself, Davis comments that she received a great deal of fan mail after *Now, Voyager* from "...children of possessive mothers, whose lives had been ruined as was Charlotte's before meeting Jacquith; also many from mothers admitting their similar mistakes with their children." (*Mother Goddam*, New York: Berkley Books, 1979 (1974), 175) Clearly, the ideology of maternal evil had, and still has, quite a bit of popular appeal.

²⁸ Much has been made of this strange mixture of noir and melodrama. Specifically, it has been argued that the omniscient voice of the male detective in the noir sequences serves to undercut the female narrative of Mildred's own "rags-to-riches" (continued...)

traditionally "female" genre) but because it offers up a reading of the mother/daughter relationship that inhabits, I believe, two worlds, two paradigms. On the one hand, *Mildred Pierce* is certainly a film operating very much within the "back to the kitchen" mode of the late war and immediate post-War years (many of the scenes are literally set in kitchens - both public and private). It is a harsh condemnation of working women, that much is obvious. More precisely, it is a condemnation of working *mothers*, for it was this new labor pool (white, middle-class mothers) that provoked the greatest outcry during and after the war. Even the war propaganda in the women's magazines, while urging women to work as a patriotic duty, constructed a strict hierarchy of admissible female labor, with single women at the top of the list and mothers with young children at the bottom, as a sort of "last resort."²⁹

This disapproval of working mothers was certainly not uncommon for that period; indeed, the late war and postwar years can surely be characterized by the ferocious attack on working mothers, an attack that seemed to begin as soon as women began working in the defence industries:

Scare stories about "latchkey children" and "eight-hour orphans" filled the newspapers and magazines, even though most surveys showed that

²⁸(...continued)

story. While I agree with this observation, here I will focus on the construction of the mother/daughter relationship within the film, assuming the more general point, already sufficiently argued, about the dominance of the male point-of-view.

²⁹ While debates about working women raged, one position seems to be shared by all, even the supporters of full participation in the labor force: women with young children should not, unless absolutely necessary, work outside the home. The age usually stated was three years old, not coincidentally a crucial age for Freudian theory, itself become increasingly popularized.

the vast majority of working mothers made arrangements for the care of their children before they took jobs.³⁰

The 1945 release date of this film, when men were returning home from war, demonstrates the commitment to placing women back in their "proper" place.³¹ As Linda Williams has noted, the film avoidance of specific references to the war, allows for both a reflection and a repression of women's wartime experience:

...some of the most important issues raised by the war are not reflected in the films about the war. It is as if only those films that could both reflect *and* repress could also *manage* these issues so important to women's new wartime experience.³²

On the other hand, it is also a film about maternal sacrifice; as Mildred tells us in no uncertain terms, "I've done without a lot of things - including happiness sometimes - because I wanted her to have everything..." Mildred is endlessly doing for her daughter, giving more and more. Yet, while Stella's sacrifice pays off (Laurel marries the man of her dreams and enters into the upper-class world), Mildred's sacrifice not only backfires, but is seen itself as slightly unhealthy. What was once a sign of love and devotion, is now a sign of smothering, overinvolvement, and, ultimately, pathology. Generally, this film invokes the resurgent spirit of popular psychology in that it clearly places blame on the mother for the wretched way her beloved daughter has turned out, a popular sport in the 1940s:

³⁰ Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women*, 91.

³¹ Linda Williams, "Feminist Film Theory: *Mildred Pierce* and the Second World War," in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Video*, ed. E. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), 17-18.

³² *Ibid.*, 25.

Ambitious, overprotective Mildred was a case study in "momism," a phrase coined by conservative social critic Philip Wylie in his 1942 best seller *A Generation of Vipers*.³³

The way these two discourses - of maternal sacrifice and maternal deprivation - work hand-in-hand produces the ideological moment of the film. This ideological moment speaks directly to the aggressive ideological work of the late-war and early post-war years, a work predicated on the disjuncture between the rise in working women and developing images of domesticity. In other words, the media was actively *working* to construct an ideological edifice that would safely enthrone "Rosie the Riveter" as a patriotic heroine while at the same time curtailing the radical potentials embodied in both the image and reality of "Rosie." This gap, between the lived experience of women and the images of their lives in the mass media, was a persistent thorn in the side of the culture industries that films like *Mildred Pierce* tried its best to reconcile.

Mildred Pierce is the story of a woman who moves up from slaving housewife to owner of a chain of restaurants. This method of class ascendancy (entrepreneurial, suburban, referencing the mass consumption of the future with its chain-store motif) contrasts with Stella's more traditional rise via marriage. But Mildred's rise to the top is only one part of the narrative. It is Mildred's relationship with her greedy and malicious daughter Veda that moves the narrative, and that is the catalyst for the climactic finale. Almost every motivation for Mildred's actions - from leaving her husband to marrying the aristocratic moocher, Monty, originates with her devotion to this daughter, above all else in her life. Yet this is no straightforward maternal sacrifice film, where the mother's sacrifice is at least rewarded (a la *Stella Dallas*) by

³³ Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*, (New York: Pantheon Press, 1983), 120.

seeing the daughter go happily off into the sunset, because Mildred's daughter ends up going off to jail for the murder of Mildred's husband. Ironically, it is the Mother who goes off into the sunset in this film, reunited now with her original husband. Indeed, Mildred's sacrifice seems to backfire, seems to spoil and warp the very child she purports to adore. Even Mildred's vapid husband wonders if it isn't perhaps a bit "abnormal" that Mildred is so devoted and sacrificing for Veda. In this first flashback scene with Mildred and Burt he tells us that she's "...trying to buy love from those kids and it won't work..." and concludes that "There's something wrong Mildred, I don't know what, I'm not smart that way but I know it isn't right to..." Throughout the scene, the camera follows Mildred's movements, as if she was the changeable, unstable force, and Burt appears as the constant and steady presence, commenting knowingly on the errors of his wife's daughter-obsessed ways.

I think there is a sort of double assault going on here. On the one hand, this film is responding to the growing trend in popular psychology to place the full responsibility for the psychological health of the child firmly on the mothers shoulders.

As E. Ann Kaplan has so rightly noted:

In the post-war period both the maternal melodrama and the woman's film undergo marked changes. Indeed, the maternal sacrifice theme may be said to have all but exhausted itself, its essentially nineteenth-century ideology being finally archaic. In its place, we have a different kind of male Oedipal drama that focuses either, as in film noir, on the threat of female sexuality (now seen as extremely dangerous), or on the Mother's inadequacies, especially her inability to foster psychic health. *Mildred Pierce* and *Now, Voyager* may be seen as setting the pattern for 50s and later films in their portrayals of the alternately masochistic and sadistic Mother. Close Mother-daughter bonding is now seen not merely as 'unhealthy' but as leading either to evil, or to neurosis.³⁴

³⁴ E. Ann Kaplan, "Mothering, Feminism and Representation," 134.

Motherhood here is dangerous, suspect, almost unnatural. The men in the film repeatedly tell Mildred that "something is not quite right" with her doting closeness with Veda.

Not only are mothers presented as fully responsible for the psychological health of their offspring, but, with the growing concern over rising rates of juvenile delinquency during the war years and after, mothers were targeted as responsible for the social behavior of their daughters as well:

Many expressed concern that the problems of child neglect and juvenile delinquency might have been intensified by the loosening of family ties, the separation of families, the rising divorce rate, the employment of teenagers at high salaries, and, most particularly, the expanded employment of mothers...Most law enforcement and other officials cited parental neglect as the most important contributor to increased juvenile delinquency and contended that working mothers were a primary cause of such negligence.³⁵

Even the head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, contributed to the growing sense that there was a relationship between the spread of juvenile crime and the increasing numbers of women in the workforce. Hoover gravely informs us that mothers are "our only hope" in the battle against the decline of wholesome youth, a problem exacerbated by the absence of fathers during the war:

At this point the war enters the picture by placing a double burden on mothers. Fathers who might be roused by a campaign of education to become not only examples but preceptors for their children are in many instances away at war or at war work...If the drift of normal youth towards immorality and crime is to be stopped, mothers must do the stopping.³⁶

³⁵ Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women*, 94-95.

³⁶ J. Edgar Hoover, "Mothers - our only hope," *Woman's Home Companion*, January 1944, 20.

And he goes on to inform us that the "happy home" sans juvenile delinquency, "...is the home where the child rushes in and calls, 'Mother!' and gets a welcoming answer."³⁷

One question haunts the film: why is Veda the way she is? Is she just a "bad seed" who somehow emerges from nowhere to haunt her innocent mother? Or does the film lead us to believe that, in some very profound sense, Veda's greed and evil are directly attributable to her mother, a woman seemingly obsessed with giving the child "all that she never had.?" Mildred's working is never directly denigrated; indeed, the denigration she receives from Monty and Veda is seen as mean, ungrateful and snobbish. But the narrative works in such a way as to be critical of Mildred's status as businesswoman, without directly confronting the issue, a strategy perhaps more disturbing in its subtlety. Why does Mildred go out to work? She must support her family. And why must she support her family? Because she has kicked her husband out of the house. Curiously, we see that Mildred had always worked - baking pies for neighbors. But this work is "acceptable" as it is done within the confines of the family kitchen and to supplement the husbands meager income. Mildred becomes both more dangerous and more powerful once that same labor is released from its domestic environment and made "public." This is consistent with government propaganda and the policies of the recently established Women's Bureau: women working was an unfortunate necessity, and when it was necessary, at least it should be in "sex-appropriate" work, such as cooking. But back to the narrative. Why has she kicked her husband out of the house? Here again we return to Veda, for it is around

³⁷ Ibid., 21.

a fight concerning her - and how Mildred is spoiling her - that Burt Pierce leaves. Indeed, even his involvement with another woman, which is also central to their breakup, can be seen as attributable to Mildred's overinvolvement with her daughter and subsequent neglect of her "wifely duties." In this case, we can see how mother/daughter intimacy is almost always witnessed at the expense of mother/father intimacy: here again the Mother/Woman split dominates the narratives of popular culture.

Veda *has* turned on her mother, but is there any way for a 1940's audience to understand this - an audience familiar with Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* - than as the (perhaps well-intentioned) bad mothering of Mildred. After all, we know Mildred is bad because she has - through her involvement both with her work and with a man romantically - allowed her youngest daughter to die.³⁸ Indeed, as soon as her husband walks out, Mildred becomes fair game to every man who enters into her life: the tawdriness of the scene with her husband's old partner, coming as it does on the heels of the husbands walkout, only serves to reinforce the idea that now Mildred is somehow "unclean." She is clearly held responsible for her uncleanness, (and her younger daughter's death) yet curiously seems to show little long-term remorse or grief.

Mildred is not only punished by the loss of her daughter Veda at the end of the film, but she is further punished as the daughter steals away the mother's lover. The theme of mother/daughter sexual rivalry has been a staple of popular culture. But

³⁸ The "good" daughter mysteriously contracts pneumonia and dies in a single day - the single day that Mildred happens to be out with another man and her estranged husband Burt has the kids.

Mildred Pierce adds a strange twist: it is a completely one-sided rivalry. Seen in the context of 40s ideologies of irresponsible mothering, Veda's involvement with Monty can be seen as an indication of maternal deprivation in two senses. First, if Mildred weren't so busy with "making money" she would be more aware of what was happening right under her nose (indeed, it was she who pushed the two together). And, secondly, if Mildred were more of a mother, more there, more attentive to her daughter's emotional life, then the daughter wouldn't have to turn to Monty to get her mother's attention, and perhaps the murder wouldn't have even taken place.

Mildred's last attempt at sacrifice (to take the rap for that murder) is doomed from its noir start, as the true killer must be found out by the masterly - yet almost anonymous - male detective, ("Not this time, Mrs. Berrigan. This time your daughter pays for her own mistakes.") Indeed, as many film critics have argued, the noir part of this film seems in many ways to outweigh its melodrama counterpart and sets the tone (the film begins in noir fashion - a suicidal woman on a bridge on a dark and rainy night) for the guilty woman resolution (not of murder, but of bad mothering, which led to the murder) that is so much a part of film noir.

Clearly, then, we are getting a change here from a more complexly layered representation of the mother/daughter relationship where attachment *itself* wasn't necessarily suspect (*Stella Dallas*), to an image of this relationship that presents intimacy and attachment as *inherently* debilitating and essentially unhealthy. Indeed, the attachment was clearly mutual between Stella and Laurel, and the poignancy of the film at least in part derives from the audience's knowledge of the very real and very mutual love that existed between mother and daughter. Mildred's attachment, conversely, is coded as "overinvolved" and rejected by the daughter, as she moves out

of the house to live on her own and becomes a nightclub singer (a plot device, incidentally, used to great effect in another classic mother/daughter film, *Imitation of Life*). The difference in the two films is graphically visualized in a brief comparison of two similar scenes. In *Stella Dallas*, the scene is the already mentioned train scene, an unusual depiction of mutuality and love. The counterpart in *Mildred Pierce* is a scene that takes place right after Mildred's husband has left and Mildred is upstairs in the girls' bedroom, saying goodnight to Veda. Similarly lit, the mise-en-scene, like the earlier film, evokes a romantic environment. Yet this scene exposes the daughters' greed (not her love and concern for her mother) and depicts the mother's sacrificial intent as a desperate attempt to hold on to her unloving daughter. Indeed, their words of love ("I love you Veda." "I love you too, Mother,") are almost parodied as Mildred reaches over to kiss her daughter and the daughter utters the unforgettable line, "But don't let's get sticky about it." What a contrast to the bittersweet tenderness of the train scene.

Claudia (1943), starring Dorothy McGuire, Robert Young, and Ina Claire, spells out very straightforwardly the new concern with "too much" mother/daughter attachment. Interestingly, it does so in the form not of a film noir, as in *Mildred Pierce*, or a classic melodrama, as in *Now, Voyager*, but rather in the jokey, light form of a sort of comedic, sitcom melodrama.

Claudia was the first of several films to be made by the McGuire/Young team. In this early one, McGuire plays a recently married young woman who has moved with her husband out to a farm in Connecticut, outside of New York where he works as an architect. The character of Claudia is a staple of Hollywood films: the not-quite-grown woman-child, almost tomboyish, innocent, a babe-in-the-woods. Visually,

the contrast between Claudia - with her flopping hair, simple gingham shifts, boyish figure - and her husband David - with his pipe and suit and paternal manner - could not be more striking.

The catch with this film is that, of course, Claudia's "immaturity," her inability to grow up and be a mature wife (and soon-to-be mother) is directly referenced by her ties with her mother. In so many ways, this film is more like a sitcom than a classic melodrama: all the action takes place over the course of a weekend, it is almost all shot indoors with "naturalistic" lighting, outsiders enter the narrative but they are essentially extraneous and the plot must be resolved familially, etc. And, like a sitcom, many little pieces of "business" enter the narrative that are seemingly irrelevant to the central narrative. Claudia's mother has ben visiting for the weekend, but has left unexpectedly to return to New York. Claudia is curious, and sends her husband to find out what the story is. In this interchange, the subject of Claudia's overattachment to her mother is made explicit, as is the position of the mother vis-a-vis this "problem."

Mother: "Oh, David, Claudia's worse than a detective. I never have been able to fool her."

David: "Well, she certainly has herself an overdose of mother image."

Mother: "Yes, I wish she hadn't."

David: "I wish she hadn't too."

Mother: "That's why I was so glad about you buying this house."

David: "The only thing she doesn't like about it is leaving you in New York."

Mother: "That's the best thing that could have happened to all three of us."

Here, then, we get not only the attachment issue, but we get the strange image of the mother and son-in-law bonding around the overattachment of the daughter to the mother. This is interesting, because most films depict daughters struggling to break free of their "overinvolved" mothers. Here, the mother is enlisted as an aid to the separation, rather than an impediment, and in alliance with the male "rescuer" rather than in opposition to him. Nevertheless, the necessity for the separation remains the same.

As with *Now, Voyager*, the independence of the daughter from the mother is directly related to the daughters ability to be successfully heterosexual: that is, to be a good wife and mother. Growing up is explicitly related to separation, as David makes clear in the film: "Now listen darling, when are you going to grow up and stop being a Mama's Girl?" And Claudia certainly doesn't refute his analysis of her problem: she too sees her attachment as "unhealthy:" "Yes, I know it's not good. Someday when I'm an old woman I'll develop a twitch in one eye and you'll hype me to the doctors and he'll say it's because I have an attachment to my mother...."

The mother's "secret" is, and this is perhaps the only melodramatic element to the narrative, that she has an "illness" and is going to die. Not coincidentally, at the same time Claudia finds out she's pregnant, making it more difficult for her to tell Claudia she's dying:

Mother: "Oh, it'll be so hard to tell her now. I'm a coward, David."

David: "When it comes to Claudia I think you are at that. You haven't got the insides to let her do her own suffering."

Mother: "She's not disciplined to pain. Life's been gentle to her up to now."

David: "And you want to go on taking the hard knocks and leaving her the easy ones."

Although said with much less venom, how far is this from Mother Vale's claim in *Now, Voyager* that "I've always made decisions for my little girl. Always the right ones." While in this case the roles are rather reversed - Mother here is not the evil force of repression but rather wants to see her daughter "free" herself from her - the message is still the same: to be an adult is to be separate from mother and attached to men. Dr. Jacquith's assertion that the daughter must be allowed to grow "free and blossom in her own right" is consistent with the discourse here about self-determination.

The daughter does know about the mother's illness, and this knowledge is what propels her to "grow up:"

Mother: "She knows David."

David: "Yes Mother. She knows."

Mother: "And she's let me go?"

David: "I think so."

Mother: "Ohh, it makes all the difference David."

David: "Does it Mother?"

Mother: "Yes. It's like a miracle. It's as though she were the mother and I were the child."

David: "Well, maybe that's the way it should be. If it's...right."

Mother: "It's right David. Suddenly I'm quite sure of that."

So "letting go" is here the sign of maturity: the "way it should be." The ending reiterates this one more time. As the mother walks upstairs a sort of farewell occurs between her and her daughter. Standing looking up at her mother ascending the stairs

(to her death) Claudia says, "So long, Mrs. Brown." And the mother returns, "So long, Mrs. Naughton," as if calling each other by their married names (male names) they acknowledge each others grown-upness. The mother continues up the stairs and Claudia stands on the landing while her husband enters the frame and the couple are framed in a shot. The camera then pulls back as Claudia walks down the stairs and her husband follows. Then we have a two-shot facing each other, and David says, "Hello darling," to which Claudia replies, "Hello David." and we fade out. Moving from the close-up of mother and daughter (separately) saying goodbye, to the coupled, two-shot of the husband and wife saying hello, the meaning could not be any clearer: the mother has died so that the daughter can be free to be an adult wife to her adult husband. Goodbye mama (immaturity, pre-sexual, boyishness, innocence, enmeshment) hello hubby (adult sexuality, maturity, couple-ness, sophistication, emotional distance).

Interestingly, the women's magazines of the war years paints a somewhat different picture of the mother/daughter relationship. While clearly, the introduction of psychology and the rise of the experts found their way into the magazines, the conflictual side that we find so explicitly in both *Now*, *Voyager* and *Mildred Pierce*, seems almost absent. Instead, you find an approach that has to do with the "new" responsibilities daughters must now take on as mother enters the labor market. Primarily, this is organized around domestic tasks as daughter is urged to stand in for mom and provide traditional maternal/housewife functions for dad and the boys:

With mothers doing war work...and with household help fast vanishing,
lucky is the family that boasts a daughter! And lucky is the daughter

who can learn at home the art of planning, buying and preparing meals for a family.³⁹

Magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* promoted the idea of daughter as mother/housewife in training with regular sections such as "Cook's Kindergarten," and "Homemaker's Kindergarten," with headlines like "Susan makes hot cross buns," and "Susan does the dishes in record time." Ads for household products often included mother and daughter using it together, marveling at how quickly the housework will now be done, or sharing war work as in the ad series for "Tangee Natural Lipstick" ("mother does the seeding - daughter, the weeding.") Clearly, the aim was to present the women war worker as fulfilling her patriotic duty and, most importantly, remaining devoted to the family and not producing significant disruptions:

...advertisers conveyed the message that employed women would not disrupt the family...War workers were often shown in housewife/mother roles - working with or taking care of children or doing housework in factory coveralls. Children pictured in these scenes cheerfully helped their mothers with household tasks, especially young daughters who were frequently dressed in coveralls and kerchiefs themselves.⁴⁰

However located in the domestic this might be, what emerges from the women's magazines is both a sense of mother/daughter togetherness (be it in war work or in house work) and, to a lesser extent, the mother serving as role model (albeit a "Superwoman" one) for the daughter. We see no counterpart in film.

The reasons for this discrepancy in media representations is in many ways quite simple. Fundamentally, the women's magazines were explicitly enjoined in the war

³⁹ Enid A. Niquette, "Daughter's in the Kitchen Now," *Parents Magazine*, August 1943, 54.

⁴⁰ Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II*, (Amherst: University of Mass. Press, 1984), 117.

effort by the direct "guidance" of the propaganda efforts of the Magazine Bureau which published the *Magazine War Guide* from 1942 to 1945.⁴¹ Writers, editors and publishers sat in on meetings of the Bureau, received instructions for "helpful" and "patriotic" plot lines and characterizations, and were generally caught up in the combined war efforts. Indeed, this tie-in helped smooth the way for the astoundingly "back-to-the -home" tenor of postwar magazine fiction and nonfiction:

...the close connection between propaganda groups and the magazine industry throughout the war made unnecessary specific instructions to encourage the movement of women back to the home and to female fields in the labor force during demobilization...fiction and advertisements during this period portrayed war workers leaving their jobs for domesticity, office work, and unskilled jobs in manufacturing. This largely resulted from information writers had received from the government for two and a half years - information based on the assumption that new women workers would not remain in the "male" occupations once veterans returned and the dominant perspective of which highlighted the needs of the country.⁴²

But, like other media, magazines too began to shift in mid-war towards a more overt concern with the perils that the working mother offered to the smooth functioning of the family:

...the initial idea that working mothers could raise happy children was replaced by tragic portraits of families breaking under the strain of mother being away. By the spring of 1944, ads began dramatizing the unhappiness of children with war-working mother.⁴³

Yet editorials and nonfiction articles in the women's magazines continued to print pieces that provided very supportive views of working mothers. In an article entitled "Girls in Overalls" in the March 1943 edition of *Parents*, Josephine Von Miklos writes

⁴¹ Ibid., 36-37.

⁴² Ibid., 56.

⁴³ Ibid., 124.

very positively about women's work, and cites reasons other than the patriotic for her continued involvement after the war. And Stella Applebaum in February's issue of *Parents'* also argues strongly for the value of mothers at work, again not only stressing the patriotic but the personal and psychological benefits.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, by the late forties, the magazines too began to blow the horn of maternal neglect, deprivation and the everpresent "momism."

There are, of course, exceptions. But the exception is, in itself, telling. The film *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* stands out as a somewhat different representation of mothers and daughters, a depiction that is located outside of the two paradigms discussed thus far. Starring Dorothy McGuire as the mother and Peggy Ann Garner as her 12-ish daughter Francie, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is set in the tenement slums of 1920s⁴⁵ Brooklyn. The earlier date is significant, as we will see in the next chapter, for very often more "positive" mother/daughter relationships are presented in films that locate them in an earlier era.⁴⁶

The plot is relatively simple: a young family struggling to make ends meet in the slums of Brooklyn. Yet, while *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is most often thought of as a touching coming-of-age story, this narrative of the young girls' development is intimately tied in with the narrative of both mother and daughter and daughter and

⁴⁴ Josephine Von Miklos, "Girls in Overalls," *Parents' Magazine*, March 1943, 22+; Stella B. Applebaum, "War Jobs for Mothers?" *Parents' Magazine*, February 1943, 17+.

⁴⁵ One assumes the time period is roughly the twenties or perhaps a bit earlier, as the film opens with "several decades ago" and it was made in 1945.

⁴⁶ This is also true of *Stella Dallas*, as well as films such as *I Remember Mama* and *Little Women*.

father. A neat split is set up early on between the hardworking, down-to-earth, pragmatic mother who basically supports the family, and the often unemployed, often drunk, funny, dreamy, lively man that is her husband. The children fall on either side, the boy - a street-smart young tough - identifying with the mother and the daughter - dreaming of being a writer - identifying with the adored father.⁴⁷ The coming-of-age narrative is connected with the realignment of this familial *mise-en-scene*, so that the daughter becomes re-attached to mother.

Already, then, one crucial difference emerges between this and the other films discussed thus far: the reversal of the motif of separation from mother as the hallmark of adulthood. Here, Francie's move into young womanhood is accessed not through the world of men, but through a new and deeper connection with her mother, a connection effected by a more realistic appraisal of the mother's life and her choices and, very crucially, by a sense that the daughter matters to the mother, that she can be a nurturer and caretaker.

The narrative, then, can be seen as a move from Daddy's Girl to young woman, rather than a move into a similar adoration of mother. Francie's adoration of her father is an Electra complex gone overboard: she enacts scenes with him that are completely inappropriate to their relationship as father and daughter. In one scene that sets the tone for their relationship, Francie rushes to the door as her father comes home, and they proceed to create a *mise-en-scene* of husband and wife (he even comes

⁴⁷ This "pairing" is accomplished both through the dialogue as well as through visual aspects. In one scene, where mother and father are arguing over the future of Francie's schooling (she wants to transfer to a fancier school and he wants to lie to get her in there) the camera literally shows the mother and son and then cuts to the father and daughter, reinforcing the explicit message of opposition and alliances. It is not until the end, when mother gives in, that all four are shown within the same frame.

up behind her and kisses her) as she caters to his domestic needs ("I love to iron for you Papa") and he gives her his fervent "things are going to be different one day - you won't have to iron for me" speech, a speech he should be giving to his wife. As she stands ironing, he reinforces his treatment of this child as woman/wife: "You know something, prima donna, you're going to make somebody a mighty fine wife some day...."

The contrast to this ideal husband/wife couple can be found in the scene immediately following this, where pa goes up to tell mother - who is cleaning the steps - about his job and she is less than enthusiastic. As she "diminishes" the father, the camera cuts away to the daughter gazing up lovingly at him, and he descends the stairs to waltz out with the daughter (singing "Here Comes the Bride!") while the mother looks on.

Now, if the film stopped with this, if it produced the idea of pop as a great and fun guy and mom as a hard and uncompromising wet blanket, it would be no different than the majority of films on mothers and daughter. But, as the film progresses, it also becomes infinitely more complex in its portrayal of a mother placed in an impossible position and a daughter infatuated with father but slowly learning the reality of mother's life. Mom is chastised for, as her mother puts it, forgetting "...to think with your heart," and we agree with Aunt Sissy's concern over Mother's statement that "My kids is going to be somebody if I got to turn into granite rock to make them." But this is never presented as an inherent failing of the mother's, quite to the contrary. Not only is she shown to personally struggle with this question of her "hardness" but the hardness itself is seen as a consequence of a real difficult situation: the twin

specter of a new baby and an out-of-work dreamy husband and the overwhelming reality of poverty.

It is after the father's death that the mother/daughter narrative surfaces more explicitly. The daughter resents the mother for his death, and the mother works to regain her daughter. The birth of the new baby not only is the catalyst that brings Francie back to her mother, but it is the moment that signifies her move into adulthood. Francie is now needed, as her mother tells her in the crucial scene that marks the beginning of the reconciliation. They are in the hospital where Aunt Sissy is having a baby and Katie speaks to her elusive daughter about her need for her help when she has her baby at home:

Katie: "It isn't going to be long now. For me, I mean, with my baby. We can't come to a hospital. There isn't even going to be enough money for a woman to come and help. I'm going to need you Francie. Don't ever be far away. Neely - well, a boy ain't much good at a time like this. I'm counting on you Francie. You won't forget that will ya?"

Francie: "All right Mama, I'll remember."

In this scene, as in the next one where Katie is giving birth, Francie is standing and her mother is either sitting, or lying in bed, as if to symbolize the new power of the daughter. But, unlike the other films, it is not a power gained at the mother's expense, as in *Now, Voyager* when the psychiatrist looks down on the mother announcing her culpability. Conversely, we have here a power gained through an understanding of the mother's life. The labor scene is one of the most moving film moments I have seen between mother and daughter. As the daughter begins to help her mother through her pain, both mother and daughter share a bit of each other's life: Francie reads her mother her essays, and the mother talks of her choices, the limitations of her life, how she misses the father. The knowledge that her mother

needs her empowers the daughter ("She only wants me now," she says to her brother) *and* empowers the mother.

In an extraordinary speech by the mother, she speaks of the double binds mothers are put in, having to hold the family together in the midst of adversity and then being forced to make decisions that seem punitive and oppressive:

Katie: "It's so nice to have a visit from my daughter. I didn't want for you to have to grow up so soon. I didn't want for you to have to quit school. I tried to tell him that. He didn't mind about the baby but he never forgive me for wanting you to quit school. I told him, and he just went out. You never forgive me either."

Francie: "Please don't Mama."

Katie: "He would've bought you dolls instead of milk. I don't know, maybe you would've been happier, I don't know. I never would've thought of givin' ya that school like he did. And all them fine compositions of yours. I never read one of them. I should've had time. Johnny did. But I couldn't do no different. I don't know how I could do any different.

And later, she continues to express this double-bind as she is in the throes of labor and is speaking at random about her life:

Katie: "...who'll cry for me like that if I died... I never did a wrong thing in my life but it ain't enough...Oh, Sissy, I didn't mean to be hard like you said...If Johnny was here he could go to your graduation and I'd go to Neely's but I... I can't tear myself into two pieces...how'm I going to do both?

Importantly, the reunion of mother and daughter is not a simple matter of hugging, kissing, and bittersweet tears. The reunion, if one could really call it that, is about mutual recognition, sharing of experience, and a deeper understanding of the choices mother was forced to make. There are no great moments in this scene of "coming together," yet the coming together is there in the daughter's caretaking, in the mother's

expression of the double-binds, and in the way this is tied to the daughter's coming-of-age.

This exception can be explained on a number of levels. First, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* was adapted from a best selling "serious" novel (it was a "Book-of-the-Month Club" selection), and retains a certain literariness and staginess as do films like *I Remember Mama* and *Little Women*. Secondly, it was not a classic genre film, and thus was not subject to the same sort of strictures required of most genre productions, such as the centrality of a narrative resolution centering on a male agent. But, more importantly, this exception provides an interesting contrast to the genre films discussed above. For it is perhaps its historical, ethnic, and working-class setting that allows this film to present a relationship that is both moving and complex and that renders neither mother nor daughter absent. It's working-classness, it's ethnicity, allow for more space for mother/daughter mutuality in the context of a society still struggling with the "incompleteness" of the much-vaunted "melting pot." And the generic formulation here - a sort of ethnic historical one - subverts and rearranges the dominant cinematic codes in a way that "in the present" genres are unable to, given their rootedness in the dominant ideologies of the time.

What emerges from this overall transformation, then, is two-fold. On the one hand, the move from *Stella* to *Mildred* signifies a shift from a vision of all-giving motherhood that locates women as sacrificial caretakers that derive deep pleasure from that sacrifice, to an image of motherhood slightly off, possibly unhealthy, and almost certainly responsible for the psychic health of their offspring. But the change is not just in images of motherhood (from sacrificial and benign to overpowering and controlling) but in the way the discourses of motherhood refract and interact with other

significant social discourses.⁴⁸ The story of Stella's mothering is also a story of class, an uneasy story that applauds class ascendancy (and sees it as accessed through the father) but still maintains a sharp criticism of bourgeois "expert" values and modes. The story of Mildred's mothering (and Mother Vale's and Mrs. Brown's), on the other hand, is a purely psychological story. Even Mildred's class ascendancy is directly tied to her unhealthy desire to "give her daughter all she never had," while Stella's original move up the class ladder was propelled by her own desires. Mildred is punished both for wanting too much for her daughter and for daring to think that a working mother/single parent can join the ranks of the entrepreneurial upwardly mobile. Linda Williams has pointed out how the background of the war served to change the original intent of the novel written by James Cain, and turn Mildred's mobility into an altogether more problematic affair:

...the indirect evocation of wartime ideology operates to judge Veda's - and by extension Mildred's - materialism harshly. In the original novel, Mildred's materialism encounters no such censure, because it arises directly out of her experience of want and social humiliation during the Depression. Similarly in the novel, Mildred's excessive mother love and spoiling of Veda appears misguided, but it leads to no crime.⁴⁹

The class motive for Mildred's working is now replaced with a basely materialist and neurotic one. Class as providing the context for the mother/daughter interaction thus

⁴⁸ Another film of the 1930s, *The Old Maid*, also portrayed a sacrificing mother (played by Bette Davis, whose character is strangely called "Charlotte" and whose daughter is named "Tina" - shades of *Now, Voyager*) whose sacrifice, like Stella's benefitted her ascending daughter. Here, again, issues of maternal sacrifice are linked with issues of class ascendancy. And, like Stella, this film too is set in the past, during the Civil War.

⁴⁹ Linda Williams, "Feminist Film Theory: *Mildred Pierce* and the Second World War," 129.

disappears as that relationship is increasingly portrayed as having no context other than itself.

While this metamorphosis in the representations of the mother/daughter relationship is significant, and speak to the strength and persistence of the postwar backlash and domestic surge, it is important too to stress the continuities. For all of the daughters in these three films, the sign of their difference from their mothers is their *popularity*. Laurel's popularity in the "in" crowd crowds her less fashionable mother out. Charlotte's ability of be popular with the "common" cruise-goers distances her from her more stand-offish mother. And Veda's worldliness and swirl of parties and polo marches stands in severe contrast to the life of her hardworking mother. This issue of popularity, and the mother's ability to access it for the daughter or deprive her of it, not only persists in the film images of the period, but crops up continually in the women's magazines of the late thirties and forties. The connection between the new concern with popularity and the popularity of psychology is striking, as this passage indicates:

Somebody with a desire to help harassed young girls ought to endow, for mothers, a number of classes in advertising and public relations. The purpose would be to teach women how to speak of their daughters so that they seem well adjusted and worth knowing, rather than walking problems with a low popularity rating and enough complexes to supply a psychology textbook.⁵⁰

But the most critical continuity, and the most lamentable one, is the legacy of loss in these films. In all of the films discussed here, and indeed, in most representations of the mother/daughter relationship, mother and daughter are torn

⁵⁰ Elsie McCormick, "Sometimes Mothers Talk Too Much," *Good Housekeeping*, September 1943, 25.

asunder, split apart, forever to be deprived of each other's company. Stella's daughter is forever lost to her, Mrs. Vale and Mrs. Brown die, and Veda goes off to jail. In all these films, then, narrative resolution is firmly anchored to a permanent separation of mother and daughter, a separation that is both psychic and physical. But, at least with *Stella*, we experience the loss of mother to daughter (and daughter to mother) as sad, wrenching, unhappily necessary. And, as Andrea Walsh has pointed out, we do get some sense of Stella's activity, her decision-making, her subjectivity:

These *sacrifice* films, though rarely feminist in ideology, are based on a feminist assumption that women can make choices...They are, to an extent, authors of their own destiny. The fact that they are depicted as choosing subjects may be as important as the *content* of the life styles they choose.⁵¹

Conversely, in the other three films, the loss is never depicted as loss, much less as choice, but as the inevitable liberation of daughter from mother. Clearly, though, neither option constructs a discourse of constancy and mutuality. In the move from sacrificing *Stella* to maladjusted *Mildred* we may have relinquished class and acquired psychoanalysis, but one thing remains constant: we have lost each other.

⁵¹ Andrea Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience 1940-1950* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984).

CHAPTER FOUR

FATHER KNOWS BEST ABOUT THE WOMAN QUESTION:
FAMILIAL HARMONY AND FEMININE CONTAINMENT

Lora: "...Yes I'm ambitious, perhaps too ambitious, but it's been for your sake as well as mine. Isn't this house just a little bit nicer than a cold-water flat? And your new horse, aren't you just crazy about it? --

Susie: "Yes, but --

Lora: "And that closet of yours --

Susie: "Has all the dresses fit for the daughter of a famous star."

Lora: "Now just a moment young lady. It's only because of my ambition that you've had the best of everything. And that's a solid achievement that any mother can be proud of."

Susie: "And how about a mother's love?"

Lora: "Love! But you've always had that!"

Susie: "Yes, by telephone, by postcard, by magazine interviews, you've given me everything...but yourself."

-- *Imitation of Life*

As we have moved from the thirties through the wartime years, we have seen that the representations of mothers and daughters underwent profound shifts. Fundamentally, the move was from an idealized dream of the mother as sacrificial lamb to her daughters social ascendancy, to a much harsher nightmare of the mother as malevolent force on her daughter's struggling psyche, particularly as the war was coming to a close and the specter of a more permanent working mother proved anxiety-provoking indeed. Moving now to the years after the war - to the late forties and fifties - the question arises as to how the culture industry "handled" the personal and social turmoil that now characterized almost any discussion with the term "woman" or "mother" in it.

The years after World War Two are crucial to any examination of the mother/daughter relationship, for it is in those years, roughly between 1945 and the early 60s, that we witness the hardening and solidifying of what Betty Friedan would call "the problem that has no name." Indeed, Friedan's groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*, detailed for the first time the tremendous backlash experienced by women during the postwar years. Her chronicle of women gone slightly mad under the pressures of suburban isolation and severely circumscribed lives opened up the door both for a resurgence of women's activism in the seventies as well as a reexamination of what got hidden under the pleasant facade of fifties consensus.

It is a particularly important period for the history of women, as many feminist historians have documented. If the War brought women into the workforce and into public life with a vengeance, then the post-War period (really beginning midwar as the previous chapter has indicated) attempted to shunt them back off into the domestic,

force in unprecedented numbers during the war, often at the urging of an enormous government campaign that exhorted women to give their all for the war effort. But, as the men began to return home from Europe and the Pacific, many women were also forced to return "home," literally: By 1946, 4 million fewer women were working than had been at the peak of the war."¹ In fact, the retrenchment started midwar:

...government propaganda, midwar, did an about-face. Because the original exhortations to women to do war work had never challenged the core of ideas about femininity, because no one had suggested that work was more than a sacrifice women had willingly made for the most motherly of reasons, the shift was an easy one. The message was clear: although women *could* do anything, authentic women would chose to be at home with their families.²

Yet government officials and labor leaders alike began to realize that many women would not simply step down from their jobs and offer them up to the returning G.I.'s. Indeed, a 1944 Department of Labor survey showed that 80% of former working women, 75% of former students, and 50% of former homemakers hoped to continue working.³ Clearly, the work of ousting women from the public sphere was going to be work indeed.

Numerous feminist historians have pointed out how the late 40s, and most especially the 50s themselves, represented a period of retrogression for women, a period in which many of the gains and freedoms experienced during the war years were lost or, more accurately, wrenched from women in the name of a newly

¹ Donald N. Rothblatt, Daniel C. Garr, and Jo Sprague. *The Suburban Environment and Women* (New York: Praeger Press, 1979), 50.

² Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women's Issues 1945-1968* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1988), 4.

³ Rothblatt, et al., *The Suburban Environment and Women*, 50.

constructed familialism. As many historians have demonstrated, the familialism of the postwar years was not a "return" to a more "traditional" ethos, but was instead a fundamentally *new* phenomenon:

The legendary family of the 1950s...represented something new. It was not, as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of "traditional" family life with roots deep in the past. Rather, it was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members' personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life.⁴

Indeed, it need not have turned out the way it did. Traditional gender roles had been challenged both by the Depression and, more extensively, by the experience of the war and women's work during those years. In addition, growing access to birth control and higher education could have encouraged a more progressive attitude to the position of women in American society.⁵

The domestic containment of the postwar years was thus not a simple continuation, or even a resurgence, of an already existing ethos, but was rather a backlash of significant proportions, a backlash related not only to establishing the nuclear home as the paradigmatic social/personal site, but to the establishment of an ethic of consumerism as a vast bulwark against the threat of communism abroad and the internal "other" within. As Elaine May reveals, the famous Nixon-Khrushchev "kitchen debates" used women as central elements in their visions of the "good life." Anticommunist writers in the US ridiculed the "unfeminine" (working) Soviet women, implying "...that self-supporting women were in some way un-American. Accordingly, anticommunist crusaders viewed women who did not conform to the domestic ideal

⁴ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

with suspicion."⁶ The policy of containment was thus always something more than externally motivated, "In Nixon's vision, the suburban ideal of home ownership would diffuse two potentially disruptive forces: women and workers."⁷

The growth of the suburbs in the post-war expansion played no small part in this backlash, as women were ousted from their public, work environment and relocated in the relative isolation of the new suburban tract home, now itself symbolizing the new ideal of the American Dream. As Cowan has pointed out in her work on household technology, the relationship between the new home products, the suburbs, and the nuclear family ideal was close indeed:

The move to the suburbs carried with it the assumption that someone (surely mother) would be at home to do the requisite work that made it possible for someone else (surely father) to leave early in the morning and return late at night, without worrying either about the welfare of his family or the maintenance of his domicile.⁸

Warren Susman has observed that the term "family" itself came to define not only a new media emphasis (the domestic sitcom) but a whole range of commodities and modes of existence:

...the new medium of television found its function in domestic-centered television shows, from "I Love Lucy" to "I Remember Mama," all seen in the "family room." (Indeed, think of all the family words enveloping the new suburban lifestyle: family-size carton, family room, family car, family film, family restaurant, family vacation.) In essence, one can

⁶ Ibid., 18-19.

⁷ Ibid., 164.

⁸ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 212.

represent the new affluent society collectively in the image of the happy suburban home.⁹

Certainly, the fifties are most often remembered as the period in which the ideal of the traditional nuclear family with 2.4 kids, a suburban tract home, station wagon, and assorted barbecue grills, domestic pets, and home appliances, restructured the social and cultural terrain. The mass media played a central role in this restructuring. For not only was the new medium of television filling up the family living room and occupying a larger and larger space in the social body,¹⁰ but the images themselves were crucial to orienting both women and men to the new social and sexual order, an order that was organized to a great extent around the new consumerism born of the post-War economic boom. As Lipsitz has pointed out, early television production was an influential addition to the more "official" discourses of domesticity and consumerism:

Commercial network television emerged as the primary discursive medium in American society at the precise historical moment that the isolated nuclear family and its concerns eclipsed previous ethnic, class, and political forces as the crucible of personal identity. Television programs both reflected and shaped that translation, defining the good life in family-centric, asocial, and commodity-oriented ways.¹¹

⁹ Warren Susman with the assistance of Edward Griffin, "Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America," in *Recasting American: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 22.

¹⁰ The number of television sets purchased is a good indication of the enormous expansion of TV as a form of popular entertainment: "Sales of sets jumped from three million during the entire decade of the 1940s to over five million *a year* during the 1950s." George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," *Camera Obscura* 16 (January 1988): 83.

¹¹ George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programming," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, ed. May, 93.

If previously, women were targeted by the mass media as potential workers, "Rosie the Riveters" hammering away at the hulls of fighter planes while their noble menfolk were off fighting fascism, then now they were targeted as "happy homemakers," suburban wives and mothers keenly attuned to the newest home products, eagerly reading their Dr. Spock and supporting their husbands' climb up the company ladder.

A sample from an episode of the classic fifties sitcom, *Father Knows Best*, typifies the explicit ideological work of popular culture in orienting men and women towards traditional sex roles. In this episode, teenage daughter Betty hears a lecture from a vocational counselor in her high school and decides that she wants to be an engineer. She gets a summer job working on a highway surveying team and her family is appalled at the idea of a girl doing that sort of work. Betty goes ahead, citing a "changing world," but meets up with a sexist (but handsome) foreman on her first day. He constantly berates her ("why are you doing this?", "what are you running away from?") and Betty runs home in frustration. The young man comes to the house that evening, gives a passionate speech about the need for women to be in the home, and wins over the chastened and enamored Betty.

The ideological impetus of this episode is forthright and explicit. Importantly, Betty's mother plays the part of sort of passive sex-role socializer, while Father plays the central role of arbiter of values and morality. The running joke throughout the episode centers around Betty's refusal to be interested in the new dress her mother has gotten for her, now that she is concerned with her career. The mother continually tries to entice her with the dress, to use it as a lure to swing Betty away from her egalitarian fantasies and towards the replication of her mother's life. The episode ends

with a newly coquettish Betty running upstairs and slipping on the new dress to entice the young male engineer who has come to woo her away from work and towards romantic love and domesticity.

The speech the engineer makes is filled with references to the new expanding world (the new highway system, the housing boom) of the fifties and the desire to have a lovely "sweet girl" to come home to: the wife/mother as the legitimation of postwar growth ("we do it all for her"). Betty overhears the speech (made to the father of course), and runs upstairs to transform herself from strident girl-engineer in jeans and boots to beguiling teen angel in dress and bows. Father looks on happily. By shows end, the realities of a "changing world" are safely contained within the rhetoric of both essential differences and romantic love. The idea of the working woman is ridiculed and put down firmly and vigorously.

Indeed, social messages became vehement in opposition to the enhancement and development of work opportunities for women, and pervaded all areas of popular culture:

A survey of women's roles as portrayed in magazine fiction in 1945 showed careers for women depicted more unsympathetically than since the turn of the century.¹²

The publication in 1942, tellingly before America had entered the war and thus before women had massively entered the wartime workforce, of Philip Wylie's classic attack on American women, *Generation of Vipers*, signaled the beginning of what was to be one of the darkest periods in the history of ideologies of motherhood. Wylie's thesis, that American women had become omnipotent "Moms" damaging the psyches

¹² Harrison, *On Account of Sex...*, 6.

of their offspring, the masculinity of their mates, and the vitality of their country, were the initial salvos in a barrage of mom-bashing that took hold of the popular imagination, soon to be followed by the publication in 1943 of David Levy's *Maternal Overprotection*, and in 1947 of Lundberg and Farnham's popular and vicious *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*.

Although written in the forties, these texts provided the backdrop to the continued psychologization of the mother/daughter relationship. The language of both overprotection (Levy) and neglect and malevolence (Wylie and Lundberg and Farnham) continued on into the fifties, albeit with less rancor and vehemence.

In many senses, then, the post-war years were marked first and foremost by the reorganization and restructuring of sexual roles and ideologies. The anger and moralism of these popular texts only attests to the extreme unease of these years, the sense that something had begun that could not wholly be kept under wraps, not entirely contained under the happy mask of "hearth and home."

Indeed, as Nina Leibman has argued, 50s films continued the evil mother motif that we witnessed in the 40s, presenting a very different version of motherhood than is typically associated with the period. She sees a much less rosy version, one, in fact, in which mothers represented a more malevolent force in their children's lives:

The cinematic family melodramas of the 1950s, then, seem to exhibit an attachment to Wylie's Momism. Mothers are accused of being too smothering and are then relegated to a marginalized existence within the narrative, where they can witness (with admiration) the blossoming of the crucial familial bond, that between father and son.¹³

¹³ Nina C. Leibman, "Leave Mother Out: The Fifties Family in American Film and Television," *Wide Angle* 10 (1988): 30-31.

Leibman argues that it is this erasure, this marginalization, that links fifties television to its filmic counterpart: "Both media depend on a systematic erasure of the mother in order to ensure an emphasis on the father's role in raising his children."¹⁴

This erasure is certainly apparent in the television sitcoms of the period, as *Father Knows Best* amply illustrates. Sitcom mothers seem either absent, anonymous, or inconsequential:

...it is possible to discern in domestic comedy programming of the period a concerted effort to deemphasize the mother's importance in the lives of her children; indeed, she is presented primarily as a domestic servant.¹⁵

Interestingly, in an era which both celebrated and derided the mother, it was the *father* (or often the symbolic father-figure in film melodramas eg. "Imitation of Life") who reigned as head of household and "significant other" in his children's lives. And it was the *father*-child interaction that proved the most substantive and important, both in terms of narrative structure as well as in ideological weight.

In a sense, fathers seem to have been brought back into the picture as a result of the "realization" (promoted by Wylie, et al) that mothers were ruining their children. If maternal instinct was now aggressive and predatory, if "Moms" ruled the earth and made their children rue the day, then fathers needed to re-enter the family fray and set things straight. "Father Knows Best," for all its innocuousness, implied in its very title that Moms may be cute and addle-brained (or mean and malevolent) but, when it really comes down to the important issues of child-rearing and family life, father really *does* know best. And the title of the popular 50s melodrama, *Imitation of Life*, implies that

¹⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵ Ibid., 31.

the life of a "career woman" (Lana Turner's character in this case) is only an "imitation" of the real thing, presumably Mrs. Anderson's life.

Yet the contradictions of this period are legion. For, on the one hand, the recuperation of women as primarily domestic was facilitated by a playing-up of images of "hearth and home" and a celebration of the virtues of motherhood and family, particularly as the decade came to a close and the domestic ideologies of the fifties began in earnest. The old language of biology-as-destiny often merged with the new language of functionalist social science to provide ample evidence for the ineluctability of rigid gender positionings. In a 1956 article in *Parents* magazine ("Fathers shouldn't try to be Mothers"), well-known psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim echoes his Parsonian colleagues in arguing for a "...thinking based on...inherent function," where "...the completion of womanhood is largely through motherhood, but fulfillment of manhood is not achieved largely through fatherhood."¹⁶

This image of the fifties as a period of happy and fulfilled homemakers waxing freshly washed floors and beaming brightly at their brood through their suburban picture windows, is an image we strongly identify with the tv sitcoms of that period, particularly such shows as the hugely popular "Father Knows Best," and "Leave it to Beaver." If any one tv image says to us "Fifties" it is the image of June Cleaver, ever patient mother, loving wife, cheerful consumer, dispensing love and cookies to husband and madcap sons alike. But this concerted effort to regain a sense of stability about women and their place was clearly motivated by a felt concern over the realities of change, struggle and confusion.

¹⁶ Bruno Bettelheim, "Fathers Shouldn't Try to be Mothers," *Parents*, October 1956, 125.

At the same time that these ideologies of maternal beneficence were blossoming, the specter of Philip Wylie's malevolent Mom reared her ugly head. Wylie's description of a society gone soft, ruined and shriveled by the effects of hordes of devouring, emasculating moms, is as much a part of the familial discourse of the forties and fifties as are the happy homemakers and cake-baking mothers.

These two aspects of post-war ideology - the glorification of motherhood and its simultaneous denigration by the exponents of "Momism" -may seem to be in contradiction. But it is this double-message, this insoluble paradox, that itself is the defining discourse of mothering in the fifties, and most especially of mothering daughters. The image of the devouring mother and of the virtuous mother are two sides of the same double-bind. The fear, anger and misogyny found in such popular texts as Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* and in many of the melodramas of the period is not an aberration, nor is it minor and inconsequential. Rather, the attempt to erase Mom, to find her guilty and responsible not only for her children's miserable failures, but for the failures of a society as well, are part of the same ideological moment which locates June Cleaver and Mrs. Anderson as the ultimate examples of virtuous motherhood. As Ann Kaplan notes, this pattern was already beginning by the thirties:

But 30s filmic narratives already show increased attention to the Mother's responsibility for the child's psychic, as against social, health. The emphasis shifts in an interesting way from the 20s focus...on the mother as moral (Christian) teacher, to the greater burden of creating happy, well-adjusted and fulfilled human beings. Instead of being the agent for shaping the public, external figure (the man/citizen) the Mother is now to shape the internal, psychic self. By the 40s, aberrations in the grown-up child are her fault.¹⁷

¹⁷ E. Ann Kaplan, "Mothering, Feminism and Representation: The Maternal in Melodrama and the Woman's Film 1910-1940," in *Home is where the heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film

And I think that it is not simply a matter of this being "two sides of the same coin." Rather, the more appropriate metaphor might be a mirror, but this time not Lacan's mirror into which the male child gazes, signifying his own reality and his own otherness, but the funny-house mirror, into which the anxious mother stares. This single mirror splits and fractures her image, mutates it, bends it. There is no single image, no reflection of the self she believes herself to be. All images are freakish, all contorted, yet unified by their shared abstraction, joined by their fictiveness.

Interestingly, many of the critiques of motherhood that emerged during the 40s and 50s (and have re-emerged with the New Right/Moral Majority of the 1980s) draw a very firm connection between the evils of mothers and the evils of the developing mass society. Mass culture (and most writers include the new home technologies amongst these) is here seen as replacing the intimate familial environment in which a mother's love and nurture provided the sustenance and growth for the entire community. Women have lost their place in the world and now, having been made redundant by the new technologies, are erroneously looking for gratification (in all the wrong places):

With the coming of an industrial civilization, woman lost her sphere of creative nurture and either was catapulted out into the world to seek for achievement in the masculine sphere of exploit or was driven in upon herself as a lesser being. In either case she suffered psychologically.¹⁸

This almost pre-industrial yearning for a return to a time when men were men and women were mothers manifests itself in the attacks on working women made in

Institute, 1987), 130.

¹⁸ Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham, *Modern Woman: the lost sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), 363-364.

films like *Mildred Pierce*. Mildred has tried to be "both a mother and a father" (interestingly, a line echoed by Faye Dunaway in her portrayal of Joan Crawford in *Mommie, Dearest*) and, in doing so, has created a monster child.

As we move into the 1950s, and firmly into a post-war world, many themes from the malevolent mother era of the 40s remain the same but the specific depiction and narrative resolution changes significantly. There were, I believe, two primary and simultaneous responses to the changing roles of women. The first response can be seen in such films as *I Remember Mama*, and *Little Women* and such TV shows as *Father Knows Best*, *Mama*, and *The Donna Reed Show*. These images yearned for the good old days when mothers were all-tolerant and all-sacrificing. In many ways, these nostalgic images of traditional family life refer back to the Depression era films such as *Stella Dallas* in that they posit a benign and all-loving mother who is unproblematically governed by a maternal instinct of sacrifice and familial devotion. Tellingly, these images were often set in either a pseudo-Victorian past or a new suburban idyll, thus referring back not only to the benign vision of maternal sacrifice, but also to 19th century ideals of "True Womanhood:"

With their stress on manipulative femininity and the importance of purchasing marital harmony at the cost of a woman's individuality, the postwar themes closely resembled those of the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity.¹⁹

And women's magazines consistently advocated not only the psychological dictum of maternal responsibility for the growth and development of husband and children, but

¹⁹ Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War Two* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 175.

the social doctrine of maternal responsibility for the growth and development of western civilization:

They hold human happiness in their hands. Theirs is the power to make or mar human personalities, to supply a core of warmth and security for husband and children, or to withhold this. Theirs is the responsibility, as homemakers, to see that the same values are found throughout the community...a mother's responsibility for human living does not end with her home. Her home is not a desert island. It is part of a larger community, responsible for it and dependent on it. As members of this larger group, mothers must see to it that all the children of the community have good schools, good recreation, good training in democratic living.²⁰

In these nostalgic representations, mothers and daughters are seen as united both in their domestic orientation, as well as in their position within the family. In both *Father Knows Best* and *Donna Reed Show*, the teenage daughters are seen as extensions of the mother - they help out in the kitchen, participate in mother's household chores, and laugh knowingly along with mother when dad and the boys act up.

The second response was far more interesting, in that it in many ways acknowledged that women were not solely domestic and set out to explore the issues that arose from this "new paradigm" of work and family for women. This would include such films as *Imitation of Life*, *Peyton Place* and, surprisingly, many articles in women's magazines which began to discuss the new working mother and which often (tentatively) supported women in their desire to remain in the labor force after the war had ended. But, more significantly, this second "line" of response continued the often vitriolic attacks against working mothers found in films of the 40s such as

²⁰ Dorothy Lee, "What Does Homemaking Mean To You?," *Parents* January, 1947, 89.

Mildred Pierce, referring back then to these complex wartime representations. Popular texts such as Lundberg and Farnhams helped to exacerbate this distress over the working woman.

It is this tension, between the nostalgic image of the domestic mother and daughter and the tormented image of the working mother and neglected daughter, that characterizes this period. Yet, again, it is important to realize that these seemingly disparate representations are united not only by their shared idealization, but by their insistent emphasis on domesticity as the happiest possible route for women. And, importantly, both sets of representations convey the feeling of a familial world in crisis. Both the nostalgic response and the angry response are so widely drawn, almost comical in their outlandishness, that the answers they propose are almost always fractured, unsteady, not-quite believable.

The classic fifties melodrama - *Imitation of Life*, directed by Douglas Sirk, one of the great melodrama *auteurs* - exemplifies the double-bind mothers in the fifties faced both in the narratives of popular culture and in the experience of their everyday lives. *Imitation of Life* was a 1959 remake of a Fannie Hurst novel originally produced in 1934 (with Claudette Colbert as its star). It is the story of two mother/daughter couples: one black and one white. This racial theme is vitally important here, not only for what it reveals about the racial dynamics of 50s society, but for the part it plays in this specific narrative and in the melodrama genre in general. If, in the thirties films such as *Stella Dallas* played out class conflict through the mother/daughter relationship as metaphor, then in the fifties, in a film like *Imitation of Life* the racial "issue" was refracted through familial interactions. For under the booming, "Happy Days" exterior of 50s life, beneath the contemporary surge

of rose-colored nostalgia, the reality of life in the 50s was much more fraught, much more complex and disturbing than popular memory would have it constructed.

Indeed, the impact of McCarthyism on all areas of popular culture has been well-documented.²¹ Not only were producers, screenwriters, actors, and directors blacklisted, but the culture industry itself initiated anti-Communist imagery and narratives. Often, these films and tv shows were overtly anti-communist, portraying a FBI agent or US spy engaged in a holy war against the Eastern European infidels, or a brave scientist battling the invaders from another planet (perhaps we hear faint echoes of Reagan's "evil empire" thesis?) But, more often than not, the ideology of anti-communism manifested itself in more "subtle" and oblique ways, and was often implicitly connected to other ideological agendas - particularly ones concerning the family - with which the Red Scare found common ground. As Elaine May has noted, the relationship between the cold war and domesticity was close indeed:

With security as the common thread, the cold war ideology and the domestic revival reinforced each other. The powerful political consensus that supported cold war policies abroad and anticommunism at home fueled conformity to the suburban family ideal. In turn, the domestic ideology encouraged private solutions to social problems and further weakened the potential for challenge to the cold war consensus.²²

And, as usual, the melodrama was a central site for the production of domestic ideologies. *Imitation of Life* is an exceedingly complex and contradictory melodrama, its overpowering glitzy style often drowning out the more explicit ideological implications. While the role of Lora Meredith is certainly similar in many ways to the "career woman = maternal deprivation" theme of earlier films like *Mildred Pierce*, the

²¹ The effect of McCarthyism on popular culture has been well documented.

²² May, *Homeward Bound...*, 208.

presence both of another mother/daughter couplet as well as the racial theme serve to complicate this otherwise routine story of a mother's climb up the ladder of success and the havoc it wreaks on her home life.

There are two central narrative strands - two parallel stories - in this film, strands that come together - that unify - around the core issue of "mothering." Fundamentally, though, it is yet another example of a film highly critical of "career women," particularly as seen in the context of their parenting capacities. The very title and theme song, *Imitation of Life*, attests to the "falseness" of a working woman's life ("What is love without the giving? Without love, you're only living...an imitation, an imitation of life...")²³ Lana Turner plays Lora Meredith, a widow recently moved to New York who is trying to make it in the theater and raise her daughter. The story of Lora's rise is joined early on with the story of another mother and daughter, played by Juanita Moore and Susan Kohner²⁴, who come to live with/work for "Miss Laura," before she has made it, and stay on with her through her success.

Certainly, this success and its repercussions construct a central ideological moment of the film. Lora, like Mildred, wants to give her daughter everything, and it backfires, as Annie lets Lora know after they've moved into a glamorous new house and Susie has been sent to boarding school:

Annie: "Did you see those bills from Susie's new school?"

Lora: "Uh huh. And it doesn't matter."

²³ The title sequence, with the song in the background, depicts what appears to be diamonds dropping down and forming a pile, visualizing the falseness of Lora's fame and fortune.

²⁴ Both actresses received Oscar nominations for Best Supporting Actress.

Annie: " But Miss Lora --"

Lora: "No matter what it costs, Susie's going to have everything I missed."

Annie: "From her letters, she misses you more than she'd ever miss Latin..."

As in *Mildred Pierce* and even *Stella Dallas*, mothers can not access upward mobility: that is the province of fathers. Later, when Annie reveals to Laura that Susie is in love with Steve (Laura's lover) and Laura says, "Why didn't I know about this, why didn't she come to me?" and Annie replies, "Maybe you weren't around." Laura, of course, gets the message, "You mean I haven't been a good mother." The next scene reiterates the evil career mother theme, with an angry and love-struck daughter Susie (played with a sort of wide-eyed adolescent glee by Sandra Dee) further condemning the Mom who "gave me everything, but herself." Even Laura's dramatic attempt to make amends with her daughter by sacrificing Steve for the sake of their relationship backfires, as Susie pleads with not to "act" because she is not one of her fans.²⁵ Lana soon enough sees the light, and settles down with the decent, hardworking Steve.

But this narrative is contrasted with the story of Annie Johnson and her daughter Sara Jane, whose desire to be white - and the "passing" that accompanies it - remains the other central narrative element in the film. One way to understand this film is that it sets up a "good mother/bad mother, good daughter/bad daughter split, with the white daughter and the black mother being paired as the virtuous couple. For

²⁵ Quite early on in the film, when Laura is still living in near-poverty and trying to break in to the theater, Steve also tells her "not to act," in a fight *they* were having over her relationship to her work life. The repetition here reinforces the alignment of the daughter with the current patriarchal position on women's labor (it's destructiveness and falseness - "acting") and places the mother on the receiving end of their scorn.

the strange aspect of the film is that, unlike most of the other films discussed thus far, the daughter that "goes bad" is the product of some obviously devoted and healthy mothering. Where *Mildred Pierce* indirectly blamed Mildred for her daughter's badness²⁶ no such impression can possibly be garnered from the mothering done by Annie in *Imitation of Life*. Rather, Sara Jane's rejection of her mother seem to be the result of a combination of factors: first, the rebellious/alienated teenager theme beloved of fifties filmmakers, and, secondly, and more to the point, the effects of a real and present racism. Sara Jane is the way she is not because of Annie's failures as a mother, but because of social failures.²⁷ Even her mother recognizes this at one point (Quote) and the brutal beating she receives from a white boyfriend reinforces the social construction of her rebellion, rather than the psychological construction via the mother.

To what extent, then, does this narrative of maternal beneficence and social injustice impact the more traditional narrative of maternal neglect and deprivation? I think it places it on shaky ground, because it then sets up two separate rule systems for each mother/daughter pair. If Sara Jane is "bad" because of the way a racist society has treated her, then it becomes more difficult to validate Susie's anger and resentment towards her career mother. It almost appears as if Sirk didn't really have

²⁶ Interestingly, in both films the badness of the daughter's is signified by their becoming singer/dancers in sleazy nightclubs for leering men. And both mothers witness the objectification of the daughter as an object of the male gaze. In both cases, the maternal gaze loses out to the male gaze.

²⁷ Indeed, both Lora and her daughter are presented as enmeshed within that racist system; while Lora is basically good and loving to both Annie and Sara Jane, there are several significant moments in which the unthinking insensitivity of a white person towards a black person emerges and is critically examined. One scene that exemplifies this is when Lora realizes Annie has a life outside of her employ and says, "I didn't know you have friends" to which Annie gently replies, "Miss Lora, you never asked."

his heart in it: the confrontation scene between mother and daughter is mild indeed (compared to *Mildred Pierce* certainly) and after speaking such harsh words, the daughter immediately falls into the mother's arms and begs her forgiveness.

Indeed, the fact that Lora has decided to give up her career and marry Steve *before* this confrontation scene, reverses the traditional cause and effect narrative movement (bad mother realizes her neglect and repents). If Lora "repents" and settles down prior to the confrontation with the daughter (and thus prior to the full realization of her supposed neglectfulness as a mother) than perhaps this resolution can be read as somewhat self-determined, not wholly in response to her guilt feelings. For many reasons, then, *Imitation of Life* is not completely believable as a melodrama of maternal neglect.

Two years earlier Lana Turner had done a warm-up performance in *Peyton Place*, playing another working mother neglecting the emotional/sexual life of both herself and her teenage daughter. This notorious filmic soap opera (later to be followed by a television soap version) included two mother/daughter pairs - the virtuous Salina (Hope Lange) living in squalor with her mother who works as a maid for Mrs. MacKenzie (Lana Turner) and her daughter Alison. In an early scene (actually the first we see between Alison and her mother) the presence of the "absent" father rears its ugly head. Supposedly, he is dead (a war hero) but, as this is a soap opera, he actually was a married man with whom Mrs. MacKenzie had an affair. The daughter, of course, worships the never seen father. When the mother objects to the daughter kissing his picture before she goes off to school, Alison replies, "It's not my fault that he died before I was two." Alison "lacks" a father - a male presence - and it is this lack that motivates the mother/daughter conflict, as the mother replies angrily,

"Stop talking about fathers and husbands and marriage." So an opposition is set up between careerist/unloving/perfectionist/cold Mother and daughter's desires for male attention/approval. This is spelled out in a later scene where Mom catches the daughter kissing at a party held in their house:

Mother: "I don't want you to be like everyone else in this town. I want you to rise above Peyton Place..."

Daughter: "I don't want to be perfect like you Mother. I don't want to live in a test tube. I just want to be me...I'd rather be liked than be perfect."

In the ensuing battle, the mother tries to make up by saying that she wants the daughter to fall in love, to meet the right man, etc, but the daughter will have none of it, "*You* want! Is that all you can say? Well if any man would seriously ask me I'd run away and become his mistress." So the daughter's desire to be sexually desired is thrown up in the face of the mother's fear/denial of her own sexuality. This is reiterated in a later scene where Mother accuses daughter of having been swimming nude with a boy:

Alison: "Mother, if you keep this up someday I will do what you keep accusing me of."

Mother: "I wouldn't doubt it. You're just like your father when it comes to sex..."

So, again, daughter is identified with sexuality, freedom, father, while mother is clearly the force of repression.

The claustrophobia of the suburban idyll - the endless repetition of actions and reactions - is expressed here through the mother/daughter relationship, as Alison here confides in the maid Nellie after a fight with her mother, in much the same way that Susie confided in the maid Annie, when her working mother was "unavailable:"

Alison: "Nellie, you've been both a daughter and a mother, which one is worse?"

Nellie: "Being a mother."

Alison: "Why?"

Nellie: "You find yourself doing the same thing you hated your own mother and father doing."

Alison: "That's very interesting. Somewhere along the line doesn't somebody get intelligent and realize that the children have to grow up their own way?"

Shades here of Dr. Jacquith's theme of "growing free and blossoming." Yet these ideas of letting children grow up "their own way" emerge in the context of a society in which the professionalization of motherhood and the rise of the expert have inserted themselves into every nook and cranny of social life:

Whether or not all Americans read or believed the professionals, there can be little doubt that postwar America was the era of the expert...Science and technology seemed to have invaded virtually every aspect of life, from the most public to the most private. Whether in medicine, child rearing, or even the intimate areas of sex and marriage, expertise gained legitimacy as familiar, "old-fashioned" ways were called into question.²⁸

As Clark and others have noted, there existed in the fifties competing discourses of maternal incompetence and natural maternal functioning that makes it difficult to decipher the dominant ideology re. maternal behavior:

The tension between self-sufficiency and ineptitude which was expressed in Dr. Spock's contradictory emphasis on both personal self-reliance and professional expertise, placed women in an ambivalent position.²⁹

²⁸ Elaine Tyler May, "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb," in *Recasting America*, ed. May, 155-56.

²⁹ Clifford E. Clark, Jr., "Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 173.

Indeed, the venerable town doctor³⁰ is here the voice of professional authority: it is he who advises the victimized Salina, who reveals the truth of her rape by her stepfather, who informs Mrs. MacKenzie that it isn't healthy to have only one child.

The mother eventually blurts out her confession (the daughter's illegitimacy) and the daughter leaves Peyton Place and moves to the City, only to be reunited with her mother when Mom proves her "goodness" at Salina's trial (she accidentally killed her drunk stepfather). The reunion, though, occurs only after a man (the handsome new schoolteacher) has broken down mom's icy reserve and she becomes an available object of the gaze. The ending, then, is similar to *Imitation of Life* in that the mother and daughter can only be brought back together when a man enters the picture, "balances it out," thus legitimating the connection, now safely ensconced in a nuclear-family context and eliminating any suggestion of self-defined mother/daughter intimacy.

In these two films of the late fifties, in contrast to the dominant images of mothers and daughters in the forties, the women are reunited by film's end. While Veda was thrown in jail, and Charlotte got rid of her mother by a convenient death, these two films leave us with the sense of a relationship maintained, albeit with chastened mothers. This should not be surprising, given the dominance of family ideologies in the fifties. The drastic separation entailed in a film like *Mildred Pierce* implied that something was not right in the domestic nest. But the vision of familial harmony and domestic happiness produced by the culture industry and supported by

³⁰ The doctor as voice of reason, justice, and clarity in a hazy world is a constant in films of the 40s and 50s (eg. *Now, Voyager, Peyton Place, All That Heaven Allows*, etc.)

government policies,³¹ could simply not tolerate so drastic a rift in the domestic landscape. In both *Now, Voyager* and *Mildred Pierce*, the families we are left with at film's end are strange and fractured: Charlotte becomes the keeper of her lover's daughter, squashing her sexuality in the service of this awkward arrangement. And Mildred is reunited with first husband Burt, but is rendered childless - one daughter lost to her own neglect and another to her own obsessiveness. Neither are simple visions of a domestic idyll.

While *Peyton Place* revealed the underside of the suburban paradise, (tellingly set right at the beginning of the US entry into the war) it ended up arguing that it can be internally "cleansed." By film's end, Mother and daughter walk into their beautiful bourgeois home together as father/lover figure #1 (the schoolteacher) and boyfriend of Alison look on proudly. You can almost hear them saying, "Gosh, it's good to have our girls back together again!"

It seems here that images of mothers and daughters in the 40s - for all their meanness - expressed and explored the turmoil of a world in crisis, a world amazed at the horrors of Hitler and unsure of what the future would bring. But in the fifties, popular culture was fundamentally and passionately enjoined in the effort to acclimate and orient Americans to the "brave new world" of mass consumption, tract housing, and ideological homogeneity. *Peyton Place* could expose the contradictions but it

³¹ Government policies supported the development of the suburban nuclear family, with government supported mortgages, subsidies for roads to the suburbs, the creation of housing acts, support for dependent children, and the encouragement of "buying on time." (Warren Susman w/Edward Griffin, "Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America," in *Recasting America*, ed. May; Eugenia Kaledin, *Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984)

could not let them exist, and *Imitation of Life* could present mother/daughter conflict but it had to resolve it so that a familial harmony was reestablished by films end.

Indeed, even the conflicts between mothers and daughters that went on in both films of the fifties seem more like a rather benign generational struggle than a profound psychological disharmony, reflecting perhaps the popularization of "youth rebellion" as a legitimate social category. When Alison threatens to run off with a lover we can picture the mothers in the audience smiling gently at her youthful naivete, sure that, as the psychologists say, this is only a stage she is going through. And Susie's "you've given my everything but yourself" speech is shot through with a sort of humor, as when she asks her mother pertly if she has worded her college application correctly.

The rifts and conflicts between mothers and daughters could now be managed, worked out, rectified. But this working out was intimately tied to the reconstruction of the harmonious (patriarchal) nuclear family. Representations of the mother/daughter relationship in the post war years presented a vision of a endlessly malleable nuclear family, able to withstand problems and disagreements, secure in the knowledge that they can all be worked out eventually. While conflict between mother and daughter remained central to the narratives discussed, it was interpreted not as the imposition of the neurotic mother on the victim/daughter, but as part of a "life stage" or even generational rebellion. As in the films of the mid and late 40s (*Mildred Pierce*, *Now, Voyager*), class continues to disappear as a mediating theme, and is replaced by psychology. But the type of psychological offering here is a bit different, a psychology now searching for continuity and conformity, resolution and adjustment.

So the mother and daughter are reunited in many of these fifties images, yet

it is a problematic reunion. First, class and history continue to disappear, rendering the reunion rather sterile. But, most importantly, the reunion in both films discussed depends on the reconstruction of the nuclear family and the re-establishment of a dominant male presence, a re-establishing that is also performed in terms of genre. Perhaps this re-establishing of the male presence signals the end to the female centered "women's films" and a resurgence of more male-defined generic formulas, particularly in the "rebel" films of the 50s and early 60s.

The 50s and early 60s remain marked, then, by the rigorous attention of popular culture to an explicit and rarely wavering ideological agenda of familial harmony and feminine containment. An examination of several segments from the popular sitcom, *Father Knows Best*, reveals the extent to which a clear and unambiguous ideological dialogue permeates the very fabric of cultural design. In a 1958 episode entitled "Medal for Margaret," the subject is trophies and medals, and Mother's complete lack of any of the above. As Father and the kids busy themselves building a case to hold their symbols of achievement, Mother is made to feel lacking for her inability to garner the emblems of success, but assures her concerned brood that she is "...perfectly happy cooking all of the meals to keep all you champions hale and hearty."

But to keep the family happy, Mother secretly takes up fly catching in order to compete in a women's contest and thus win the admiration of her husband and progeny. But, of course, true to sitcom logic, Margaret breaks her arm and is unable to compete in the contest. Finding out her plan, her touched family entertains her with a "This is Your Life, Margaret Anderson," ceremony. One by one, each member of the family recounts an event in which resourceful and reliable mother/wife Margaret

has exhibited prize-winning maternal behavior. Eldest daughter Betty begins by recalling the time when she was nine years old and her mother valiantly dashed off a new, prize-winning costume after she had fallen and ruined it on her way to a party: "I thought that she was the greatest, smartest mother in the whole world. Of course now that I'm older I'm sure of it. And so, Mrs. Anderson, I award you this plaque for most valuable mother," and she gives her a frying pan with "Most Valuable Mother" written on it. Each child continues "Boy's best friend," etc., and Father finally pops in with a medal for "being the best darn wife I ever had."

First, Margaret is mocked for her lack of achievement. Then, when she does try to learn a skill, she is terrible at it and finally unable to compete, taken out of the running. Ultimately, Margaret is compensated for her lack of official recognition by the recognition of her family: her maternal/wifely nurture and caretaking has allowed her family to achieve. This secondary, vicarious success is all that she should ever need or want.

But mother's caretaking and functioning (as the positivist sociologists would have it) is at the same time presented as inadequate to the task of preparing her children for the major moral and social issues that will confront them in their adult years:

Philip Wylie's presence in Fifties television is felt not in a preponderance of violent or evil mothers; rather, the programs "solve" the "problem" of mother's all-powerful and harmful influence within the family by decisively reconfiguring the father as *the* crucial molder of his children's psyches, while simultaneously suggesting that the mother is fundamentally inadequate to this and other familial and household tasks.³²

³² Liebman, "Leave Mother Out: The Fifties Family in American Film and Television," 31.

Father Knows Best is quite literally what it says it is: mother is the family yet she is strangely insignificant. Here again is that double message of the fifties: on the one hand extolling the virtues of motherhood and domestic femininity while at the same time promoting fathers as primary socializers. And the background to this seemingly antinomous message is the lingering scent of the rabid misogynists, Wylie, Strecker, Lundberg & Farnham, et al.

In a 1959 episode, entitled "Kathy Becomes a Girl," the role of the father as both the figure of knowledge and moral guidance as well as the educator into appropriate femininity is made explicit. In a reversal of what would typically have been a dialogue between mother and daughter, father now supplants mother as the one most able to educate their daughter in the realities of adult femininity. The episode begins with Mother's concern about youngest daughter Kathy's tomboyish behavior ("Kathy, don't you think you're getting a little old to be wrestling boys and playing football?") Kathy's initial resistance ("What else is there to do?") quickly turns into concern over her lack of girlfriends and her status as "oddball." Mother informs her that "...there comes a time when girls like girls who act more, well, more like girls." Kathy continues objecting: "You mean I should act the way they do and be a stuffed shirt?" Mother replies, "No! Just be a normal, average girl," to which Kathy wonders, "I don't think I'm the type." Mother here is able to express the desire for conformity but not the way to create it; that job is left to Father.

The inculcation of Kathy into appropriate femininity is painful to watch. Interestingly, Kathy's inappropriateness is signified by her physicality: roughhousing with boys and swinging and hugging her girlfriends. Part of the breaking of Kathy, of constructing the feminine in a little girl, is related to a restriction of the body and

a production of a repertoire of deceit and manipulation that is identified with female wiles.

This episode of *Father Knows Best* puts to rest any doubts concerning the authenticity of de Beauvoir's comment that "woman is made, not born." The entire family becomes engaged in the task of making a woman out of Kathy. When Kathy is ignored by her girlfriends when a party is being planned, the tension heightens and Father legitimizes Mother's exasperated (and rather comical) concern by pointing out the implications of this problem for Kathy's "development:" "If she feels rejected at school this can become a big problem for her. We've got to find a solution." When sister Betty suggests that the solution lies in a gender switch, Kathy runs down the stairs to concur with her joking sister, "I wish I was a boy!"

While Mother buys Kathy a frilly dress in the hopes that it will "...encourage her to be more careful and ladylike," and big sister initiates her into the woolly world of feminine appearance ("I'll turn her into a girl if I have to black her eye doing it"), it is Father who finally gets through to the still-reluctant Kathy in a little talk they have on the steps. The reference point in his pitch is Mother; he's going to let Kathy in on the little tricks Mother uses that make her so wonderful:

Father: "Oh, I mean cute things. Like, uhh, being dependent, a little helpless now and then, expecting me to take over. You see, men like to be gallant. All you have to do is give them the opportunity."

He convinces Kathy that little tricks are a part of being a woman, and she concludes that, "We girls have got it made. All we have to do is sit back and be waited on." But Father is quick to point out (and here is the nod to the reality of women's lives, including participation in the labor force) that, "...it's very important for a girl to be

capable and self-sufficient." But Kathy continues to get it wrong and more work is needed to set her straight:

Kathy: "I am! I can beat Eroll wrestling any day!"

Father: "Worst thing you can do. Never try to beat a man at his own game. You just beat the women at theirs."

Kathy: "I'll remember Daddy. But are you sure it'll work?"

Father: "You're Mother's worked it on me for over twenty years."

In the end, Kathy accedes to her feminization. She successfully seduces the boys by acquiring the trappings of "girlness" and employing the womanly arts of deception. The final scenes show her rendered prone and helpless by a (false) broken ankle, and thus rewarded by the attention of admiring boys. Kathy wins over the girls as well, who now find in Kathy a successful sister who is finally able to attract the sought-after boys.

This inculcation into appropriate femininity is also the subject of an appalling article written in 1956 by Constance Foster entitled, "A mother of boys says: Raise your girl to be a wife." The author here is clearly angry at the "confused" roles in contemporary society and wants to get wayward women back on the right path to wife-and-motherhood:

...the one essential qualification for a satisfactory daughter-in-law is the ability to be a real woman and like it. For such a girl having children is the most natural thing in the world because it's what everything is all about.³³

³³ Constance J. Foster, "A Mother of boys says: Raise your girl to be a wife," *Parents*, September 1956, 44.

Foster cites venerable misogynists Farnham & Lundberg in stating her case against willful mothers who would lead their daughters into the never-never land of female independence:

Long before it's time for Mom to help plan the wedding or Dad to give the bride away, it's time to be raising a future wife in your home. Because wives aren't born - they are made. Your daughter is born a female, but she has to learn to be feminine.³⁴

This strange twist on de Beauvoir, like it's *Father Knows Best* counterpart already discussed, encourages mothers to be diligent in their education of their girl-children.

Bolstering dads seems to be a principal ingredient in the construction of a wife:

Sometimes a mother harms her daughter's chances of future happiness in marriage by deprecating men in general and the girl's father in particular. If she is the one who "runs" the family she then gives her daughter the feeling that men need to be managed.³⁵

Indeed, those important "inner patterns of femininity" are almost solely contingent on daughter's worship of fathers and mother's ability to access those for the daughter:

I hope my daughters-in-law are lucky enough to have Dads who rave over their first fumbling attempts to bake a cake and make dresses for their dolls. The fonder they are of their fathers, the better they will be someday for my sons.³⁶

Mothers of daughters are not only urged to prepare their daughters for the dubious distinction of wife/helpmate/mother, but are often informed of the intractability of generational struggle and the necessity of remaining forgiving and accessible throughout. In an article on how to be popular with your daughter (a very common

³⁴ Ibid., 43.

³⁵ Ibid., 113.

³⁶ Ibid., 44, 113.

theme in the fifties age of conformity), Marjorie Marks urges mothers to be endlessly malleable in relation to their daughter's teenage angst:

Never be too busy when Daughter talks or too pressing if she is reticent. It's normal procedure for her to prefer Friend Irma to yourself as confidante. This is proof that the apron strings are lengthening as they should be. Some day she will come back of her own free will. A girl's best friend is her mother - on request only.³⁷

Yet Jo Wagner is not so sure that what goes around will, in fact, come around:

There is a theory that a teenage girl, once she herself has grown up and becomes the mother of a teen-age girl, will say, "Mother was right!" Comforting, that theory - if you can subscribe to it. I can't. I am sure that she will do no such thing. My daughter will look at *her* daughter in amazement and consternation. She'll wonder, What is the matter with kids these days? *She'll* be saying, "Now when *I* was your age -"³⁸

One thing remains clear in both these statements, and the issues discussed above: the fifties continued the process of constructing the mother/daughter relationship mothers as a series of double-bind discourses. On the one hand, mothers are to be endlessly available and responsive to the caprices of their teenage daughters. Indeed, the inevitability of generational struggle (or "irritation" more accurately) is produced here as a natural category and a prerequisite for development ("lengthening of those apron-strings as they should be"). The theme in many articles in the women's magazines was one of a sort of benign, all-giving tolerance to rambunctious daughters. Yet mothers were simultaneously condemned for *not* being attentive and diligent enough with their kids (maternal deprivation/neglect) and thus urged to exert a more

³⁷ Marjorie Marks, "Be Popular With Your Daughter," *Woman's Home Companion*, June 1950, 105.

³⁸ Jo Martin Wagner, "There are only 37 things wrong with my daughter," *Good Housekeeping*, October 1955, 309.

substantial maternal influence, both on their wayward youth as well as on their wayward society.

The double-binds continue. Mrs. Anderson is held up as the epitome of well-adjusted womanhood, yet she is not even deemed competent enough to teach her daughters the "necessary" lessons of womanhood. Mothers are to initiate their daughters into appropriate femininity (turn them into wives, as the article stated), but how can Mrs. Anderson reproduce herself if Dad has taken over that job as well? Mothers continue to be held responsible for their daughter's psyches and personalities, yet are given little narrative power to make that meaningful.

These double-binds help to maintain a no-win situation for mothers and daughters in the postwar years, a no-win situation that continues to plague contemporary representations and, I believe, lived experience as well. The daughters of these fifties mothers are led to believe that working mothers, if depicted at all, will imply for them a serious "lack" and situation of deprivation. And the alternative image of the period -the Margaret Andersons and Mama Hansens and June Cleavers - offer daughters a model of sappy, happy serfdom and sacrifice, completely negating any path for these daughters other than an endless reproduction of the same. The closeness of some of these fifties mothers and daughters is not an intimacy built on the richness of human experience, but a cloying attachment firmly anchored to the patriarchal constraints of female domesticity.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE TURNING POINT:
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS AT THE BIRTH OF SECOND WAVE FEMINISM

In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, and echoed torch singer Peggy Lee when she asked American women, "Is that all there is?" After over a decade spent amidst the eerie cheerfulness of the domestic fantasy, the facade was beginning to crack. Friedan's book spoke of this domestic ideology as both illusion and entrapment. She grieved for the days of valiant heroines and independent women that she had seen in images of the thirties and during the war years, and tried to understand the "retreat to the home" that so characterized the period in which she both lived and wrote. And, because of her own work as women's magazine writer, she articulated a familiarity and forcefulness that bespoke her intimate knowledge of what she termed "the problem that has no name."

Clearly, the women's movement, much less feminism, did not emerge full-blown the day after Friedan's book hit the bookstores. Indeed, for a large part of the sixties, it was business as usual. *Ozzie and Harriet* ran until 1966, as did *The Donna Reed*

Show, even though June (Cleaver) and Margaret (Anderson) had faded out by 1963. The lure of an idyllic suburbia still exerted itself on the ever-expanding body politic, and barbecues and home decorating remained favorite domestic activities. Yet the sixties saw the full development of the significant social movements of our time: the civil rights movement, the anti-war and student movement, and, towards the end of the decade, the women's movement. Indeed, as Sara Evans¹ has so forcefully argued, the women's movement itself was in large part a product of both women's engagement in civil rights struggles and in the culture and politics of the New Left.

It is by now axiomatic and somewhat of a cliché to say that these years were saturated with a social upheaval made even more compelling in contrast to the previous years of feminine containment and McCarthyite repression. There is no denying that what has been periodized "The Sixties" (really meaning late 60s and early 70s) has come to represent America's own unique experience of internal dissonance and rebellion. Indeed, these years have come to mark off a period of American history in much the same way that World War Two has been demarcated as a watershed "event," shaping and structuring the public consciousness in fundamentally new and challenging ways.

What, then, happens to the images of the mother/daughter relationship in a world of televised napalm bombings and Woodstock, sit-ins and Marches on Washington? And, what concerns us here and in the chapters to follow, what happens to these images when the women's movement really emerges both as a cultural discourse and as a vast panoply of experiences and practices? How does the new

¹ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

language of feminism, and the new location of women as media subjects, structure and shape the way we look at and "think" the mother/daughter relationship?

This chapter examines the shift from a leftover fifties ideology in the sixties that perpetuated a still-active maternal evil/maternal good dichotomy, to the emergence of full-blown feminism in the seventies. This shift can also be seen specifically as a media shift, where television, and the sitcom in particular, really comes into its own in the 70s as a medium that is something more than a simple reinforcement of the status quo. For it was clearly television, much more than film, that exhibited the greatest willingness to engage with the women's movement and the new familial configurations. Except for a few notable exceptions, the "new Hollywood women's cinema" of the 70s was just that, a few notable exceptions that made only occasional inroads against the hegemony of the alienated male/buddy films of the sixties and seventies. Thus, the focus here is more on television and women's magazines than on film, as it is these media that engaged more completely with the radical offerings of the women's movement.

One of the most striking aspects of both the sixties and seventies is the almost complete absence of images - either "good" or "bad" - of mothers and daughters in film. Aside from *Inside Daisy Clover* (1965), *The Graduate* (1967), *Rachel, Rachel* (1968), *The Turning Point* (1977), and a few others, one is hard pressed to find any films dealing with mothers and daughters in even the most remote and oblique fashion. Certainly the most popular films of the period were more engaged with themes of war, male bonding, rebellious (male) alienation, and the counterculture male anti-hero. In these narratives, women were the less-than-secondary sexual objects serving as release or, alternately, frustration to the everpresent angry young man angst. If the backdrop

to mainstream sixties culture was the counterculture New Left, then the narratives provided by this Left were relentlessly male in subject and style, with women occasionally grafted on as new products of a "sexual revolution" that made them more available to the male (anti)heroes and less available as substantive subjects of the narrative itself.

Molly Haskell might be overstating the case a bit when she claims that, "From a woman's point of view, the ten years from, say 1962 or 1963 to 1973 have been the most disheartening in screen history."² Yet it does seem a period that can be noted more for its absence of significant female roles in film than for anything else. This absence is accentuated when we move to the more specific representation of mothers and daughters. While mother/son relationships abounded in the 60s (*Sons and Lovers*, *Return to Peyton Place*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *All Fall Down*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *The Stripper*, *Five Finger Exercise*, *Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner*, etc.³), mothers and daughters seem to be notably absent from the everpresent dramas of angry young man angst and ball-breaking momism.

Sixties films, though, had a particular angle on the "bad mother warping her children" theme, that was in many ways significantly different than its fifties predecessors. Sixties films, in studiously ignoring the specificity of student protest, civil-rights struggles, and the anti-war movement, instead refracted social discord through the generational lens of domestic disharmony. No film could speak to this

² Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (2nd Edition), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 323

³ David Considine, *The Cinema of Adolescence* (Jefferson, North Carolina: Mcfarland & Co., 1985), 64-65.

more eloquently than *Rebel Without a Cause*. Even though made in 1955, *Rebel* exemplified the 60s trend towards narratives of alienated young men, docile fathers, and overbearing and dominating mothers. Typically thought of as a classic and heartrending tale of youthful alienation and social/parental repression, it takes on a less valiant hue when viewed through the eyes of mothers. If ever there was a Wyliesque "mom" personified, it is in the figure of Jim Stark's (James Dean) mother - overpowering, smothering, aggressive, and - most importantly, denying her son the strong male model he needs through her dominance of the "hen-pecked" husband. In this saga of generational rebellion, mothers play the unfortunate role of the subjugator of youthful growth and development. As Considine has noted:

The image of the mother that dominated the sixties was a logical outgrowth of a trend that began in the forties and developed steadily throughout the 1950's. It was an image that seemed to obsess the industry. In the process, it served to obscure the issues of the day. While film families throughout the decade are strife-ridden and torn apart, the issues dividing them remain obscure....What we find instead in these film families is domestic discord based on the possessiveness and aggression of wives and mothers.⁴

1961's *Splendor in the Grass* similarly pairs overbearing mothers with weak fathers (Deenie's parents) and macho fathers with submissive mothers (Bud's parents). The echo of structural-functionalist theories of complementarity can be heard in this oft-repeated formula of familial patterns. Deenie's mother drives her daughter to the asylum by articulating her own Victorian ideas of sexuality onto the desirous and suffering teenager ("Your father never laid a hand on me until we were married. And then I, I just gave in because a wife had to. A woman doesn't enjoy those things the

⁴ Ibid., 67-68.

way a man does. She just lets her husband...come near her in order to have children.")

Inside Daisy Clover, while primarily a film about the tawdry and manipulative construction of "the star" in the days of the studio system, allows a sympathetic mother figure, but only rendered likable through her obvious insanity. Daisy's mother, played wonderfully by Ruth Gordon, is in some ways not used narratively as a maternal presence, but as the narrative ploy to return Daisy to her pre-star "naturalness." But, like so many earlier films, the mother must die for the daughter to "cleanse" herself and break out of the patterns of self-destruction.

And the 1967 hit *The Graduate* (still understood as a "classic" film of the sixties, like *Easy Rider*) pitted the adulterous, cynical, almost grotesque Mrs. Robinson against her angelic daughter who is the real object of Jonathan's affections. The generation gap is made manifest both in the relationship between the mother and daughter and in Jonathan's relationships with his egregiously middle-class parents. But it becomes *embodied* in the person of the demonized mother, as the final scene in the chapel indicates. As Jonathan comes to "save" Katherine from a bourgeois marriage, the mother is literally silenced; we only see her lips furiously spewing forth her anger and resentment at her daughter and at Jonathan. And the daughter is allowed the final words: "You had your chance, now let me have mine." The daughter's voice breaks through the imposed silence of maternal possessiveness/domestic pathos. But, more importantly, *both* women's voices are reduced to mere plot devices in the service of the male coming-of-age narrative.

Mother-as-grotesque was also a popular theme in other films, such as 1968's *Rachel, Rachel*. Like her Bette Davis counterpart in *Now, Voyager*, the Joanne

Woodward character is a slightly off-center spinster daughter living with her even more off-center and domineering mother. Once again (like *Now, Voyager*) the father has died years ago, leaving the devoted but seething-inside daughter to take care of her demanding and dependent mother. Here too, the daughter is kept a virtual prisoner by her Wyliesque mom and achieves an attenuated sort of freedom by leaving town and forcing her mother to either come with her or stay on her own (the mother comes along). Given these options, one wonders whether absence (of mothers and daughters in film) isn't a more desirable position.

Sixties television was similarly absent when it came to mothers and daughters, indeed, when it came to substantial female characters at all. First, westerns had a resurgence, with such popular shows as *Gunsmoke*, *Wagon Train*, *Bonanza*. These continued to receive high ratings throughout the sixties, even with the influx of the "wacky" comedies such as *Bewitched*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, *Hogan's Heroes*, *Get Smart*, *The Addams Family*, *The Flying Nun*, etc.⁵ From 1960 to 1970, no shows with significant mother/daughter relationships achieved ratings in the top ten.⁶ When it came to the serious exploration of mothers and daughters, the tv industry in

⁵ David Marc sees these sixties sitcoms as examples of a sort of "deep escapism," "...during the sixties, faced with more cultural ambiguity than the genre dared handle, the sitcom went into what might be called a period of 'deep escapism.' If the suburbo-realist domesticoms of the fifties had strived to portray a vision of the 'likely,' the next generation of sitcoms...seemed utterly indifferent to verisimilitude...." (David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, Winchester, MA.: Unwin Hyman, 1989, 128-129).

⁶ The exceptions include *Petticoat Junction*, which didn't exactly concern itself with *relationships* at all; *Peyton Place*, which only "placed" ratings-wise one season; and *Here's Lucy*, where the mother and daughter were wholly related via the supposedly humorous playing up of generational differences. Lucy as mother simply did not work, nor was it funny.

the 60s was as uninterested as the film industry appeared to be. It is not really until the 1970 season, with the birth of *Mary Tyler Moore* and 1971, with *All in the Family*, that adult mother/daughter relationships begin to peek forth from behind the ossified images of western macho men and countrified sex kittens. And from 1972, with *Maude* and *The Waltons* joining the pack, mothers and their teenage or adult daughters emerge as a significant force in television narrative.

But, while the visual media of the sixties retained a resolutely male (albeit often alienated and rebellious) outlook, the women's magazines, in their implicit targeting of a gendered audience, continued to explore issues of relevance to women's lives, including the relationship of mother to daughter.

The women's magazines present a sort of microcosm of the contradictory images of mothering and the mother/daughter relationship during the sixties and seventies. What you have, really beginning in 1963 with Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, is a series of highly truncated debates engaging with the central challenges of Friedan's thesis. Importantly, Friedan was one of their own, not simply an outside "expert" who could be cited and then pressed aside in the service of a more home-grown editorial stance. As in the fifties, the women's magazines seemed to express a wider variety of responses to the changing social/sexual situation than did its filmic and televisual counterparts. It is not until the mid-seventies that the visual media explore with the same vigor the "women's issues" explored early on in the women's magazines.

This is not to say that the magazines gave their full and unfettered support to the growing women's movement. In fact, there was a great deal of harshness from writers concerned about the "trend" towards liberation, a harshness that was magnified

in other popular presses, such as *Time*, *Look*, and *Life*. In *Look* of January 11th, 1966 Patricia Coffin extols the virtues of "true womanhood" very explicitly in reaction to what she sees as a dangerous move towards the obliteration of sex distinctions. She quotes Friedan disdainfully, and goes on to tell women that, "It's time you woke up, because the joke is on you...."⁷ In arguing for the intractability of gender difference, Coffin obliquely "blames" mothers for the "alienation" of modern (male) youth, a theme we will see throughout the sixties, and one that has been thoroughly echoed in film, as mentioned above:

The boys grow their hair because the girls wear the pants...The climate is phony. You don't really want to look like a tinker toy or a little boy. You are a gender apart and lucky to have a man to lean on...You ought to go back to being a woman.⁸

And again, she connects the return of the real woman with the return of the real man: "If you can find your way back to true womanhood...in the deep, beautifully illogical female sense, the American man will recover his pride and his manhood."⁹

An article by Eunice Kennedy Shriver in *McCall's* of June 1965 echoed this plea for a return to women's true destiny with an angry attack on pro-abortion activists and those who would in any way impinge on the sanctity of motherhood:

I believe in motherhood as the nourishment of life. Women have been rearing children for fifty million years. It is what we do best. Only we can do it. It is the most wonderful, the most satisfying thing we could possibly do.¹⁰

⁷ Patricia Coffin, "Memo To: The American Woman," *Look*, 11 January 1966, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ Eunice Kennedy Shriver, "An Answer to the attacks on Motherhood," *McCall's*, June 1965, 165.

A 1966 forum in *The PTA Magazine* which included pieces by Ann Landers and Mary S. Calderone, specifically addressed the question "Are Girls Getting Too Aggressive?" Again, the reference to the new women's movement is explicit and, again, it is mothers who are the sole referents for the causality of their daughter's aggressiveness. Here, as in so many articles, the inclusive language of "parent" is invoked, yet the specific example is always with mother: "The solution lies with the parents of American girls. Girls need to be taught by their mothers that sex is not dirty or evil, that it is an important part of married love."¹¹ Yet this forum is symptomatic of the contradictory impulses within the women's magazine literature. While, on the one hand, Ann Landers is bemoaning, like Patricia Coffin, the state of womanhood in the mid-sixties, other articles contest this angry and nostalgic discourse of "return to true womanhood" and seem to tolerate, and at times even embrace, a critique of traditional gender hierarchy, as in Lester Kirkendall's piece in the same forum entitled, "Away with Stereotypes."

As in the films, women's magazines often interpreted social rebellion and "social problems" through the stern gaze of parental (again, read: maternal) responsibility. In a 1961 piece in *Good Housekeeping* David Lester asks, and answers, the question: "Are You Pushing Your Daughter Into Too-Early Marriage?" Citing statistics on the rising rates of teenage pregnancy and teen marriages, Lester identifies this as a significant social problem and, not surprisingly, locates mothers as responsible for the precocious social/sexual behavior of their daughters:

¹¹ Ann Landers, "A Sickness of Our Times," in Forum "Are Girls Getting Too Aggressive?" *The PTA Magazine*, September 1966, 5.

Youngsters are pressured into dating by their own socially active parents, who urge them into a variety of social situations. Mothers are generally the prime movers; fathers, busy with the bread-winning, generally go along with the decision.¹²

Again, notice how the discursive move is from "parents" to "mothers," a trusty maneuver of almost every women's magazine article that concerns parents and their children.

This article has a double message, in that it positions the girl as responsible for the social problems of early pregnancy and marriage, and then further implicates *women* by positioning the *mother* as responsible for creating the situation of precociousness that led to daughter's downfall. After recounting the horror story of 16 year old Clarissa's early marriage and subsequent attempt at suicide, Lester clearly sees Mom as responsible:

Let us look more closely at girls such as Clarissa who teeter to the alter on high heels they have barely learned to wear. What makes them rush so? Even more important, how are their parents, particularly mothers, actually forcing them into early matrimony without realizing it?¹³

Ironically, Lester completely overlooks another part of his own story: the fact that Clarissa's young husband "wished her dead" prior to her wrist-slashing.

No, the origin of daughter's acting-out is to be found in her mother's nostalgia for her own lost youth:

With the prospect of oncoming middle years too painful to contemplate, they look back, instead, where there is fun once again in dates - this time their daughters!...The young girl, knowing she has her mother's approval, finds her a willing listener and even an accomplice in her romantic problems ...The mother deludes herself into believing she has

¹² David Lester, "Are You Pushing Your Daughter Into Too-Early Marriage?" *Good Housekeeping*, October 1961, 217.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 216.

a confiding relationship with her daughter. Actually, it's a conspiratorial one, and one she enjoys hugely. The result, however, is to push her child deeper and deeper into an advanced social and sexual whirl.¹⁴

Interestingly, David is here criticizing mothers for trying to "keep up with the times," when just a few years before the women's magazines had been filled with advice urging mothers to remain as hip and flexible as possible. This reversal needs to be seen in the context of a social environment that positioned youth as "dangerous," and thus initiated a discourse of parental (read: maternal) responsibility. This discourse of responsibility is not new, as we have seen from the preceding chapters. Yet it changes its focus in the context of the student and anti-war movement in the sixties, for the student movement was certainly not equivalent to the juvenile delinquency of the late 40s and 50s, and the participants much more profoundly challenged the values of their parents and of the society at large. But just as Wylie castigated mothers for being overbearing and producing weak sons, unprepared for manly military heroism, his 60s counterparts also took mothers to task for creating rebellious youth, for raising children too "liberally" and with not enough discipline and authority. Many things remain constant about the two periods, but the most striking is the lack of concern for girls and their mothers and the overwhelming focus on the mother and son, and sometimes the father and son, relationship. Daughters are simply not considered actors in this new drama of generational and cultural rebellion. So, the discourse on the mother/daughter relationship remains more firmly anchored to the "classic" psychological constructs that had begun in the 40s, and in many ways is little transformed by the social and political turmoil of the (pre-feminist) 60s.

¹⁴ Ibid., 218.

Mothers are generally taken to task in relation to more traditional complaints from daughters; for example, maternal interference and the lack of separation. In the regular *Good Housekeeping* section called "My Problem And How I Solved It,"¹⁵ a woman tells the story of how her mother came to live with her and her family, causing a breakdown in the daughter who finally realizes (with the help of the friendly psychiatrist) that it's because she can't grow up with her overinvolved mother:

Most mothers know they must to some degree "lose" their children as they grow up. The best mothers, even at pain to themselves, try to help them to be independent. But my mother, I came to realize, had never accepted this idea. She fought to keep me from growing up, from growing away from her.¹⁶

The good Doctor explains the woman's "fatigue" completely in relation to her mother's presence and her own failings:

Dr. Harvey had been right. My fatigue had been a symptom of everything that had been bottled up inside me - resentment of Mother, a childish fear of her disapproval, anger at my own failings, and a lot of self-pity. Nowadays, I can do all the housework in half the time, with half the effort.¹⁷

Given the later "problem that has no name" interpretation of this housewives depression, this passage has particular poignancy, and the resolution reasserts her submission, rather than challenging it: "I'm still Mother's daughter, but I am even more Howard's wife, and Jill's mother."¹⁸

¹⁵ This section is, I believe, always written by anonymous editors, often with the aid of social service organizations, in this case the Family Services Association of America.

¹⁶ "My Problem and How I Solved It: Mother and Daughter," *Good Housekeeping*, June 1962, 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Yet other authors continued to insist on the right of mothers not only to work, but to do so not merely to maintain the family's level of consumption, but for reasons of "personal satisfaction." Writers like Lobsenz, writing in a 1961 *Redbook* article, argues that because so many wives are working ("One out of every three wives in the nation holds a job today."¹⁹) it becomes important to move away from guilt and towards an honest assessment of why women desire to work:

What concerns the experts on family life today is not that so many mothers are working, but that they are so often confused about their reasons for working, and that by deluding themselves and their families about their motives in taking a job, they create a host of wholly unnecessary problems.²⁰

Now, granted, he still sees the women and work question as precisely that: a question (like childcare and birth control) that is solely up to women to resolve, as if male attitudes and, more importantly, male power, didn't enter into the equation. Nevertheless, he is anxious to argue against the guilt feelings of many mothers, and even for the possible benefits working mothers might transmit to their children, a debate that hasn't progressed much further in our own time.

Indeed, a specific discourse about the "problem that has no name" began even before the phrase was coined. In 1961 *Parent's* magazines published an article by Elizabeth Schmidt entitled, "The Best Mothers Aren't Martyrs," in which the author expresses precisely the frustrations of the feminine mystique:

I'm bored with the housework, irritated by my children and tired - tired all the time. I love my husband and my family, but what about my own needs and wishes? I'm lost - nothing more than a machine for cleaning

¹⁹ Norman M. Lobsenz, "Are Working Wives Hurting or Helping Their Families?" *Redbook*, July 1961, 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

furniture and scolding children. What's ahead of me? Nothing but more of the same. I feel just awful feeling this way, but I can't help it.²¹

After detailing her life previous to marriage where she felt immense satisfaction as an army nurse overseas, she has "...to admit that when I said all I wanted was to be a good wife and mother, I wasn't being honest. I wanted something else besides - to be a person in my own right."²² It is, tellingly, several interactions with her young daughter that push her into this realization and force her to initiate change on her own behalf:

One day...I watched six-year-old Jan...playing house. "Oh, now I have to do the dishes," Jan wailed. Then, shouting at the long suffering doll, "How can I get anything done with you always in the way?" Her performance as a weary, sighing mother got better and better. I realized I was looking at an imitation of myself.²³

And it is precisely this process that the mother wants to halt, brought home by yet another instance of the daughter's budding domesticity:

Another time, Jan was helping me dust. She rubbed listlessly at the dining room table, confiding to me with a long face, "It's hard to be a mother, isn't it Mommy?"²⁴

But Schmidt is able to break out only so far; her decision to take part-time work and be less of a perfectionist housecleaner are predicated on a reading of her situation in completely individualistic terms (my fault, not society's) and in fact adopting as rationale a resurrected version of the companionate marriage:

²¹ Elizabeth Schmidt, "The Best Mothers Aren't Martyrs," *Parent's*, May 1961, 41.

²² *Ibid.*, 78.

²³ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The aims I set for myself weren't conflicting at all - perhaps I could be a good wife and mother without sacrificing my own personal growth! Perhaps what was wrong was not my situation but myself - what was needed was not martyrdom but energy and determination. I decided to try for both worlds.²⁵

Little Jan's premature domesticity is thus understood solely in terms of her mother's modelling, rather than as a part of the socialization of young girls into "appropriate femininity."

A 1966 *Look* article entitled "The war between mother and daughter," attempts to reassert both the language of biological determinism and the metaphors of war to describe the mother/daughter relationship. In this reading, mothers and daughters are drawn together via their biological destiny as mothers yet, paradoxically, it is this sameness that initiates what the authors call the "cold war:"

And there is a rapport, an intimacy between women, which men can never achieve. Women are drawn together by a simple and complicated fact: Their bodies are designed to bear children, and they share an understanding of the physical changes and discomforts that accompany that privilege. The cold war starts when the little girl discovers she and her mother are of the same sex - and daddy is different.²⁶

As penis envy creeps into the discourse of women's magazines, so does it's ultimate Freudian purpose: male-identification:

...I believe that no girl can ever become a whole woman unless she understand and has made a mature acceptance of her mother....For if she still resents her mother and yearns for the kind of affection she thinks her mother denied her, she may have difficulty ever reaching a satisfactory relation with a man, leaning (consciously or unconsciously) toward women as mother substitutes.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Virgil Damon and Isabella Taves, "The War Between Mother and Daughter," *Look*, 11 January 1966, 30.

²⁷ Ibid., 34.

Coming to terms with mother is not yet understood on feminist terms (eg. mother as another *woman*) but still in terms of how the mother/daughter relationship effects the "real" heart of our existence: our relationships with men. It is precisely these discourses - of biology as bonding and bonding as healthy heterosexuality - that begin to change as feminism enters into the popular language of the women's magazines in the early seventies.

Even more than in the sixties, women's magazines in the seventies continued to explore central issues of the mother/daughter relationship in the context of an ever-growing women's movement. In 1976, Janet Kole asked these very questions in an article she wrote for *Harper's Bazaar*:

Is it harder to raise a child these days? Has 1976 brought any revelations about mothers and daughters? Is it easier or harder for them to have a good relationship in this atmosphere of increasing awareness of what it means to be a woman?... The 70s and the Women's Movement have brought new dilemmas and new joys for women and one area in which dilemma and joy are particularly intermingled is the mother/daughter relationship. All the talk and thinking about ourselves as feminists has brought us back to our beginnings; we are examining the women who made us what we are the daughters whom we will inevitably shape.²⁸

And other writers became aware of the paucity of materials on mothers and daughters:

One could make a good case for there being no human relationship so dramatic and so rich in possibility as that between mother and daughter; and it is strange to me that so little literature - always's excepting psychiatrist's notebooks and the literature of pathology - has attempted adequately to deal with it. One is hard-pressed to think of contemporary novels that focus on mother-daughter relationships. On the other hand,

²⁸ Janet Kole, "Eight Successful Women Discuss Motherhood," *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1976, 114.

one has no trouble finding novels about Portnoy-mother-and-son relationships; and there is a surfeit of father-and-son novels.²⁹

These are questions and concerns that clearly could not, and were not, asked by previous women's magazine writers.

While the language of (maternal) separation and struggle still exist ("All children...must separate emotionally from their mothers before they can become healthy, independent adults."³⁰) it is now often couched in a discourse that not only stresses the commonalities between all women, (not solely biologically based) but that (finally!) takes daughters to task for being emotionally responsible for the well-being of that relationship, as Dr. Basescu notes in a dialogue he had with a group of daughters:

You've complained that your mothers had plans for you, but it seems you had plans for your mothers too. If your mothers didn't fit certain molds that you'd like them to fit, you're disappointed. So you don't accept them for what they are either.³¹

The new concern about women's identity and sense of self produced a discussion of the possibility of mother as role model in a changing society. What was mother able to pass on to her daughter in the age of feminism?:

We all know that fathers pass their names and sometimes their ambitions along to their sons. But what do mothers pass on to their daughters? 'My mother gave me recipes and the secret of how to endure,' a friend told me. But like so many other daughters, she also feels she inherited many negative things from her mother - feelings of guilt, a tendency to martyrdom, a mistrust of men.³²

²⁹ Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, "Finding the Way to Be Friends," *McCall's*, October 1975, 94.

³⁰ Teri Schultz, "The Feelings Too Many Daughters Are Afraid To Face," *Redbook*, October 1976, 183.

³¹ Sabert Basescu, "Why So Many Women Can't Stand Their Own Mothers," *Redbook*, June 1970, 185.

³² Schultz, "The Feelings Too Many Daughters are Afraid to Face, 108.

Yet this aspect of the discussion - the inheritance of submission and domesticity - is more dormant in the seventies until it emerges with real force in the feminist literature of the eighties, as we shall see in the next two chapters. Rather, the emphasis here was much more on understanding commonalities and, more importantly, understanding the reality of mother's life and mother's options. Fundamental to this was an insistence, after so many years of relative silence, of the simple *importance* of a daughter's relationship to her mother in forming her own identity, an importance that was now being addressed with language that went beyond the 40s bond/separate dichotomies:

Your mother's role as model heightens the intimacy between you. For better or worse, she gives you many of your most important impressions of what it is like to be female.³³

There was indeed an explicit understanding developing that, if we resented or even hated our mothers, there was a *social* context that helped to construct these feelings:

Too often mothers fail to understand and daughters fail to explain that the anger comes, not from what our mothers did or failed to do, but from who they were, from the image of themselves that they passed along to the daughters they loved. In many instances, our mothers were the first generation of American women to feel trapped in their homes, frustrated in dead-end jobs, bitter about not finishing college. As a result, they expected more from their daughters.³⁴

Schultz continues to explore the power of this relationship using a new feminist language that recognizes the internalization not only of our mothers, but of sexist assumptions by implication. She explicitly moves away from the separation models by acknowledging the continuities between mothers and daughters in a very social sense:

³³ Myron Brenton, "Mothers and Daughters," *Seventeen*, December 1971, 92.

³⁴ Schultz, "The Feelings Too Many Daughters Are Afraid To Face," 188.

Every woman wants to love her mother, and every mother wants to be loved by her daughter. Those daughters who say they hate their mothers usually realize at some point that they cannot truly hate them without hating some part of themselves, for each of us has internalized our mother to some extent. She is at the core of our identity, whether we like it or not.³⁵

It is hard to underestimate the importance of this shift. For the first time, the relationship between mother and daughter is placed within a social context that acknowledges the often painful reality of the "pre-feminist" mother; that relieves her of some of the overwhelming responsibility for her daughter's psyche in the name of a more realistic appraisal of mother's life options and life limitations.

This is not to say that the seventies were without their mother-blaming moments. Indeed, one of the unique aspects of women's magazines is the existence, side-by-side, of very contradictory discourses about women in general and mothers and daughters in particular. Themes of sexual rivalry and jealousy crop up frequently, as in a '76 article called "Can You Ruin Your Daughter's Sex Life?" where the author sees mother's jealousy of daughter arise because, "Daughters reach their bloom just as mothers are beginning to fade, and a mother may well be jealous of her daughter."³⁶

³⁵ Ibid., 188.

³⁶ Helen Singer Kaplan, "Can You Ruin Your Daughter's Sex Life?" *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1976, 84. One of the curious things that has always struck me about this position is the assumption that a middle-aged mother would be jealous of her teenage daughter. It seems to me that this is a resolutely male perception of female sexuality; it seems ludicrous to imagine that a mature woman would somehow want to return to (or relive, as so many of the articles insist) those horrible and usually unsatisfying years of adolescent sexuality. As any woman knows, the sexuality of a 40 year old woman is bound to be more developed and personally enhancing than that of a 17 year old girl. The insistence on the mother's envy and jealousy seems a weak remnant of Freudian orthodoxy coupled with a denial of the mother as sexual being.

Ann Landers joined the fray with a peculiar article on "What To Tell Your Daughter About Women's Lib," that is itself a mass of contradictions. Landers does acknowledge the changing status of women:

...daughters need help in deciding what they will be because it is not longer true that, like their mothers and grandmothers before them, the majority will grow up to be housewives without even considering alternate lifestyles. What's a mother to do?³⁷

Landers answers her own question with uncharacteristic ambiguity. While on the hand she warns mothers not to encourage their daughters in certain "male" activities, lest "...they come off as being terribly unattractive, excessively aggressive, and...really turn men off," she also argues adamantly for abortion on demand. She rails against the "libbers" and for the ideal of woman as housewife/mother, yet simultaneously praises a central tenet of feminist activism, namely, the pro-choice movement.

But perhaps the ultimate moment of 70s revisionism comes when, in a 1972 *Redbook* article, the venerable Dr. Spock proffers his apologia to American womanhood:

I've been reproached for contributing to the prejudice. A number of years ago, before there was a Women's Liberation Movement, I wrote that girls should be brought up to think of child rearing as exciting and creative work. "Brainwashing!" said the feminists. Of course I should have said - as I honestly believe - "Girls and boys should be brought up to think of child rearing as exciting and creative work....More positively and more importantly, parents should prepare girls for careers throughout their childhood - psychologically and educationally - as they prepare their sons. That's my belief now."³⁸

³⁷ Ann Landers, "What To Tell Your Daughter About Women's Lib," *Today's Health*, October 1971, 53.

³⁸ Dr. Benjamin Spock, "Should Girls Expect To Have Careers,?" *Redbook*, March 1972, 50, 52.

One year after Spock bid farewell to his well-meaning paternalism, the wittiest matriarch to ever hit prime-time emerged on CBS. The hit sitcom *Maude*³⁹ was a turning point for the representation of mothers and daughters in the medium of television. *Maude*, I believe, has not received the attention nor the accolades it deserves. It certainly has not achieved the near cult status of such classic 70s "quality" sitcoms as *All in the Family* (from which *Maude* was a spin-off), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *M*A*S*H*. This is not surprising, given the character Maude herself. For if Mary Richards used traditional feminine qualities to rethink office politics and women and work questions, and Edith was the stereotypical silly woman with a heart of gold, then Maude was the loud, brazen, brassy Bella Abzug of prime time. She was funny without being self-abnegating, smart without being coy, and contentious without being apologetic. She was, in other words, a radical woman.

Maude was also the first prime-time tv sitcom to portray an adult mother and daughter living together. In that, and in so many other ways, *Maude* was really a "social issue" sitcom with a sincerity and depth that surpassed that classic of social sitcoms, *All in the Family*. For there were no fools in *Maude*, no buffoons, no sitting targets waiting to be dissected with a dose of Learian liberalism. Even the right-wing character Arthur, though often buffoonish, was more often than not a relatively articulate spokesman for the small-minded Nixonian conservatism that Maude was always battling. No, the subject of Maude was not the single girl/big city, or working class bigotry, or the hellishness of war, but rather the liberal, enlightened family itself. Maude represents the grand reversal of the domesticoms of the 50s, in that it locates

³⁹ *Maude* was a consistently popular show - it ran from 1972 to 1978 and, except for its final two seasons, it always placed in the top ten of the Nielsen ratings.

itself generically within that trusted environment of the family home and then proceeds to explore the new configurations and struggles engendered in that space since the late 60s.

One of the significant dislocations of the traditional nuclear family has most certainly been the growing rates of divorce and single-parenthood, two issues that provide narrative grist for the mill of the social sitcom.⁴⁰ *Maude* was obviously no exception here: she had been married 4 times before she settled on her current mate, the wry appliance salesman Walter Findlay, and her daughter was a divorced, 27 year old mother of an 8 year old son when she came to live with Maude and Walter. It is no exaggeration to say that the relationship between Maude and her daughter Carol is unlike any I have seen on TV - then or now. For, unlike *Rhoda*, where the mother/daughter relationship is framed within the more traditional structure of old-fashioned, interfering Jewish mother and struggling to be liberated daughter,⁴¹ both Maude and her daughter are feminists and "liberated women." It is this which sets *Maude* aside and in some ways makes it a more advanced text than the times would suggest. For, although Carol often plays the part of spokeswoman for the "new

⁴⁰ *Maude* is not alone in this. Many other sitcoms of the 70s centered on divorced women - with or without children (*Rhoda* - post Joe -, *Phyllis*, *One Day at a Time*).

⁴¹ *Rhoda*, though, is certainly more than this stereotype, as I will discuss later.

woman"⁴² she is by no means alone in this, and it is this *dialogue* between mother and daughter that is so refreshing and so enlightening.

Importantly, while struggle and conflict is openly and humorously acknowledged, it never entails a sense of the need for rift and permanent separation: these two women clearly love each other and, in many ways, are much alike. Several episodes point this out clearly. In, "Like Mother, Like Daughter" (1972) Carol has begun dating a man many years her senior, and, importantly, a man Maude used to see before she met Walter. Maude is concerned that Carol will be jilted like she was and, after waiting up for Carol all night, confides her distress to Walter over breakfast:

Maude: "Walter, I am going to put a stop to this right now!"

Walter: "Now look Maude, if you break this up Carol's going to think you're an interfering mother. You want that?"

Maude: "It's a hazard of the trade Walter. I didn't interfere when she eloped with Pete and it ended in divorce. I've never forgiven myself."

Walter: "Then why didn't you interfere?"

Maude: "I was in Reno at the time divorcing Albert."

⁴² In one of the best (and most controversial) episodes, Maude has gotten pregnant at age 47 and is faced with the dilemma of whether to have this baby that she clearly doesn't want, or to have an abortion (legal by this time in the state of New York). Carol urges her mother on: "There is no earthly reason for you to go through this at your age..." and is amazed at Maude's hesitancy given her politics:

Carol: "...Mother, I don't understand your hesitancy. When they made it a law you were for it."

Maude: "Of course, I wasn't pregnant then."

Carol: "Mother, it's ridiculous, my saying this to you. We're free. We finally have the right to decide what we can do with our own bodies."

Maude does go on to have the abortion, with the support of her daughter and her husband.

First, as in many such scenes, the explicit and humorous discourse of "the interfering mother" helps to make it less deadly, it makes it less *prescriptive* and pathologizing. In addition, the statement of Maude's re: her own divorce not only links the experience of mother and daughter but gives the mother a *life*, so that her interference is relativized.

In the next scene, Carol has come down the stairs and into the kitchen, clearly not eager to talk. Yet Maude persists, putting her hand on Carol's shoulders and facing her, a stance that is repeated time and time again between mother and daughter throughout the series:

Maude: "I know you're going to tell me again to mind my own business. But look at it this way: God couldn't be everywhere, that's why he invented mothers."

But Carol is having none of it, and tells Maude that she doesn't intend to see him again anyway, as he called her "Maude" last night. Maude assumes it was during lovemaking, and is flattered, but it turns out that it was during an argument in which Russell accused Carol of sounding just like her mother. When Russell (Carol's lover) emerges to make amends, he is placed physically in the middle of the two women who proceed to demolish him (as an egocentric jerk) and send him out the door. As Maude returns from the doorway she walks over to Carol, "Good morning honey," "Good morning mother," and they smile and hug and kiss.

Importantly, the scene doesn't end on that note. Rather, Maude continues to tell Carol of *her* experience with Russell and Carol comforts her. When Walter walks in to apologize for his jealousy, Carol and Maude are seated on the edge of the couch, one slightly behind the other in a "matching" shot (similar clothes, hairstyles, position

on couch, etc.) that is accentuated by the identical warm smile they give Walter during his speech. The women are brought together by a sense of wry sisterhood re: the egocentric man they both slept with, and by a sense of mutual nurturing and caretaking.

Similarly, in a 1976 episode entitle "The Election" both Maude and her daughter are working for Carter, and this shared work, while typically providing material for discourses of "enmeshment" and "lack of separation," here is expressed in terms of mutual pride, and, always, humor:

Maude: "Oh you know Carol, I just think you're wonderful. The way you have thrown yourself into this presidential campaign."

Carol: "Well, after all, I am your daughter. You know what they say: the acorn doesn't fall far from the political nut."

Maude: "Carol, you know you're getting to be more like me all the time. And some day we're both going to pay for it."

It sounds banal, but the simple statement from a mother to a daughter, "I think you're wonderful," and its response, "I am your daughter," moves us decades away from the agonizing ideologies of separation and struggle. To acknowledge love, closeness, sameness without being stamped as "overinvolved," "enmeshed," "immature," is a major step in a feminist direction for the image of the mother/daughter relationship.

Another 1972 episode also depathologizes the stereotype of the interfering mother. Carol has just announced, after being unemployed and suffering sexual harassment while looking for work, that she intends to get married. Maude is understandably upset, as Carol has discussed none of this with her.

Walter: "Maude, I don't want Carol to make a mistake any more than you do. But I got a pretty good feelings that you're beginning to lead her life again."

Maude: "Will you do me a favor with your feelings Walter? Save them, and then someday give them all to me together in a lump. In my old age maybe I'll browse through them and find out who you were."

If this event had occurred, say, in *Father Knows Best*, the father would have gently showed the mother the error of her meddling ways and led the family into complete harmony. But here, in the 1970s, Maude's humor undercuts Walter's attempt at paternalism (the man who knows best about how to handle both mother and daughter) and implies that, in this universe, *mother* knows best. Walter continues to play the role of mediator, but it is a role without the ideological power it had previously. When he calmly tells Maude that "Carol's a grown woman. You're her mother but you can't talk to her like her mother," Maude swiftly dispatches him with a biting remark and proceeds to deal with her daughter in *her* own way. And her way clearly does not include enacting this cloying psychological dictum of "loving and letting go" as she illustrates when she comes up to Carol's room:

Maude: "Honey do you mind if I come in? If I promise..."

Carol: "Promise what?"

Maude: "If I promise not to talk like a mother?"

Carol: "All right."

Maude: "(strides over to Carol) "If I promise not to talk about the way you're wrecking your life."

When Carol reproaches her, Maude asks "Would it disturb you terribly if I cried? Very quietly?" and then gives a delightful speech, pleading for her daughter's attention:

Maude: "Carol! I've been your mother for 27 years. I carried you for nine months before then. I lived with your father for 2 years longer than I wanted to because I thought you need him...so don't try to keep me to some promise I made a few minutes ago when I was half out of my mind with grief."

Here Maude undercuts the traditional maternal martyr theme by introducing her own humorous note re: Carol's father and the overstatement of the grief. And, importantly, the issues in their discussion of Carol's impending marriage are important: Maude doesn't want her daughter to "settle" - to marry for anything less than love, even though they both acknowledge the hardships of single-parenthood. Ironically, the reversal here is complete - unlike images of earlier years, it is the *mother* here who is arguing for love and integrity, while the daughter is arguing for compliance and compromise. But in the mother's victory (Carol doesn't marry) is a victory for all women, both mother and daughter.

What seems so different about *Maude*, is that the show acknowledges the scripts already written for mothers and daughters (as Maude says to Carol, "Children resent and mothers interfere. That comes with the territory.") while at the same time implicitly challenging their authenticity. For the traditional scripts - with their emphasis on separation and the inevitability of discord - certainly have no narrative space for an adult mother and her adult daughter living and thriving together. *Maude* takes on June and Margaret and Donna and, in doing so, challenges not only the mythology of the perfect mother (who knows that father really does know best), but the mythology of the demon mother too. Maude insists on being involved in her daughter's life, and her daughter insists on being involved in Maude's life.

While Rhoda and her mother did not live together as Maude and Carol did, Ida Morgenstern was nevertheless a persistent presence in the series. In so many ways, and unexpectedly for me as a researcher, *Rhoda* was a much more conservative and traditional series than *Maude*. I would have expected otherwise, as one show depicts

the classic feminist subject of the seventies (single working girl on her own in the big city) and the other is plopped down firmly in the heartland of domestic sitcoms: the suburban family home. Yet the centrality in *Rhoda* of the "search" for a male partner (indeed, just look how quickly a husband was found for her, placing her sister Brenda in the role of perpetual dateless manseeker) effectively devalued and limited the exploration of either the mother/daughter or the sister/sister relationship in a meaningful way. Even numerically speaking, *Rhoda* had very few episodes devoted to exploring this relationship in an narratively significant way, especially when compared to *Maude*. In addition, the choice to make Ida so stereotypically the "Jewish Mother" - so caricatured - often took the possible depth and poignancy out of the interactions between the two women. In the early episodes, Rhoda and her mother are largely sparring partners (indeed, the battle metaphors abound when Rhoda and Brenda describe their mother) competing in a lightweight battle of goodhearted and warm generational boxing. But, in later episodes, there are signs that the relationship is being depicted for something more than knowing and guaranteed chuckles. Perhaps it was in response to the declining ratings after the incredibly boring marriage to the incredibly uninteresting character of Joe, but, for whatever reasons, we begin to get beyond the obvious in several episodes of '76 and '77.

Generally, the interactions between Rhoda and her mother centered around the mother arriving unexpectedly at the Rhoda and Brenda's apartment building, making a variety of critical remarks about a: their apartment, b: their clothes, c: the men in their lives, d: their weight, etc. There is usually a bit of playful banter and everyone ends up laughing and cheery at the end. The mother/daughter relationship, then, is typically defined within the narrow terms of loud, interfering, guilt-making but well-

meaning mother and loving and "tolerant" but often exasperated daughters. Thus, while *Maude* overturned Donna and Margaret, *Rhoda* departs from the familial setting but, in many ways, recaptures the spirit of working girl in the big city series such as *Our Miss Brooks* and *That Girl*.

Yet it occasionally slipped outside the generic straightjacket and allowed for a richer interaction between mother and daughter than the usual faintly humorous generational and ethnic repartee. In the episode where Rhoda is getting separated from Joe, Ida as more than a caricature is allowed to emerge. Rhoda, afraid of her mother's disappointment, does not immediately tell her, but Ida finds out anyway via Joe. She immediately goes over to Rhoda's to try and help, and Rhoda resists, insisting that she's fine:

Rhoda: "I'm telling you that I'm fine. Can't you see that I'm fine?"

Ida: (tremulously, with an atypically small and quiet voice) "Rhoda...I love you...don't lock me out."

Rhoda: (long pause) "I'm terrified. I have never been so scared in my entire life."

Ida: (moving over to her, she takes her in her arms and holds her while talking) "No, no sweetheart, no, don't be scared. I'm here, I'm here. (Rhoda is now sitting on the edge of the couch so that they are the same height).

Rhoda: "Don't you be scared either, ok?"

Ida: "Yeah, right, listen. There has to be something that I can do for you.. You know in my day my mother would have said do anything to save the marriage, make any kind of adjustments, put up with anything. I, I guess that doesn't go now anymore, does it?"

Rhoda: "No Ma, no, it doesn't."

Ida then goes to call her husband to say she's staying with Rhoda for a

few days and Rhoda protests loudly.

Ida: "That's no good huh? (look at Rhoda who gently shakes her head) Right. (she puts down the phone). That would have been good for me but, uh, that's no good for you, huh? Ok, well, uh, I guess the best thing I can do then it to uh leave you alone."

Rhoda: "That's right ma."

Ida gets ready to leave, they kiss goodnight and, as she is halfway out the door, Rhoda calls to her, "Ma?" Ida turns back, "Yeah?" and Rhoda says, "Stick around?" Ida comes back in to her ("Oh yeah") and they embrace and the image fades out.

This scene is interesting on a number of levels. First, let me reiterate that it is definitely atypical of the series as a whole, which generally tended towards the more secure sitcom laughs via the caricatured mother. But, what this scene does is to reference both Ida's needs (eg to reframe "interfering" in terms of love and caring) as well as the new feminist era ("You know in my day...") What this signifies, I believe, is a common theme shared by many of the "new woman" series in 70s tv; the daughter's life as fundamentally different from that of the mother. The interaction between mother and daughter is thus framed through this one historical disjuncture.

In *One Day At A Time* we get this two ways - divorced single-parent Ann's life is different from *her* mother's, but her own girls extend this trajectory of liberation. Much of the narrative of this series centered around the trials and tribulations of raising two adolescent daughters, and the series was quick to foreground the context of single-parenthood. In an episode that aired in 1976, entitled "Ann's First Decision," the reality of Ann's status as single mother becomes the subject of the episode. Daughter Julie has assumed that her "liberated mother" would allow her to go on a camping trip with a group of girls and boys. When Mom refuses her request,

hysterical teenage Julie runs off to be with her father and Mom feels like she screwed up:

Ann: "It's really something. For the first seventeen years of my life, my father made the decisions. And the next seventeen, my husband made the decisions. The first time in my life, I make a decision on my own and I blow it."

This statement is surely one that must have had enormous resonance for a whole generation of women undergoing divorces, sustaining the inevitable drop in income, and suddenly being faced with responsibilities and positions that had formerly been closed off to them. Yet the resolution of this Mother's dilemma (how to rectify a wrong decision) comes from a sadly obvious source: her boyfriend. Boyfriend and divorce lawyer David gently points out to her the error of her ways and only then is she able to sit down with her girls and give a speech that sounds more like a team pep rally than a familial dialogue ("stick with me, huh? We'll make it...")

While generally an uninspired show, *One Day At A Time* was innovative simply by what it was: a single parent family, with an unrepentant working mother. By simply existing as such, it must have given validation to the thousands of women and children going through that experience and fighting against the ideologies of "broken homes" and "latchkey children."⁴³ Daughters Barbara and Julie were shown engaged

⁴³ I remember avidly watching the series even though I never really thought much of it in terms of its humor or its characters. I often found it unfunny and rather insipid, yet, as the daughter of a single-parent with two teenage sisters of my own, *One Day At A Time* legitimized and validated a family form that was consistently underrepresented in popular culture. My family may not have been as relentlessly cheery and gung-ho as the Romano's (after all, they were Italian and we were Jewish) but I too knew what it meant to learn how to be responsible to my siblings and to my mother in an entirely different way than prior to a divorce. I suspect that many of my generation might have felt a similar resonance. It feels nice to be *represented*, even if that representation is lacking aesthetically.

in the responsibilities (cooking, cleaning, watching after each other, etc.,) familiar to children of single-parents and were not summarily identified as "overly responsible" or "parentified" children. Indeed, *One Day At A Time* went out of its way to portray them as "normal" American teenagers, not in any way "afflicted" by the stigma of living in a single-parent family.

The difference with a series like *Maude* (I keep coming back to this!) is that feminism and the women's movement are *active* signifiers in the overall narrative, whereas in both *Rhoda* and *One Day At A Time* we have no real sense of the involvement of these women in the women's movement, or if they have been impacted by it in any significant way. Indeed, *Rhoda* seems to have left much of her sisterhood behind when she left Minneapolis and moved back to New York, and Ann Romano seems rather like a hipper version of the "perfect moms" of the 50s like Donna and June.

And, while undoubtedly Carol's life *is* different from mother Maude's, it is a difference that they *share*, rather than a difference one owns at the expense of the other (either humorous expense or otherwise). Indeed, when Maude first started seeing Walter, they had an episode where they contemplated living together and it was, importantly, Walter who voiced the traditional love and marriage ideology. Maude and her daughter are represented equally as women warriors in the same suburban battlefield, turning over the last remnants of charred domesticity in their march towards a feminist future.

If *Maude* was a turning point for the representation of mothers and daughters in television, then the 1978 hit, *An Unmarried Woman*, starring Jill Clayburgh, Alan Bates and Lisa Lucas and directed by Paul Mazursky, was similarly a turning point in

the medium of film. It has come to be regarded as the archetype of the "new women's cinema" of the 1970s, which included films such as *Girlfriends*, *The Turning Point*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, etc. Fundamentally, what marked these seventies films out as different from their cinematic predecessors was their explicit attention to the newly emerging women's movement and the issues this movement provoked.

An Unmarried Woman, typically understood in terms of its primary narrative of marriage-divorce-reconstitution of life as "liberated" woman, actually is quite instructive in its parallel narrative of the relationship between the central character Jill and her smart-assed teenage daughter Patty. Importantly, this film does parallel the lives of the mother and the daughter, a quite unusual strategy for narrating the mother/daughter relationship. In the films examined in previous chapters, the relationship is rarely analyzed synchronically. In other words, daughters are shown to either surpass the bad and denying mother (i.e. not repeat her life) or not, and therefore to be her victim in some way. *An Unmarried Woman* allows us to see the emotional and political development of both mother and daughter simultaneously, where neither is placed as victim or victimizer and where the ins and outs of their own relationship is firmly anchored to the new social milieu of feminism.

While certainly not the first film to discuss women's struggle for self-definition, not the first to show a loving, mature relationship between a mother and daughter (although there are remarkably few examples of this), this film nevertheless did these things with an explicit referencing of the women's movement. If ever there was a "grand signifier" in a film, it must certainly be feminism in *An Unmarried Woman*. Indeed, we witness Consciousness-Raising sessions, separation and divorce, feminist

psychotherapy, women and work questions, and a host of other "issues" deemed of concern to the new women's movement.

The daughter's sophistication is not simply the product of liberal, seventies parents, but is precisely concerned with a new sense of what it means to be a woman, particularly as it relates to sexuality. In this scene, mother and daughter are discussing the daughter's relationship with her boyfriend and the dialogue expresses not only the new choices of the daughter (eg not to marry, to be actively sexual) but also the reality of a familial world increasingly being redefined around divorce and single-parenthood:

Mother: "I think you're serious about Phil."

Daughter: "Mom, I'm still a virgin, it that's what you meant."

Mother: "That's not what I meant. I'm glad you told me. I just meant that you like Phil."

Daughter: "I like Phil. I'm not going to marry him. I'm never getting married."

Mother: "You will."

Daughter: "Don't be so sure."

Mother: "Why not?"

Daughter: "Why should I? I mean, everybody I know that's married is either miserable or divorced. I don't want that."

Mother: "Oh Patty, that's ridiculous. There's lots of happily married couples."

Daughter: "Name three."

Mother: "Uhh, I'll have to think about it."

The fact that the mother cannot respond with the traditional pat answer, and that the next scene reveals the mother's marital problems and her abandonment by her husband, reinforces the daughter's perceptions of love and marriage.

In a later scene, the mother has come to see Patty locked in a passionate embrace with her boyfriend. Her response is out-of-control, as she quickly admits to Patty after she has settled down:

Daughter: "God, what is it with you?"

Mother: "I'm sorry. God. Oh, God. It's just confusing. I'm sorry I screamed at you Patty. I'm sorry."

Daughter: "It's all right. I just don't understand why you get so upset."

Mother: "I just can't be your father."

Daughter: "So just be my mother."

Tied up in this exchange is an acknowledgement of the mother's confusion not only about her daughter's sexuality, and how to be a single parent, but her own confusion about how to be an "unmarried woman."⁴⁴ The scene ends with both women checking out each others "ok-ness." By explicitly discussing this "confusion" the mother and daughter demystify the mother's outburst and, simultaneously, depathologize it as well.

⁴⁴ The TV series already discussed, *One Day At A Time*, about a divorced mother with 2 teenage daughters, also introduces this new configuration of single-parenthood into the popular imaginary. Unfortunately, the series chose to ride on this generic innovation rather than develop and expand on the relationships between these three women. Nevertheless, like *An Unmarried Woman*, this series depicts the struggle to adapt to new family formations, and to find skills and competence where previously one had felt the ancillary half of a traditional couple. Even the title suggests a sort of easy-going, teamwork approach to single-parenthood. But, like its AA counterpart from which the title is drawn, *One Day At A Time* lacked depth, originality, and the rough and contradictory edges that made sitcoms like *Maude* so interesting and so entertaining.

In *An Unmarried Woman*, the ideologies of angst, separation and generational dislocation cease to exert themselves on this mother and daughter. Mother is *not* punished for being sexual; she does not lose/ruin her daughter as a result of her assertion of a sexual self. Indeed, in the scene where Erica brings her lover Saul home to dinner, the final moment is between mother and daughter, as they play the piano and sing "Maybe I'm Amazed" together. The two women are locked in the frame together in a medium close-up two-shot that excludes the unseen Saul. As the camera pulls back up they burst into laughter as the image fades to black. Thus is the sexual woman reunited with the loving mother.

One year before *An Unmarried Woman* another film - this one more explicitly about mothers and daughters - was made that was as melodramatic and cloying as *Woman* was low-keyed and engaging. Herbert Ross's film about 2 women friends whose lives diverge when one (Ann Bancroft) continues her dancing career and the other (Shirley MacLaine) marries and has kids, may be most remembered for its grotesque "catfight" between the two central characters. The thrashing, kicking brawl between these women on the roof of Lincoln Center sets the general tone for this less-than-delightful film. Much more than *An Unmarried Woman*, this film expresses a reading of "woman's situation" in the seventies that is clearly patriarchal and that, not surprisingly, remains with us today, albeit in somewhat different language. The new generation daughter is positioned in the middle of what is here constructed as "the female dilemma"; namely, family vs. work, domestic happiness and professional

disappointment vs. personal loneliness and occupational accomplishment.⁴⁵ The narrative structure thus catches her between these dichotomies.

In so many ways, this film recapitulates the dichotomies it sets out to explore, and reproduces the more traditional dichotomies of mother/woman that films like *An Unmarried Woman* rather successfully challenged. For example, the tension between Deedee (MacLaine) and both her daughter and her friend is initiated when Deedee accompanies daughter Amelia to New York to study dance. A parallel love story emerges, Amelia falling for the smooth Russian ballet star (played by Baryshnikov) and Deedee rekindling an old affair. So far so good. But when Amelia returns home - devastated - one evening after witnessing her lover with another woman, she finds her mother absent as loyal father calls to check in. From this moment on, the daughter becomes infatuated with Emma (Bancroft) as pseudo-Mom, thus leading us narratively to associate Deedee's infidelity (her womanness) with her decline as a maternal figure for the daughter. And the narrative plays out perfectly in accordance with this grand script: Deedee is only able to win back her daughter's affection after she begs her forgiveness for the affair and, as if that wasn't enough, has a poignant reunion with steadfast hubby, a reunion the daughter looks, literally, with approval.

In addition, *The Turning Point* recapitulates yet another traditional theme of mother/daughter narratives, and one that has found much currency in recent feminist writing, as we will see in the next few chapters. Not only is daughter Amelia placed synchronically as the figure of new woman (career vs. family) but she is located

⁴⁵ The way this posing of the issue for young women continues in the popular discourse of the 80s can be evidenced by the titles of a number of popular best-selling books of recent years: *The Cinderella Complex*; *Women Who Love Too Much*; *Perfect Women*; *Smart Women, Foolish Choices*, etc.

diachronically as the person who will successfully redeem her mother's lost and neglected dreams, as Emma says to her during an argument:

Emma: "I don't want to be anybody's mother. I think of Amelia as a friend. And one reason I tried to help, stupid me, I thought it would make you happy if your daughter became what you wanted to be and never could be!"

What can be concluded from this period that so clearly has been marked by contradictions and social and media shifts in relation to representing mothers and daughters? With the onset of feminism in the late sixties and early seventies, mothers and daughters began to emerge as a relationship worthy of public discussion and representation. For the first time in television, for example, the relationship itself begins to demand narrative attention, rather than just being part of the background of the domestic bliss sitcoms of the fifties. For the first time, there is something to look at, something to analyze, a relationship that becomes socially imprinted as important and vital.

Yet, while both television and women's magazines were relatively quick to pick up on the specifically familial aspects of changing sexual politics, film of the sixties and seventies seemed to almost completely ignore the importance of the mother/daughter relationship, and it is not until the late seventies and early eighties that film once again explores mothers and daughters.

One thing that has become exceedingly clear, throughout this chapter, is that the media have had quite different responses to the development of the women's movement and are certainly not, as many critics are quick to assume, monolithic entities that simply reinforce each other with a shared ideological stance. This discrepancy between the different media cannot be easily explained. Yet several reasons come to mind.

First, tv was - and is - primarily a domestic medium. In other words, the reception of television takes place in the home, and the subject matter of television itself is often domestic and/or familial. Therefore, given that the mother/daughter relationship has been primarily understood as a domestic and familial one, it stands to reason that the medium of television could perhaps explore this relationship in greater depth than did film.

With the development of the contemporary women's movement, it seems that television and film explored *different* aspects of the social/sexual transformations and dislocations emerging in the late sixties and seventies. Film primarily chose to explore the implications of changing gender positions via an examination of single independent women. While the "new woman" was also a subject of the tv formulation of feminism, television was much more apt to delve into the familia changes engendered in and through the women's movement.

Importantly, with the maturation of television as a medium in the sixties, and the sitcom as a genre in the seventies, television replaces film as popular entertainment. As film costs rise, and accordingly film becomes more and more specialized (film as art on the one hand, and film as special effects/teen love on the other), television emerges as a medium more tuned in to the diverse tenors of the times. The immediacy of television and its lower production costs via the subsidizing by advertisers, allow for television, contrary to the critics who rail against its banalities, to not only be closer to the contemporary conditions of its diverse audience, but to enact narratives that are more responsive to the prevailing social conditions than its filmic counterpart.

And women's magazines, as we have seen, played out in its very pages the dialectical drama of feminism and the resistance to it by allowing these contradictory voices to permeate the very way the discussion was framed. Importantly, while the same debates often continued (should mother work?, why do mothers and daughter quarrel?, the difficult adolescent years, etc) the women's magazines began to shift the discourse to one specifically engaged with the women's movement. So, for example, while Ann Landers addresses the traditional subject of how to communicate with your daughter, she does so now under the more specific aegis of how to speak of this new liberation movement. Very few magazines could afford to ignore a social/sexual movement that most assuredly was occupying the minds and bodies of many of their educated, middle-class readers. Indeed, it is more than coincidental that the book that broke the waters, *The Feminine Mystique*, should have been written by a women's magazine writer. For the issues that the women's movement focused on (beyond the issue of economic justice) - issues of family life, marital happiness, how to be a mother and what it means, the "trapped" housewife, sexual pleasure, personal relationships, etc., had all been central aspects of the women's magazine gestalt for years. So, in many ways, it is not surprising to see the extent to which the magazines included such a wide and diverse range of opinions, positions, arguments on the emerging "woman question" of the late 60s and 70s. Indeed, the genre which *would* have explored this relationship most in film - the melodrama - had declined by the late 50s and had disappeared by the 60s, being replaced with genres less available to the representation of a female subject, much less one in relation to another female subject.

CHAPTER SIX
TERMS OF ENMESHMENT:
FEMINIST DISCOURSES OF MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

If the dominant culture only reluctantly took up a rethinking of the relationship of mothers and daughters, then the women's movement - and women's culture in particular - engaged with this issue as central to the feminist project. For many feminist critics, the topic of "Motherhood" -with all its associated themes - has proved to be one of the most fruitful avenues for research and analysis.

Indeed, it is not until the contemporary feminist movement that any serious and sustained theoretical discussion of mothering and the mother/daughter relationship begins to emerge, and, as Ann Kaplan argues, this omission is hardly innocent:

The absence of concern with the Mother as subject, not only in dominant literature but also in intellectual and scholarly pursuits, cannot be an accident. Significantly, until the work produced by the recent women's movement, there has been no history of Motherhood analogous to the work done on childhood, the family and sexuality.¹

¹ E. Ann Kaplan, "Mothering, Feminism and Representation: The Maternal Melodrama and the Women's Film 1910-1940," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 120.

For feminists, redressing this absence and beginning to formulate alternative histories and theories of motherhood was a vital task, as women's position and location as mother was seen as central to the understanding of women's position in broader terms. Although many theories on motherhood exist within the diverse field of women's studies and feminist theory, most would agree on its centrality to the project of feminist theorizing. Motherhood - as ideology, institution and experience - has been a central aspect of the broader feminist rethinking of the family. The mother/daughter relationship has taken on especial importance as young feminists seek to identify with their mothers in more mutually affirming ways; to explore their mothers' lives in the effort to find positive meaning for their own. Indeed, the importance of rethinking the mother/daughter relationship has been acknowledged by many feminists:

There is perhaps no subject of more significance to the women's movement than this one: it raises historically and psychologically important questions about...women's roles, and more importantly about the kinds of family bonds that are traditionally maintained through these relationships.²

As previous chapters should have shown, the myths and images of motherhood and the "maternal" remain some of the most compelling within the vast lexicon of masculinist popular culture.

Part of the difficulty in writing about these feminist discourses, though, is that, for the most part, feminist work is more generally about "mothering" and "motherhood" than specifically about the issue of mother/daughter relationships. And, clearly, I cannot review all the various positions and approaches within the feminism on the

² Serafina Bathrick, "The Mary Tyler Moore Show: Women at Home and at Work," in *MTM: Quality Television*, ed. Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi (London: British Film Institute, 1984), 111-112.

subject of mothering, as this literature has become rather enormous in recent years, and I cannot begin to do it justice here. Rather, I am trying here to set out what I believe to be a few of the central arguments and analyses of the mother/daughter relationship by feminist scholars. This task of examining the feminist perspectives on the mother/daughter relationship is thus a difficult one, as most feminist work on this relationship is itself embedded within a larger discourse on the family, motherhood or psychological development and the construction of a gender identity. Significantly, there is a dearth of *theoretical* work that focuses solely on the mother/daughter relationship, although it is a prevalent theme in feminist culture - from poetry and novels to art, film and video. The feminist discourses discussed here are often implicit in other discursive practices, particularly within film and film criticism, feminist fiction, and the growing concern with women's autobiography and "everyday life."

The arguments and analyses set out here are understood as "discourses" precisely because of the way in which feminist work on the mother/daughter relationship has traversed a multiplicity of formations - both theoretical and cultural. To call them "ideologies" or "theories" (although they may be ideological and are often theoretical) belies the interdisciplinary and broad-ranging way in which feminist work on mothers and daughters has emerged. The openness of the concept of "discourse" allows for an investigation of the ways in which very different discursive practices (from psychology, from feminist theory, from popular culture) cohere or intersect to produce certain generally agreed upon, or "common-sense," understandings of the mother/daughter relationship. It is my contention that the feminist discourses discussed here share much in common with each other, as well as with dominant,

patriarchal discourses. Certain underlying elements of these feminist discourses have entered into our common-sense understandings of what it means to be mothers and daughters and have thus become "naturalized" and largely escaped rigorous feminist criticism. A central task of this chapter is to "denaturalize" these feminist assumptions and the political positions they provoke. The fundamental question for us here is again one of change: have feminists been successful in mapping out alternative theories to those of the dominant culture?

Feminist discourses on mothers and daughters are many and varied, yet I do believe that it is possible to discern two broad trends within this area of research. As is typical with feminist scholarship, these trends are difficult to categorize neatly, as they overlap with each other at crucial points, blurring what we would like to believe are analytically clear lines. This overlapping and blurring occurs to such an extent that, as will be demonstrated below, these discourses perhaps share more in common than is at first apparent.

THE DAUGHTER'S LEGACY

The first approach in the feminist analysis of mothers and daughters coheres around Adrienne Rich's important book, *Of Woman Born*, but is relevant to other studies as well, including Judith Arcana's *Our Mother's Daughters*. To a great extent, this approach (if one can really call such a diverse range of texts an "approach") needs to be seen as a response to both the "mother-bashing"³ that was/is so essential

³ There is a feminist version of this sort of gratuitous "mother-bashing" to be found in Nancy Friday's *My Mother/My Self* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1977). She has been roundly - and rightly - criticized by feminist scholars, so I will avoid any discussion of her book in this article.

a part of mainstream ideologies of motherhood, as well as to the avoidance of the topic of mothers and daughters altogether by mainstream scholarship:

...this relationship has been minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy. Whether in theological doctrine or art or sociology or psychoanalytic theory, it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad. Small wonder, since theology, art, and social theory have been produced by sons. Like intense relationships between women in general, the relationship between mother and daughter has been profoundly threatening to men.⁴

Appalled at the extent to which the mother/daughter relationship had been either denigrated or ignored, many feminist scholars sought to "reclaim" motherhood and the mother/daughter relationship from its patriarchal heritage. There was an important utopian moment to much of this early criticism, particularly as found in the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. If contemporary (patriarchal) images of mothers and daughters focused mostly on conflict or struggle, then perhaps feminist historians could unearth earlier models of female bonding that suggest more benign -and even more sisterly - forms of interaction. Smith-Rosenberg has argued that mother/daughter conflict and opposition was much less evident in 19th century life, where ideologies of "separate spheres" and the "Cult of True Womanhood" helped to unite women in the domestic, or the "female world":

An intimate mother-daughter closeness lay at the heart of this female world. The diaries and letters of both mothers and daughters attest to their closeness and mutual emotional dependency...Expressions of hostility which we would today consider routine on the part of both mothers and daughters seem to have been uncommon indeed. On the contrary, this

⁴ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1976), 226.

sample of families indicates that the normal relationship between mother and daughter was one of sympathy and understanding.⁵

In trying to understand this apparent lack of hostility that is so assumed in contemporary society, Smith-Rosenberg concludes that:

The functional bonds that held mothers and daughters together in a world that permitted few alternatives to domesticity might well have created a source of mutuality and trust absent in societies where greater options were available for daughters than for mothers. Furthermore, the extended female network...may well have permitted a diffusion and a relaxation of mother-daughter identification and so have aided a daughter in her struggle for identity and autonomy.⁶

This strand of feminist history, with its harkening back to a brighter past, has its "spiritualist" counterpart in the work of writers like Briffault and Bachofen⁷ (and even Jung!) who theorize an original "mother-right" that was overthrown by the forces of patriarchal religion and culture. While patently utopian, and heavily criticized by other feminists,⁸ this work is important in its suggestion that things were not always (and thus need not be) the way they are now. In other words, Smith-Rosenberg, by

⁵ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975): 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ J.J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967); Robert Briffault, *The Mothers* (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1969).

⁸ One important and, in my mind, accurate criticism centers around Smith-Rosenberg's inability to adequately theorize the possible reasons for this purported closeness. It seems clear that at least some of that intimacy was related less to some sort of "proto-feminist" bonding than it was to the real lack of an enabling vision of female activity outside of the maternal home. A parallel might be made here to the intimate, nonconflictual images we see in films such as *Stella Dallas*, where the closeness must in some ways be tied to a shared female world made so, at least in part, by the strictures of patriarchal social relations. Nevertheless, female closeness can *never* be described mechanistically as simply of reflection of the limitations imposed by patriarchy.

providing evidence for a less conflictual and more supportive mother-daughter relationship, opens the door to a historicizing of the whole "culture of conflict" that has come to be seen as inevitable by even the most enlightened thinkers. Indeed, by historically analyzing mothering itself, feminist historians have implicitly challenged one of the primary mythologies about motherhood: its timelessness.

Adrienne Rich's passionate and significant book, *Of Woman Born*, is not solely about mother/daughter relationships, but is rather about the totality of mothering and motherhood. Several points are important as they relate to Rich's more specific discussion of the mother/daughter relationship. One of the key issues in *Of Woman Born* is Rich's attempt to make a distinction between the *institution* of motherhood under patriarchy and all the distortion and pain that has wrought for women, and the *experience* of mothering that implies new and feminist possibilities.

This split between the patriarchal framing of an experience (and therefore the institutionalization of that experience) and the possibilities of that same experience freed from male control and domination, is central to Rich's rethinking of the mother/daughter relationship. For Rich, patriarchy has imprisoned motherhood, turned it into a form of oppression and exploitation that alienates women from their own bodies. This alienation and distortion is extended to the mother/daughter relationship, as it is to every relationship between women under patriarchy. The victimization of the mother is carried over onto the daughter:

Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, "whatever comes." A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for

clues as to what it means to be a woman...The mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding rags for the psyche of the daughter.⁹

Rich thus eloquently depicts the double-binds mothers and daughters live through under patriarchy, as does Judith Arcana when she declares that, "The oppression of women has created a breach among us, especially between mothers and daughters. Women cannot respect their mothers in a society which degrades them; women cannot respect themselves."¹⁰

Importantly, neither Rich nor Arcana are Pollyannas about the mother/daughter relationship. Neither rhapsodizes to any great extent about its joys or triumphs. But, significantly, while both are explicit about the distortions of this relationship under patriarchy, they see it as just that, *distortions* that occur under, and because of, *patriarchal social relations*. Thus, while Rich may argue that, "Few women growing up in a patriarchal society can feel mothered enough...",¹¹ behind this statement lies the belief that this relationship *can* be rediscovered, reconstructed, rejuvenated once freed of its patriarchal baggage: "What we need is not to break the tie, but to make it healthy - to wrest it from its patriarchal context, to allow for its full impact on us, strengthening the line of women."¹² The message, therefore, is one of an "essential" bond which has been mangled by the years and years of male domination and medicalization of women's bodies, but that can be recovered, *must* be recovered, by active feminist intervention.

⁹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 243.

¹⁰ Judith Arcana, *Our Mothers' Daughters* (Berkeley: Shameless Hussy Press, 1979), 1.

¹¹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 243.

¹² Arcana, *Our Mothers' Daughters*, 150.

The assumption behind this schema that I find most troubling is the implication that there is something "real" and "original" in the mother/daughter relationship outside of the context of patriarchal relations. DuPlessis asks of Rich:

...is everything good about motherhood generated by the "real" woman's self, and everything bad about motherhood generated by patriarchy? Is there a "pure" self which exists beyond the system in which it is immersed? How has it gotten there; what sustains it?¹³

While Rich does not exactly idealize the mother (as many feminists have done) she does place a sort of "essential" weight on mothering and on the mother/daughter relationship in particular. She does this in two ways. First, drawing on theorists of matriarchy such as Bachofen, Briffault and feminist scholar Elizabeth Gould Davis, Rich attempts to claim historical - or at least symbolic - space for a different understanding of women, mothering, and, by extension, the mother/daughter relationship. If, during matriarchal periods, mothers were revered and respected and were not alienated from their bodies, then contemporary women can envision new possibilities for their own mother/daughter relationships.

Secondly, and following the first point, is a repeated emphasis on the primacy of the mother/child bond: "The mother-child relationship is the essential human relationship."¹⁴ In this view, mother/daughter relationships take on an almost spiritual and primordial quality, signified largely by their shared "femaleness:"

Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other - beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival - a knowledge that is

¹³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Washing Blood," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 1978): 1-12, esp. 3.

¹⁴ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 127.

subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.¹⁵

The basis for the mother/daughter bond thus appears here to be both spiritual and biological, tied in as they are to each other through the experience of pregnancy and birth and through their shared physical attributes. Rich thus opens up (but does not resolve) what I understand to be a central dilemma in rethinking the mother/daughter relationship. That is, 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 reproduction of patriarchy - without lapsing into a sort of feminist biological determinism that locates our impetus for woman-identification solely in our physiological likenesses.

This argument for the special bond between mothers and daughters is tied in with Rich's conception of woman-identification and the lesbian continuum. For Rich, there is a deep connection between coming to terms with the mother/daughter relationship and coming to terms with sexual love for another woman. The loss of the mother is portrayed as the grand metaphor for the loss of all women to each other, a loss predicated on compulsory heterosexuality and a fear and hatred of intimacy between women. Interestingly, it is at this juncture of lesbianism and mothering that American radical feminism meets certain forms of French feminism. Luce Irigaray's work in particular (but also Kristeva's in a rather different way), concerns itself with the

¹⁵ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 220.

double-binds of the mother/daughter relationship under patriarchy, and finds a positive and erotic potential in a "return to the mother."¹⁶

This equation of a "merger with the mother" with lesbian identity (a version of which is to be found in the psychoanalytic discourses as well) remains a highly problematic aspect of these discourses. It does a disservice to the specificity of lesbian identity as well as to the specificity of the mother/daughter relationship. If lesbianism is seen as a "return" to the mother then, in our psychologized society, that can only be understood as a regressive form of sexuality, as separation from the mother is what marks a person as adult. It also confuses the myriad reasons for the adoption of a lesbian sexuality (among them, political choice) and thus blurs and limits the multiplicity of lesbian experience. Clearly, too, it can also fit into more general heterosexist assumptions concerning the "regressive" and "narcissistic" character of homosexuality.

So, while in one sense *Of Woman Born* is a eulogy for the mother/daughter relationship as it exists under patriarchy, it is simultaneously a celebration of this "most essential" bond. Rich, like Judith Arcana in her book *Our Mother's Daughter's*, finds fault with mothering and the mother/daughter relationship, but is at pains to place the "blame" for mothers role in maintaining patriarchy firmly on the side of men in power and the male medical profession especially. In this feminist version, *Mama has done us wrong, but it really ain't her fault.*

Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise
and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom

¹⁶ See especially Eleanor H. Kuykendall, "Toward an Ethic of Nurturance: Luce Irigaray on Mothering and Power," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcock (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), 263-274.

the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted. Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her.¹⁷

THE LAW OF THE MOTHER

Perhaps the primary way that feminist scholarship has tackled the mother/daughter relationship is through some version of a psychoanalytic approach. This is not surprising, as the *psychology* of the mother/daughter relationship has been the central focus for mainstream scholarship, even when analyzed sociologically. The influence and impact of Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* cannot be underestimated. The appeal of Kleinian object-relations theory to feminists is in some ways quite obvious. More than any other psychoanalytic theorist, Melanie Klein and her followers brought the mother back into psychoanalysis where the reign of the Oedipus complex had kept her in a rather passive and secondary position. Object-relations, with its focus on the preoedipal years and on the active position of the mother as the first "object" that the infant encounters, has been eagerly taken up by feminists as a key to unlocking the process of gender formation.

With the feminist inflection given object relations by Chodorow, the daughter - as well as the mother - assumes a new importance and centrality. No longer is the drama of the daughter's development playing second fiddle to the "genderless" (male) Child. And this psychological development is seen in the social context¹⁸ of parenting

¹⁷ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 235.

¹⁸ This social context, as I will point out, is more often than not given mere lip service rather than integrated thoroughly into the object-relations analyses.

practices, practices that locate women as the primary parent of both female and male children.

Chodorow's arguments are by now well known and, rather than repeat them in depth, I will simply review them here. Indeed, I want to avoid arguing with the "truth-value" of her claims, as that is always a fruitless project when engaging with psychoanalysis, which clearly involves a certain "leap of faith." Central to this leap of faith is a belief that early childhood experience is fundamentally determining. In other words, gender formation in this context is understood as being formed primarily in the child's earliest years. From this basic psychoanalytic assertion, issues for *adult* women can be understood as having their origin in early childhood experiences and structures. I would want to hold on to an idea of gender formation that sees the construction of femininity, for example, as a much more contradictory and drawn out process which does not begin and end before the age of three but changes and transforms throughout our lifetimes. Indeed, I would want to maintain an understanding of gender formation and the replication of patriarchy generally as a contradictory process in which the paradigm of female parenting is but one instance in a plethora of structured relationships and formations.

But in any case, I am fundamentally interested in Chodorow's work - and the work of other psychoanalytic feminists - as a discursive formation. How does it relate to the previously discussed paradigm? What other discourses (about parenting, about psychology, about women) intersect with it? And, most importantly here, what are the implications of this discourse for the construction of ideologies of mothers and daughters?

Starting from the basic fact that only women mother, Chodorow argues that the experience of women mothering has different psychological consequences for boys and girls. For both boys and girls, the first object-choice is the mother. But, in order for boys to differentiate - to understand themselves as "subject" - they must assume a gender identity that is not-female (not-Mother). For girls, the process of individuation is quite different. Built on a primary sense of unity and continuity with the mother, girls gender identity is formed not in opposition to her first object-choice, but in continuity with it.

The results of this differential process of psychological development should be quite familiar to feminists who have studied Carol Gilligan's work on moral development. Chodorow sees women's psychology as more relational and with less firm ego boundaries due to the continuity with the mother. In her view, and the view of others such as Jane Flax discussed below, women therefore have problems with autonomy and differentiation, with a sense of separate "self-hood" arising out of the patterns of childrearing:

Because of her own gender identity, the mother identifies with her girl child more than with her boy child. In relating to her daughter she unconsciously replays many of the ambiguities and identifications she experiences with her own mother. The mother thus often tends to relate to her daughter more as an extension of herself than as a separate person....The mutually reinforcing identification of mother and daughter results in the girl's acquiring a sense of separate identity later than boys, and never acquiring a sense of separation from others as strong as the boys.¹⁹

¹⁹ Iris Marion Young, "Is Male Gender Identity the Cause of Male Domination?" in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcock (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), 129-146, esp. 130.

Clearly, Chodorow is not only addressing the question of how mothering is reproduced but how, through this reproduction, patriarchy itself (or at least the psychological "types" needed to maintain it) is reproduced. Women's mothering provides the grist for the mill of unequal gender relations, and the mother/daughter relationship proves particularly helpful in reproducing the psychological patterns that maintain patriarchy. It follows then, that Chodorow's "solution" - and Dorothy Dinnerstein's - is shared parenting. Only when "mothering" becomes a task performed by both sexes will we be able to break this cycle that assures a masculine identity formed in opposition to mother/woman, and a feminine identity formed in continuity with that very same mother.

The heterosexism of this "solution" should be obvious, in that it assumes a parenting couple that is heterosexual. If "dual parenting" is advocated so that the child receives a "balance" of parents of both genders, than what would we make of a homosexual couple for which no such "balance" exists? In addition, "dual parenting" has severe limitations as an answer to patriarchal social relations in which real questions of power, coercion and male violence cannot be simply "parented" away.

Both Dorothy Dinnerstein and Jane Flax take up the same line of argument concerning the negative effects of women's mothering on social life as a whole (Dinnerstein), and on daughters' sense of selfhood specifically (Flax). For Dinnerstein, the results of women's exclusive mothering has been that men are compelled to control themselves, women, nature and culture in order to contain symbolically the fear of the all-powerful and terrifying mother. Dinnerstein, in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, quite unequivocally attributes all the oppressive relations of the modern world to mother-dominated children. So long as mothers "rule" the cradle, they will

create fundamentally warped human psyches, individuals whose fear and terror of that awesome maternal power leads them on a path of destructiveness and consent to violence. The prevailing conditions of gender inequality are just one aspect of the larger and more profound malaise.

Jane Flax's work, dealing much more specifically with mother/daughter relationships, takes both the Chodorow and Dinnerstein positions to their logical conclusion. Jane Flax is also an object-relations theorist, but again (like Dinnerstein) takes it further than Chodorow in claiming that:

The repression of early infantile experience is reflected in and provides the grounding for our relationship with nature. This is true, as well, of our political life, especially the separation of public and private, the obsession with power and domination, and the consequent impoverishment both of political life and of theories about it.²⁰

Flax here, in quite orthodox psychoanalytic fashion, moves outward from the repression of infantile experience to the panorama of social ills. The *agency* for this repression is the mother. Flax thus *pathologizes* Chodorow's description of the mother/daughter relationship: "...the development of women's core identity is threatened and impeded by an inability to differentiate from the mother. I see as a central problematic in female development the very continuity of identity with the mother...."²¹ Flax sees an "...endless chain of women tied ambivalently to their mothers, who replicate this relation with their daughters"²² because of their inability

²⁰ Jane Flax, "Mother-Daughter Relationships: Psychodynamics, Politics, and Philosophy," in *The Future of Difference*, eds. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 20-40, esp. 26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

to deal with their anger at their mothers and their inability to fully separate from her. Separation for the daughter is more difficult because, as Flax sees it, the important "symbiotic" experience is never "enough":

The feeling that women often report of not having had enough of something, of being cheated, is also related to the inadequacies of the symbiotic phase. It is not that women lack the experience of being nurtured; but it is rather that their experience takes place within a context in which the mother's conflicts render the experience less than optimal....If the symbiotic experience has not been adequate, the process of separation and individuation that follows is also more difficult....²³

Kim Chernin, writing in this object-relations tradition but focusing more specifically on women and eating disorders, starkly reinforces the belief that the key to women's emotional and psychological problems can be found in their relationship with their mothers:

If we are to understand the contemporary struggle for female identity, we must place it in relation to this fateful encounter between a mother whose life has not been fulfilled and a daughter now presented with this opportunity for fulfillment.²⁴

Chernin's book is an endless cataloguing of the mother's failed life and how it impinges on the budding independence of the daughter, impinges to such an extent that the daughter is forced to engage in self-destructive behavior (anorexia and bulimia) in order to call attention to it:

Because her mother cannot give her what she needs - cannot enter with full understanding into her struggle, cannot model for her its potential resolution - she reaches for food in place of the mother and thereby incurs the terrible danger of becoming everything she most fears to be:

²³ Jane Flax, "The Conflict Between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and Within Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 1978): 171-189, esp. 175.

²⁴ Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity* (London: Virago, 1986), 43.

a human being for whom the question of rightful development has not yet been formulated.²⁵

Flax, and Chernin too by implication, sees women as faced with a dilemma: "...to be loved and nurtured, and remain tied to the mother, or to be autonomous and externally successful, to be like a man."²⁶ All of the contradictions of Flax's position are wrapped up in this sentence; for the options are to be *tied* to mother versus being *like* a *man*. In her choice of words, Flax betrays her inheritance of patriarchal ideologies of apronstrings and clinging, dependent mothers. One is either tied to mother, bound to her, or "like" a man.

But how is this dilemma any different from the dilemma splashed across the pages of the women's magazines? Mainstream culture has always depicted those options and dilemmas for "today's woman": she can either be homebound and mired in the dependent domesticity of motherhood and mother's life or join the man's world of work and autonomy but risk losing her "femininity" and becoming an unloved and unloving "career woman." Why should feminists be helping to maintain this false polarity?

Jessica Benjamin's fascinating and erudite new book, *The Bonds of Love*, takes up where Chodorow left off. An attempt in many ways to break free of the acultural limitations of Chodorow's analysis, Benjamin presents a compelling argument for the relationship between gendered patterns of domination and submission and the vicissitudes of the modern "administered society" of capitalist patriarchy. While

²⁵ Ibid., 54.

²⁶ Flax, "Mother-Daughter Relationships....," 37.

definitely a giant leap from Chodorow's early work, Benjamin nevertheless replicates many of its fundamental assumptions.

First, is what I can only call the great psychoanalytic leap. That is, Benjamin starts out by expressing her dismay at the persistence of the sorry state of gender polarity and then jumps from there to the necessity for a psychoanalytic interpretation:

The fundamental question we must consider is why these positions continue to shape the relationship between the sexes despite our society's formal commitment to equality; what explains their psychological persistence?²⁷

In the first place, it is doubtful that the United States (for example) really has a formal commitment to equality between the sexes. But, even if that were the case, formal commitment is by no means equatable with socially/politically *enacted* commitment. It seems to me that Benjamin does her own argument a disservice with this sort of tendentious logic, and seriously downplays an analysis of the *political* persistence of patriarchy (a word she herself rarely uses).

Benjamin is, at least, honest and upfront with her psychoanalytic commitment to the determining quality of early childhood experience. Like Dinnerstein, she wants explicitly to locate the originary moment of the culture of domination in the culture of the cradle:

I will show how the structure of domination can be traced from the relationship between mother and infant into adult eroticism, from the earliest awareness of the difference between mother and father to the global images of male and female in our culture. We will begin with the conflict between dependence and independence in infant life, and

²⁷ Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 7.

move outward toward the opposites of power and surrender in adult sexual life.²⁸

Thus, once again, women's mothering (albeit constructed not entirely by her) is seen as the great thief that steals away male nurturance and, most important for this study, female independence:

The female difficulty in differentiation can be described almost as the mirror image of the male's: not the denial of the other, but the denial of the self. Thus the fact of women's mothering not only explains masculine sadism, it also reveals a "fault line" in female development that leads to masochism.²⁹

This model of complementarity, and this insistence upon a dualistic framework for understanding psychological development is itself problematic. Fundamentally, this reasoning can't allow for the active reality of male power to enter into it's equation, because that would disrupt the complementarity in her logical apparatus. But, more to the point, we are once again faced with the *feminist* insistence that daddy may make the world go round, but it's mommy who makes our heads spin. Indeed, Benjamin is very explicit about the deleterious effects of mother/daughter togetherness on the daughter's psyche:

...mothers tend to identify more strongly with their daughters; whereas they push their sons out of the nest, they have greater difficulty separating from daughters. Thus it is more likely that girls would fear separateness and tend to sustain the tie to mother through compliance and self-denial. If not acute, this tendency would be unremarkable. But the girl's relationship to the mother, emphasizing merging and continuity at the expense of individuality and independence, provides fertile ground for submission.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 8.

²⁹ Ibid., 78.

³⁰ Ibid., 78-79.

Benjamin returns once again to what has now become a familiar theme in the literature on divorce and single-parent families: the restoration of the missing father. While she is quick to point out that male-identification is not the whole answer for women ("...failures in the struggle for recognition cannot be fully repaired by using a male identification to revolt against the mother."³¹) she comes perilously close to just such a position, not coincidentally echoing Flax's limited options for women:

Lucy had unequivocally made the choice to beat back maternal power with paternal power, to find liberation in the father. But to do this, she was always having to struggle against her father - his command of and contempt for her, her mother, and women in general. Lucy's choice had led her to a common daughter's dilemma: How to be a subject in relation to her father (or any man like her father)? How to be like her father and still be a woman?³²

In the choices "Lucy" is offered by the feminist psychiatrist, the mother as a subject in her own right (and therefore as an option for identification with the daughter) is completely absent. "Maternal power" here is everpresent, but the specific mother as subject seems to once again have receded in favor of the more tantalizing possibilities of identifying with the contemptuous father (while still remaining, of course, a "woman"). Identification with the mother (and implicitly with other women) can here be only understood as a regressive move back into the bonds of (maternal) love.

WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY?

Certain polarizations and dichotomies such as the ones mentioned above run through almost all feminist work on mothers and daughters. Often, an opposition is

³¹ Ibid., 121.

³² Ibid., 99.

set up between mother trapped in "old" ways, whose life has not been fulfilled, and the "new" and "modern" daughter who is liberated, or at least sees the possibilities for liberation and growth:

We are a generation who, with every act of self-assertion as women, with every movement into self-development and fulfillment, call into question the values by which our mothers have tried to live....For the daughter...the confrontation with the despairs and failures of the mother's life must inevitably produce a feeling of profound dismay.³³

This easy opposition is problematic in a number of ways. On the one hand, it posits an overly simplistic and coherent view of women's history as a progressive and linear movement from ignorance and oppression to enlightenment and liberation. This not only denies the long history of women's struggles for equality and recognition, but also overlays historical categories with psychological "truths." For Chernin, this historical move from oppression to liberation is paralleled by a psychological move from unfulfillment to fulfillment. This monolithic view of "pre-feminist" mothers assumes a unitary march towards self-fulfillment which is very questionable historically and which assumes a single "institution" of motherhood to which all mothers unambivalently ascribed. But "motherhood" - and patriarchy as well - are hardly that monolithic and uncontradictory:

But we should resist the temptation to present conflict and tension as wholly characteristic of mother-daughter relationships when the latter were at the adolescent stage, nor should we stray into representing mother's as the main agents of their daughter's oppression. Certainly, mother's tended to provide their daughters with the latter's earliest models of "femininity." But one cannot assume that mother's themselves possessed simple, unambiguous personalities wholly at ease with their

³³ Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity*, 42-45.

social roles, nor that daughter's learned from their mother's passively, like blotting paper simply absorbing impressions.³⁴

In addition, there is a certain arrogance in this sort of position. Contemporary feminists - identifying as the daughter rebelling against the outmoded mother - often assume a position of "higher knowledge" when it comes to reflecting on the situation of their mothers. While it is vitally important for us to understand the real changes that have occurred with this second wave of feminism, it is equally important to avoid the sort of sweeping generalizations about our mother's lives that so many feminist historians have warned against. We need to be much more historically circumspect and much more specific in terms of racial, ethnic and class differences so as to avoid this view of history that places modern daughters in an omniscient position vis-a-vis their mothers lives.

If the mother's life is consistently depicted as one of despair and frustration (as Chernin certainly does), then Chernin's notion of "surpassing the mother" becomes a necessity. But again, although real despair and real frustration are a part of most women's lives under patriarchy, *ours included*, feminist historians have consistently unearthed and re-discovered evidence of all sorts of struggle and opposition that occurred in the everyday lives of "prefeminist" women and girls. To "surpass the mother" is to lose the continuity with that history, a history that is often the history of the victims and the violated but (like any legacy) we "surpass" at our peril.

Behind this glib opposition of oppressed, unfulfilled mother and liberated, struggling-for-fulfillment daughter lies a larger question about the relevant object of

³⁴ Carol Dyhouse, "Mothers and Daughters in the Middle-Class Home, c. 1870-1914," in *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family 1850-1940*, ed. Jane Lewis (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 44.

analysis for mother/daughter relationships. It seems to me that much feminist scholarship on the mother/daughter relationship doesn't take into account new developments in the real social relations of mothers and daughters. In speaking of the new daughter attempting to break free of the depressed mother, there is the assumption of a heterosexual, nuclear family with dad at work and mom at home, tied to her kitchen and her children. As we know, the reality is that most women, most mothers, work outside the home. Also, we have several generations of young women now whose mothers came to maturity alongside the development of the feminist movement. Many of these mothers were that first wave of feminists who responded to Friedan's call and started to transform their lives and transform the lives of their daughters.

There is no question that many daughters of the post-war Industrial world grew up with mothers who "fit the bill" of the dependant, clinging, homebound wife and mother. But I think it is no longer possible to *assume* that image of mother when we do research on mothers and daughters today. Feminist discourses of mothers and daughters need to respond to new historical situations and to specify and locate shifts that occur in the relationship as it defines itself against a new social formation and new discursive practices.

Additionally, for many groups in our society, particularly black women, the vision of a homebound and dependant mother simply does not accord with their history or their lived experience. Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis have written of the real differences in black and white women's lives, differences which include other ways of mother/daughter relating and of conceptualizing that relationship. They argue - as others have done - that the current feminist fear of "becoming like your mother"

is a particularly white and middle-class phenomenon and cannot be simply extended to the black female population. In fact, their research on black mother/daughter relationships reveals quite different patterns and issues arising out of the experience of being black women in a society that is both racist *and* patriarchal:

...societal conditions intensified Black mother/daughter relationships. While social factors had a tendency to fracture the European mother/daughter relationships, in an ironical way they forced the role of the Black mother in her family to persevere.³⁵

Research such as Carol Stacks'³⁶ on black extended family kinship structures also points to different sorts of familial arrangements and conceptions of "family" that in turn help to organize mother/daughter interactions. Significantly, this concern for specificity does not affect the psychoanalytic work because it presents itself as a universal and timeless description of human psychological development.

Fundamentally, too much of the heritage of *patriarchal* studies of the mother/daughter relationship is left unchallenged. This is particularly a problem in the psychoanalytic work, which, while claiming to be *critically* psychoanalytic, never really problematizes the basic terms upon which that psychoanalytic account rests, terms such as separation, individuation, autonomy, differentiation. Mother/daughter relationships are almost always described using these set of concepts.

There is a clear line from Melanie Klein to John Bowlby's "maternal deprivation" and D.W. Winnicott's "good enough mother" right down to feminists such as Chodorow, Dinnerstein and Flax. How far is Flax's concern over the

³⁵ Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 89-90.

³⁶ Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

daughter's identity if the "symbiosis phase" has been "inadequate" from Bowlby's regressive theory of "maternal deprivation"? That Bowlby's work was central to the concerted post-War attempt to press women back into the domestic roles of wife and mother should itself point to the *ideological* nature of concepts such as bonding, separation, and symbiosis. And Moynihan's racist thesis of black matriarchy showed once again the ways in which theories of mothering are never value-free and non-political, and can be continually reformulated in new (racist, patriarchal) discourses. Feminists who treat these concepts as if they had no ideological history run the risk of coming to the same dichotomous and disempowering conclusions: too much mother/too little mother.

But, I would argue, these terms should not be taken as pure, natural, psychological givens. Indeed, sound feminist methodology insists that we historicize these concepts and that, most importantly, we search for the ways in which these concepts have a *gendered* meaning. Feminist scholarship has revealed early on that no term, no idea, no concept is gender neutral, not even in the natural sciences where the much vaunted "objectivity" of male science has recently come under fire from feminists. Then why, when it comes to mothers and daughters, do we drop that critical and questioning gaze? Indeed, one wouldn't have to dig deep to realize that all of the concepts mentioned above are deeply gendered. Clearly, the concept of "separation" has a different meaning when used in relation to girls and boys and mothers and fathers. Separation from whom, we need to ask, and for what purpose? Not only do we need to question these concepts for their gender bias and patriarchal heritage, but we need to locate them historically and culturally. Autonomy and individuation are highly valued aspects of a *capitalist* society, and as such are

naturalized so as to appear as unassailable truths about the nature of adulthood and maturity. Not coincidentally, these highly valued attributes of a functioning adult in a capitalist society are found to be "deficient" in women, an argument often agreed upon by feminists themselves. Rather than asking the question of *why* women have trouble with differentiation and separation (and then ascribing it to their continuity with their mothers as do Chodorow and Flax), perhaps we should be first questioning the concepts themselves and tracing the intersections between their gender, class and racial moments.

We should be critically examining the way in which "autonomy" and "differentiation" have always been placed on the valued side of an artificial dichotomy between reason and emotion, self-hood and symbiosis. The identification of the mother/daughter relationship with that web of values and practices mired firmly on the "emotion" side, only reinforces a dichotomy that has traditionally been used to oppress *all* women, both mothers and daughters. To attempt to wrench the daughter over to the "masculine" side of reason, autonomy, separateness, and the public world, is to give up on the much larger struggle of challenging those very dichotomies and their gendered status.

The choices offered us by feminists such as Flax are as limited as their patriarchal predecessors: "The successful woman in our society must choose between autonomy and self-fulfillment in the external world, and her mother."³⁷ But this is certainly not the only choice women have; indeed, I would argue that the posing of

³⁷ Jane Flax, "The Conflict...", 180.

this as *the* choice is deeply ideological and buys into deterministic models of women's possibilities under patriarchy.

Perhaps we *will* find those terms useful for examining the mother/daughter relationship. But their usefulness can only be revealed after a thorough, historical, *feminist* critique of them has occurred. We might then want to revise our thinking about terms like separation (the most prevalent term in any discussion of mothers and daughters) and begin to speak of the "ideology of separation."

We also need to think more carefully of the implications of our theories about mothers and daughters. And it is here where I think there are important insights from thinkers such as Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow. Rich's work - as well as that of Ann Oakley, Sheila Kitzinger and others - helps us to recognize the extent to which motherhood has become an *institution* under patriarchy and, as such, has been used with much great effect to reproduce the conditions of women's inequality. And Chodorow has forced us to recognize the depth and range of gender inequality. All of these feminist writers have - to a greater or lesser extent - played an important part in showing the ways in which the mother/daughter relationship is constructed *within patriarchy* and must be understood in that social, historical and cultural context.

Less contextual, of course, is the psychoanalytic work. It is by now commonplace to assert that point about the project of psychoanalysis, yet I think it needs restating here. For what concerns me is not only a theory that posits universal patterns of psychological development, but the implications of that theory for a feminist politics. There is a problem with a theory that understands the root causes of the reproduction of sexual inequality as located firmly in the mother's lap. Fathers, both in the literal and familial sense and in the more metaphorical sense of

representatives of patriarchy, are let off the hook too easily. Both Dinnerstein and Flax take this much further than Chodorow I believe, but the implications are there in her work as well.

If the mother is seen as the root of asymmetrical gender formation which in turn constitutes the building blocks of patriarchy, then the *activeness* of male domination gets lost. Patriarchy, then, as a concept to describe male hegemony and dominance, loses its vitality as it becomes a mere "result" of women's mothering. Questions of male power, ideology, coercion recede in this psychoanalytic version, except as they relate to the seemingly all-powerful mother. The important political question of *interest* is obscured in the almost automatic version of the acquisition of gender identity. In whose *interests* is it to maintain certain systems of childcare and to reproduce ideologies which provide legitimation for those systems?

TOWARDS A FEMINIST RETHINKING: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PATRIARCHY?

I think, in many ways, this trajectory in feminist thought has been somewhat inevitable. In the early, heady days, all our energies were focused on detailing, describing, analyzing male dominance. Deconstructing patriarchy and the myriad ways it shaped and organized our lives was the central project. But, like any movement that has matured, we began to look inward, to examine the more complex and painful ways in which we were implicated in the reproduction of patriarchy. The more we discovered the depth and range of male dominance, the more we realized its complex and contradictory nature and the real difficulties of overcoming it. This larger feminist shift (by no means linear and still continuing), from an emphasis on our

shared experience as women, our commonality and similarity to a new recognition of the "differences" - class, race, sexual preference - that made identification *as women* so problematic, has its corollary in studies of mothering and the mother/daughter relationship.

There was also another shift from an early emphasis on the oppressiveness of motherhood, its centrality to the maintenance of male domination, to a more positive and ambiguous sense of motherhood. Rich's work is located firmly in this shift, trying to affirm the positive aspects of mothering while at the same time understanding its location within patriarchy. This was a shift from a focus on victimization to a new concern with women's agency. Too often, though, mothers are seen to be either passive victims of patriarchy, guilty by omission, or controlling agents of patriarchy, inculcating their daughters into femininity, and thus guilty by omission. We seem to oscillate between these twin poles of similarity and difference, extolling the transcendent bond between mother and daughter or declaring the need to be free, to maintain one's difference.

Curiously too, in this age of post-structuralism where difference and desire are the keywords of the intellectual cutting edge honed as it is on the Fatherly advice of Saussure, Derrida and Lacan, any discussion of commonality or similarity is immediately suspect. Any discussion of mothers and daughters - rooted as it must be in the shared experience of gender, of alike bodies, of reproduction, of the family and everyday life - must seem uncommonly regressive, for many feminists as well.³⁸

³⁸ The relationship of post-structuralism to theories of the maternal and mother/daughter relationships provides an interesting angle on the sameness/difference shift discussed above. This connection awaits further research.

But is there another story to tell, another drama to unfold? Are feminist discourses limited to the generic conventions of epic battle or family melodrama? Must our dramas be played out in the alternating scenes of spiritual timelessness or infancy? Are we destined to blame or reclaim or can a mode of storytelling, a mode of analysis, transcend these limited dichotomies? Is there a way to return to our focus on patriarchy without ignoring the real differences but also, very importantly, without ignoring and brushing aside our commonality as women?

Importantly, we cannot tell *one* story of mothers and daughters. No single narrative, no unified discourse, can possibly flesh out the complexities and contradictions mother/daughter relationships. The variations of class, race, ethnicity, national identity, sexual preference and historical location all help to create a multitude of possible narratives. So, in conclusion, I will not construct another discourse here, for to create any single narrative would be to squeeze out real differences, impose a coherent and deceptive order on a vastly disordered and changing reality. To tell one master narrative - be it the radical feminist or the psychoanalytic one - would be to foreclose possibilities and edge out alternative discourses and explanations.

But there are some ways to begin, some remarks to be made that can at least set the stage for possible new feminist discourses on mothers and daughters. At the outset, we must ask ourselves why? Why this rethinking, why the necessity for re-evaluating the mother/daughter relationship and constructing oppositional discourses around it? And here a correction can be made to both previous discourses. For it is not that we must understand our mothers to understand our own inculcation into femininity, or that we must reclaim her in order to wrest her - and us - from male control, or that we must denounce her as a weighted chain around our emerging

feminist necks. The relationship of mothers and daughters must be analyzed by feminists because it exists as a relationship, a central nexus, *between women*. Now this may seem commonplace, yet it seems necessary to say again. That male scholarship has continuously mystified and obscured relationships between women is by now axiomatic in feminist circles. And clearly too, that this mystification has served to keep women apart and allied to men, is also axiomatic. If it is also true that the family is a central arena in which people are organized into gender-specific behaviors - where we learn femininity and masculinity - then it would also seem axiomatic that the mother/daughter relationship constitutes a powerful location in that contested terrain on male domination and our resistance to it.

In dichotomizing and prioritizing the values assigned to the intra and extra-familial, to reason and emotion, mother and woman, attachment and autonomy, public and private, work and family, the epistemology of patriarchy has inhibited the realization of the creative power and energy in the intimate personal, political, and familial connectedness of mothers and daughters. The conflict mothers and daughters may experience living in a male-dominant society has been turned inward, locking them in struggle with each other, blaming each other for whatever goes wrong with their lives. This struggle has become part of their legacy, an on-going prophesy to be fulfilled. Of course, this is no accident. If women were to be realized and powerful through each other than through their association with, or entitlement from men, the very foundations of the system of patriarchy would be challenged. If women were to experience validation through identification with their commonality, their personal self-esteem would be less contingent. And if women were to become more

conscious of their collective experience they would be less vulnerable to the messages that keep them subordinate.

To rethink the mother/daughter relationship is to take the meaning of "woman-identification" to heart. This is not to "reclaim" our mothers, for in that reclaiming we imply a lack of agency, a total victimization, that does us all a disservice. It is to say that we cannot be woman identified across all barriers (race, class, sexuality) and stop short at the generational barrier as if to say, "Here, ahh, here I cannot go: here it is too tough, too painful, too filled with mixed emotions and frayed edges." On the long march to a feminist world, we must not leave our mothers behind as remnants of a past we regret but would rather forget. For these mothers are *women* too, and daughters as well. Like it or not, they are part of our shared history *as women*, not only in the specific location of wife, mother, sister, daughter. We would do better, I believe, to surpass *patriarchy*, rather than to surpass our mothers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PARTING GLANCES: FEMINIST IMAGES OF MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

In the Oedipus myth, the son murders his father in order to replace him. Contrastingly, in the new woman's myth, the daughter "kills" her mother in order *not* to have to take her place.¹

The subject of mothers and daughters has not only been a central topic for feminist scholarship, but has played an important part in feminist cultural practice as well. If feminist theory has, as I have argued above, allowed itself to remain largely within the dominant categories of psychological thinking on mothers and daughters, then has feminist cultural work moved beyond these limiting frames of reference? In other words, how has the feminist movement itself attempted to develop self-consciously oppositional forms of imagining this relationship?

By and large, most feminist cultural work on mothers and daughters emerges out of contemporary women's fiction. The mother/daughter relationship has become

¹ Judith Kegan Gardiner, "A Wake For Mother: The Maternal Deathbed in Women's Fiction," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 1978): 146.

one of the central themes of women's writing, enough to warrant several books of criticism and a host of articles on this very subject.² Of course, given the realities of the world of film and video production, and its increasingly corporate nature, it is no wonder that the great majority of images of mothers and daughters are to be found in a medium that, at least at the outset, does not require a substantial infusion of finance capital. Nevertheless, feminists have produced work on mothers and daughters in other media, including film, video and photography.³

Rather than do a close reading of feminist literary texts, I want to focus here on what I see to be the central issue that, to a large extent, determines whether or not these representations fall inside the dominant psychological frameworks or offer up alternative and empowering visions for both mothers and daughters.

Not surprisingly, feminist cultural work on mothers and daughters has produced a wide range of diverse and complex texts, by no means as easily characterized as the more explicitly theoretical work. This realization forces me now to engage in a bit of self-criticism regarding my own approach to this particular chapter. I approached this work, unfortunately, in an attempt to prove what I perceived to be a sharp divide between the cultural production of white women writers and third world women writers. Angered at the incipient mother-blame and double-binding of much white feminist work, I sought to translate my critique of the theoretical material in the

² See especially Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner, eds., *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1980).

³ There have been a number of films, such as Michele Citron's *Daughter Rite*, as well as plays and photography books and exhibits that have focused on the mother-daughter relationship. Unfortunately, I could not include them in this dissertation.

previous chapter to a critique of the cultural material in the present one, this time adding on an analysis of third-world writers as an antidote to the white feminist propensity for buying into the dominant psychological frameworks.

But representations do not lend themselves to easy oppositions, and ambiguous and contradictory meanings often slip out from under the closed door of an simple critical distinction. In other words, no such pat and fixed distinction could be drawn. This is not to say that serious and profound differences in content, form, genre, etc., could not be found in comparing several texts in this way. There is no question, and its obviousness is clear, that the lived experience of black and third world writers must, by necessity, produce at least a somewhat different reading of this particular relationship.

Instead, what emerges for me here, in examining the cultural writings of both third-world and white writers, is that the axes along which distinctions can be made need to be multiplied and diversified. In other words, while race (and class, and ethnicity...) do structure these representations, perhaps the specific representational (dare we say artistic?) choices are themselves also structuring of the final ideological moment of the text. The central issue seemed to settle around the extent to which the author located her mother (either literally, *her* mother, or the fictional mother of the novel) in a set of complex social relations - in a world, a culture, a class, a ethnicity, a politics: in short, in history. As was true in my analysis of films of the thirties and forties, this location of the mother and the daughter in a real and social world lies at the heart of creating complex and thoughtful representations of the mother/daughter relationship. It is when this relationship is solely seen through the lens of psychology,

through the double-bind of the paradigmatic dichotomy of "bond/separate," that the relationship gets further mired in that self-same double-bind.

Here I want to focus on the work of three well-known feminist writers: Kim Chernin, Robin Morgan, and Vivian Gornick. I pick these three for specific reasons. First, all three are well-known both as scholars and novelists, and therefore their fictional work is always something more - or other - than that. Secondly, each woman has written a biographical/autobiographical story of her life and her mother's life. In other words, they have chosen a similar generic form for their explorations of the mother/daughter relationship.

Kim Chernin's popular and critically acclaimed 1983 memoir *In My Mother's House: A Daughter's Story*, does construct just such a location mentioned earlier. In telling the story of her mother's life, and her own entry into it, Chernin contextualizes both of their experiences through the rich specificity of left-wing Jewish culture. But Chernin must, I believe, struggle hard to resist constructing her mother as the grand floating signifier of her daughter's angst. The two voices in this memoir are not simply the voices of mother and daughter, but also the voices of two different approaches to a relationship. Nevertheless, Chernin's mother's marxism, her lifelong commitment to political struggle, (however Stalinist) produces a voice that mitigates against the daughter's tendency to turn specific lived experience into great and transcendent pronouncements on the mother/daughter relationship.

For all of Chernin's deep love and care, too often she seems to slip into the easy oppositions, the grand theorizing that dislocates the complex specificity of the memoir. When faced with her mother's proposal to write her life-story, Kim writes:

I am torn by contradiction. I love this woman. She was my first great aching love. All my life I have wanted to do whatever she asked of me, in spite of our quarreling....But it is not so easy to turn from the path I have imagined for myself....I fear, as any daughter would, losing myself back into the mother.⁴

By transposing her own ambivalence into pronouncements that signify eternal "truths" about mothers and daughters ("I fear, as any daughter would..."), Chernin invokes a whole set of ideological discourses that only further serve to set those discourses apart from the richness of her mother's story. Such pronouncements take away from the textures of everyday life between a mother and a daughter in an attempt to draw from this life and these events, eternal truths about the mother/daughter relationship.

Yet I think the daughter Chernin, in agreeing to tell her mother's story, allows this maternal voice to emerge most completely. Indeed, a beautiful passage towards the end places the love of mother and daughter firmly in the realm of a shared experience that is stronger than any sort of mythical bonding:

I can feel from my own love for her the certainty that nothing can destroy the bond between us. It is stronger than ideology, unshakable in its binding. It is not the birth bond which made us a mother and daughter; that we could have trampled down, in our impatience and confusion. This bond is a comradeship, won from the work we have done together. It comes so rarely to a mother and daughter, but once it is achieved it tangles itself in with all the nature and shared flesh. And then even they, if they wished, could no longer pull it down.⁵

What is clear about this memoir, and about Gornick's and so many others, is that the daughters who are writing them are passionate in their belief that, by telling their mother's stories, they are also uncovering the truth of their own:

⁴ Kim Chernin, *In My Mother's House: A Daughter's Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

With the resurgence of women's fiction in the twentieth century, many autobiographical or confessional novels by women trace the coming to adulthood, that is, to individual identity, of a daughter who must define herself in terms of her mother.⁶

As Rose Chernin says in speaking of her granddaughter, Kim's daughter: "My whole life will be in the story. And then we'll have to start all over again. But this time you will do the telling....These stories are also for Larissa. Who her grandmother is, who her mother is, for a fifteen-year old girl, what could be more important?"⁷ This is, paradoxically, both the feminist moment in these writings as well the patriarchal.

For the hard question with all these memoirs is this: how does a daughter write the story of her mother's life? Can she, in narrativizing the elusive experiences of past events, do justice to the *felt realities* of her mother's existence? Or does her story, the mother's story as told by the daughter, become merely a vehicle for detailing the daughter's life, or a lengthy compendium of a mother's mismothering? This terrain is most assuredly a difficult one. To write the story of our mother's lives is indeed a precarious and problematic project, and raises what I believe to be a crucial narrative distinction in the telling of these tales; that is, the difference between constructing oneself as a *repository* of your mother's life or as an interested *chronicler*. Or, in Bakhtinian terms, it is the difference between the monologic and the dialogic.

A writer who constructs herself as the repository of another's life assumes a unitary grandness to her own narrative expertise (for who can speak another's life with such surety?). If Gornick, for example, must be the repository for her mother's life,

⁶ Judith Kegan Gardiner, "A Wake For Mother: The Maternal deathbed in Women's Fiction," *Feminist Studies* 4 (June 1978): 146.

⁷ Chernin, *In My Mother's House*, 122.

then what does that say about her mother's own ability to speak her own story, safeguard her own existence? But the dialogic chronicler, I think, realizes that one cannot be a repository for another's life: that the sifting through the complex meanings of generations of women is about a dialogue, a multitude of voices, a dialectic of mothers and daughters. To be a repository is to say your history ends here with me: I am the result of your life and I can speak the truth of it. To be a chronicler is to perhaps be more modest, more local, more wary of any claims to truth, aware that there are many chroniclers, many ways of telling a story.

Chernin manages, I think, to be a chronicler. Never denying her investment in this project, she nevertheless allows her mother her own reality, her own subjectivity, her own history. Chernin's own entry into the story is, appropriately, at the end, therefore granting legitimacy to her mother's life, a life that most assuredly had meaning and sustenance before her daughter entered into it.

For all that Chernin's book is filled with the richness and detail of Jewish left-wing life, Vivian Gornick chooses to almost completely locate her mother outside of time, of place, of politics, of history. In so doing, the text of the world becomes mere extraneous background to the text of this mother's mismothering.

Gornick's *Fierce Attachments* locates itself on the other side of this repository/chronicler fence. Indeed, she explicitly sets herself out as the repository of her mother's life ("I am the repository of your life now, Ma") It is less a memoir of a mother, or even of a relationship, than it is of an adult daughter's anger, unhappiness, and confusion. The jacket blurb is here telling:

Vivian Gornick's brave and deeply moving memoir is a tour de force, a book that dissects one of life's most complex, maddening and closely entwined alliances - the relationship between mother and daughter.

Heralded as a landmark in American autobiography, *Fierce Attachments* probes the intimate, sometimes destructive family passions that can shape a woman's childhood - and change her life forever.⁸

Here we see the all too familiar language that constructs the mother as all-powerful, all-impacting, potentially destructive.

Now, granted, this book constructs itself in an autobiographical mode rather than the more mixed biography/autobiography of Chernin. Yet, by making the relationship between mother and daughter the focus, the recurring narrative core of the text, Gornick attempts to tell us not only of her own life, but of her mother's as well. Like Chernin, Gornick acknowledges right off the difficulty in the relationship ("My relationship with my mother is not good...."),⁹ but, unlike Chernin, never mitigates this anger and disappointment with other feelings (like love, understanding, concern...).

Importantly, when her mother does speak of her own experience of past events (events that, after all, occurred to her) the narrator/daughter Gornick is unable to resist her own interpretation, her own intervention, as in this scene early on in the book. Here, Gornick and her mother are walking (the site of all their dialogues) and her mother is repeating a story from her childhood, a disturbing story about her molestation by a young uncle:

The third time she told the story I was nearly forty. We were walking up Eighth Avenue, and as we neared Forty-second Street I said to her, "Ma, did it ever occur to you to ask yourself why you remained silent when Sol made his move?" She looked quickly at me. But this time she was wise to me. "What are you getting at?" she asked angrily. "Are you trying to say I *liked* it? Is that what you're getting at?" I laughed nervously, gleefully. "No, Ma, I'm not saying that. I'm just

⁸ Vivian Gornick, *Fierce Attachments* (New York: A Touchstone Book/Simon & Schuster, 1987).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

saying it's *odd* that you didn't make a sound." Again, she repeated that she had been very frightened. "Come off it," I said sharply.¹⁰

This scene is horrifying on a number of levels. First, and most obvious, is the sad irony of a feminist activist (here the daughter) questioning the silencing terror that accompanies sexual assault and male brutality. But, just as importantly here, we have a daughter disallowing the feelings of the mother about her own experience (mother says she didn't respond because she was frightened, daughter barks: come off it) and exhibiting almost no empathy, either sisterly or filially, towards another woman victimized by sexual violence. Gornick repeats this in her account of her father's death, where her depiction of her mother's grief is a sarcastic parody of what she perceives to be her self-serving histrionics. The point is not whether the grief was self-serving or histrionic - it might very well have been. But if one attempts to speak of another's grief, perhaps the voice of the griever ought to be accorded some modicum of space for articulation. To say this text is solely from the daughter's point of view is too simplistic, although it is that as well. But a daughter's point of view need not demean and negate the felt reality of the mother at the same time, as I think Chernin has amply demonstrated.

Robin Morgan's recent book, *Dry Your Smile*, is yet another (feminist) tale of a daughter victimized, constructed, by bad mothering. Unlike Chernin and Gornick, Morgan has written her memoir as a novel (or a novel within a novel), but there is no question that this is a memoir, the story of a child actress (Morgan was the child star of a early tv series called *Mama*) smothered and curtailed by an overbearing and obsessively controlling mother. The daughter grows up, becomes a feminist

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

leader/writer (like Morgan), and is finally liberated by her mother's death. This circularity (daughter reborn as mother dies) is central to the conception of the daughter as repository for her mother's (failed) life.

Morgan's book, I think, directly addresses the problem inherent in writing a memoir that is at once both a telling of your own life as well as a telling of your mother's. That is, how do you give power back to the mother and to the mother/daughter relationship, without falling into the trap constructed by the patriarchal psychology of singular blame? How does the daughter speak of her mother's impact on her without locating mother as sole and essential creator of the daughter's psyche (and usually her neuroses as well).? Morgan expresses this ambivalence when her alter ego Julian considers writing about her life with her mother:

Why would you write it? To justify yourself? Poor beleaguered Jule, beset by evil nonstepmother and then by wicked nonprince and finally by starving masses of enthralled women? Come on."¹¹

Yet, that is precisely what she does. Every act the character Julian takes, every interaction she has with her husband, her female lover, her interior self, is referenced through the mother, even to the extent where, in her dreams, her mother and her husband seem to merge. In using the metaphor of rebirth¹² at the end of the book, after the mother has died, Morgan falls, perhaps unwittingly, into the stance of perpetual child,¹³ and into, ultimately, a feminist form of mother-blame.

¹¹ Robin Morgan, *Dry Your Smile* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1987), 50.

¹² Indeed, she even reprises a scene from earlier: her own birth through her mother's eyes.

¹³ In a scene early on Julian has come to visit her mother and suggests she read to her. When the mother responds with, "We'll see," adult woman Julian says: "Momma, 'we'll see' are the two words a child of any age most dreads hearing from

This mother-blame is not, of course, limited to feminist novels. Indeed, as Madonna Miner has pointed out, 20th century women's bestsellers elaborate the daughter's angst with equal fervor:

...daughter-heroines voice complaints shared by daughter-readers: it is mothers who condemn daughters to inhabit bodies capable of mothering..., it is mothers who leave, failing to provide adequate nourishment, it is mothers who remain, exacting compensation for nourishment not provided. The story told in the bestsellers, then, is built on a bisexual triangle, with tremendous psychic tension marking the relationship between mother and daughter.¹⁴

Another text worth mentioning briefly in this context is Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, a British biography/autobiography/theory piece which addresses very directly the feminist discourses on mothers and daughters. This is quite a difficult book to write about. In the first place, it is very unconventional stylistically - part autobiography, part biography (of her mother), part social analysis and critique. So it is both a reconstruction of "two lives" (hers and her mothers) as well as a critique of the absences in other reconstructions of working class lives, such as Jeremy Seabrook's *Working Class Childhood*.

These "absences" have much to do with contemporary cultural analysis, and she particularly targets Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminism as "leaving out" or

a parent." (20) But, the point is, Julian/Morgan is no longer a child, she is a grown up woman. Yet, like Gornick, she is unable to relate to her mother as such and, importantly, refuses to take much responsibility for that inability. In the context of this narrative, which insistently details the mother's controlling, infantilizing behavior towards the daughter, the only possible reading is to legitimate Julian's childishness as the *result* of the kind of mothering she had.

¹⁴ Madonna M. Miner, "Guaranteed to Please: Twentieth-Century American Women's Bestsellers," in *Gender and Reading* ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweikart (London and Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 191.

having no space for the reality of her mother's (working-class) life (and hers too). Indeed, it seems for Steedman that class is the transcendent signifier, determinant of her mother's position to a far greater extent than patriarchy could ever be. ~~Like~~ with Chernin, and with the writers discussed below, Steedman's story always threatens to break out of a specific "mother/daughter" frame in its insistence on the multiple and contradictory practices that construct women's identity. Indeed, in many ways this is not a story about mothers and daughters but about the ways in which *class* location shapes personal identity, including female identity. The class perspective is clear right from the beginning, when she describes a denigrating visit from a health visitor right before her mother's death, and is seen quite explicitly in opposition to a seemingly bourgeois feminism:

I will do everything and anything until the end of my days to stop anyone ever talking to me like that woman talked to my mother. It is in this place, this bare, curtainless bedroom that lies my secret and shameful defiance. I read a woman's book, meet such a woman at a party (a woman now, like me) and think quite deliberately as we talk: we are divided: a hundred years ago I'd have been cleaning your shoes. I know this and you don't.¹⁵

So clearly here, Steedman finds herself unable to join with other women (feminists) because of her class location. Here, then, class is thicker than gender, implicitly linking her with her working-class mother.

Specifically, on mothering, Steedman is concerned with the question of the reproduction of the desire to mother and wants to place this more historically and contextually: "Nearly everything that has been written on the subject of mothering...assumes the desire to mother; and there are feminisms now that ask me

¹⁵ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, (London: Virago Press, 1986), 2.

to return Persephone-like to my own mother, and find new histories of my strength."¹⁶ Interestingly, later on in the book when she criticizes the Persephone tale as just a myth and therefore not true she doesn't do the same with the Oedipus myth which is still seen to represent some truth about early childhood experience. Central also to this book, and something not as explicitly said, is the importance of what Steedman calls "the first exclusion": "All children experience a first loss, a first exclusion: lives shape themselves around this sense of being cut off and denied." (p. 6) She is referring here, I believe, to a dual loss; the loss of the mother, in psychoanalytic terms, as well as the loss of innocence when one learns that one is poor, deprived. It is interesting that she takes up this psychoanalytic point so unproblematically, although she does consistently argue for the need to place it specifically - culturally, socially, historically. But the idea of loss, an original loss in childhood, seems inevitable in her analysis, a point repeated in more consistent psychoanalytic accounts. I think this is a problem, in that she definitely sees this loss in oedipal terms.

She finds problems with the feminist work on mothering, particularly on its assumption of a patriarchal father, who remained absent in her own history:

A father like mine dictated each day's existence; our lives would have been quite different had he not been there. But he didn't matter, and his singular unimportance needs explaining. His not mattering has an effect like this: I don't quite believe in male power; somehow the iron of patriarchy didn't enter into my soul.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

I think this points to a central problem in the feminist theorizing of mothering - for even while we do recognize intellectually the power of the Father, it is the mother, in our day to day interactions with her - who seems to matter most to us when we sum up our own development, re-think our own women's history. In this regard, her interpretation of her mother's history is illuminating:

My mother's story was told to me early on, in bits and pieces throughout the fifties, and it wasn't delivered to entertain, like my father's much later stories were, but rather to teach me lessons.¹⁸

But she never examines what social strictures might have enforced this very recognizable reality - Father can afford to entertain - it is mother's role to instruct. For her the lessons were laden with guilt: "The lesson was, of course, that I must never, ever, cry for myself, for I was a lucky little girl: my tears should be for all the strong, brave women who gave me life."¹⁹ Perhaps, the lessons of her mother's hardships and those before her, could have imparted a different message: Steedman's reading is not the only possible one.

So much of the story of her mother's sense of loss and longing is tied up with consumerism and the desire to possess the things (clothes, house, appliances) that she could not have. Steedman sees herself placed as both the reason for that loss and the moment of it: "For my mother, the time of my childhood was the place where the fairy-tales failed."²⁰ But isn't this so often the case - that the reality of motherhood and marriage and its limitations seem to emerge at the time of young childhood?

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 30.

²⁰ Ibid., 47.

Also important to Steedman is the idea of the child as the parent's future, which she quite rightly sees as different for mothers and fathers:

The idea of traffic and exchange, in and of the self, and of labour, applied also to my father. must apply to all those who find themselves in moments of transition and in places of escape. But he merely exchanged a past for a possible future; he did not place himself on the bargaining table as my mother did. Having the capacity to bear children, she took a gamble, exchanged a part of herself for the hope that he would marry her, bring her within the law; or to put it more generally: that a baby, a part of herself split off and made manifest, would not only insure a future but would also be a future.²¹

The importance of class, and the particular configuration of the family (eg single parent) becomes very important here: We learn about patriarchy differently given the different familial configurations:

What is a distinction though, and one that offers some hope, is the difference between learning of this system from a father's display of its social basis, and learning it from a relatively unimportant and powerless man, who cannot present the case for patriarchy embodied in his own person.²²

This is important, in that it might provide some feminist hope in different familial patterns, such as the single parent family.

But finally, Steedman's reading/critique of Chodorow reveals her own inability to move beyond the dualistic frames:

Indeed, Nancy Chodorow is well aware of the limitations of her account, and knows that it is class and culture bound. Were it not so bound, then the darker social side of the primary relationship between mothers and daughters, which in Mothering is presented as

²¹ Ibid., 70.

²² Ibid., 79.

meaning that they will always 'feel alike in fundamental ways,' would have to emerge.²³

Yes, but if it were not so class and culture bound it might also see the more positive, stronger side of mother/daughter bonding.

Much of black women's fiction, I believe, is able to avoid many of these perils.

If these white feminist representations of mothers and daughters have been characterized by their dichotomous framing (good vs. evil mothers, etc.) with an emphasis on the conflictual side of the equation, then it might be fair to say that black and third-world images have tended to be more nuanced, more complex, less starkly defined. The reasons for this are obvious, yet important to say.

In general terms, the relationship is depicted differently because the experience of black mothers and daughters in a racist culture is so patently different than that of white mothers and daughters. Central here is the role of work outside the home in defining daughters' relationships to their mothers. Most black daughters have been witness to the labor of their mothers, labor that they knew - even in an unspoken way - supported them, made their very existence possible. So the anger that so many white daughters feel towards their mothers - anger that to a large extent is provoked by the limitations of a mother trapped in the domestic role - is not perhaps as prevalent amongst black daughters who have had to develop a certain respect towards their mothers as competent and active women.

In an study of black mothers and daughters conducted by Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis which included extensive interviews, the authors report a very positive sense of respect between mother and daughter: "...the reason for this...seems to be located in

²³ Ibid., 87.

the Black daughters' familiarity with the circumstances within which their mothers existed and raised their children and an empathy caused by understanding these situations."²⁴

This is, of course, not only true for black writers, but for many daughters of mothers who worked. Chernin's witnessing of her mother's political work, however distressing it often was in the McCarthy years, enables her to experience her mother as something other than, or something besides, *her mother*. The competency and skill that is exhibited by the mother can not help but place her in at least a somewhat more complex light.

The same authors also note the importance of extended kinship systems in defining the black mother/daughter relationship. The presence of other "significant others" for the daughter - aunts, siblings, grandmothers, fictive kin, etc. - may in fact play a role in defusing the "overwhelmingness" of the mother/daughter relation. Similar patterns of closeness and mutuality have been found by sociologists studying the working-class family, who have often found the mother/daughter relationship to be the most enduring familial relation.

The point here is twofold: on the one hand, the existence of such different patterns of mother/daughter relating, and such different representations of that relating - should point to the "constructedness" of that relationship. What we assume to be the issues for mothers and daughters (separation, autonomy, etc.) are themselves products of particular historical times and specific social and cultural groupings: they are not

²⁴ Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 94.

transhistorical nor transcultural. Perhaps the whole notion of this relationship as one "constructed in conflict" is itself a phenomena limited to white, bourgeois society.

The implications of acknowledging this "constructedness" are critical for the elaboration of a more positive and mutually affirming rendering of the mother/daughter relationship. For example, if one of the reasons that black daughters seem more respectful and appreciative of their mothers is due to their recognition of the mother's strength and competency, then we need to think of how we can enhance every mother's sense of competency. One might think, too, given a different sort of society in which there is more equal access to representation - so that all our images weren't just of white mothers and daughters - we might be able to experience more diversity and complexity in the representations we see.

In an early (1973) short story by Alice Walker called "Everyday Use"²⁵ the prodigal daughter comes home to visit her poor, country family. Like in much of black women's fiction, the generational conflict in this story is analyzed through the lens of black identity and culture. She has come back from college with a new African identity and name and a similarly politicized boyfriend.

Interestingly, in this mother/daughter story there are two daughters and the differences between them - as much as the differences between the mother and daughter - are the subject. In many ways, it is a "good" daughter/"bad" daughter story, but the twist is that, unlike most white fiction, the good daughter is the one who remains tied in to the ways of her mother and the mothers before her - who remains identified with the patterns of "everyday use." The title itself refers to a quilt, made

²⁵ Alice Walker, "Everyday Use," in *Close Company* ed. Christine Park and Caroline Heaton (London: Virago, 1987)

by women in the family, that the eldest daughter now wants to take back with her to hang on the wall as a "sign" of "authentic" black culture and identity. But the mother has promised it to the younger woman for her wedding, and she will submit it only to everyday use: it will not be a decoration or a sign.

Interestingly, the story begins with the mother waiting for her daughter to arrive and immediately refers to TV images of families reuniting and the unreality of those images:

You've no doubt seen those TV shows where the child who has 'made it' is confronted, as a surprise, by her own mother and father, tottering in weakly from backstage. (A pleasant surprise, of course: What would they do if parent and child came on the show only to curse out and insult each other?) On TV mother and child embrace and smile into each other's faces. Sometimes the mother and father weep, the child wraps them in her arms and leans across the table to tell how she would not have made it without their help. I have seen these programmes.

Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought together on a TV programme of this sort. Out of a dark and soft-seated limousine I am ushered into a bright room filled with many people. There I meet a smiling, grey, sporty man like Johnny Carson who shakes my hand and tells me what a fine girl I have. Then we are on the stage and Dee is embracing me with tears in her eyes. She pins on my dress a large orchid, even though she has told me once that she thinks orchids are tacky flowers.

In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands.²⁶

She continues this description of herself - her strength and fat - and then says:

But of course all this does not show on television. I am the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights.

²⁶ Ibid., 133-134.

Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue.²⁷

The presence of the white (distorting) media is significant here, as it intrudes on the reality of the mother's life, and helps to move her daughter away from her, as when Dee/Wangero takes posed Polaroids of her authentic poor black family.

Then, the changed name emerges: Dee is now Wangero. Mother accommodates to this, although she keeps referring to the other name in the narration (eg. Dee (Wangero) or the other way around). She ends up giving the quilt to Maggie and Dee leaves after telling them they should do something with themselves. The story ends with Mother and Maggie settle in on the porch with snuff, reinforcing the continuity of female presence both in the face of the "radicalized" daughter as well as the white media which the daughter's presence conjures up images of.

A story by Gloria Naylor, from her novel *The Women of Brewster Place*,²⁸ is similar to Walker's "Everyday Use" in that it poses a young black woman who is very into her newly found black radicalism - her African identity - in conflict with a mother she considers either anachronistic or downright counterrevolutionary. Like the daughter in Walker's story, Kiswana has changed her name to an African one and that in itself is a source of conflict. In this case, Kiswana's mother is a woman who has married an educated man and is living a very middle-class life that Kiswana has left in defiance. She now refuses to take money from her mother and lives in relative poverty in Brewster Place. Her mother comes to visit her unexpectedly. The mother

²⁷ Ibid., 134.

²⁸ Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1983).

clearly wants her to "do something" with her life - to be upwardly mobile like the family she has come from, but Kiswana resists this and proclaims her revolutionary identity in the face of what she perceives to be her mother's acquiescence to the dominant white culture.

They argue, Kiswana defending her lifestyle and the mother being saying that she could make more use of herself if she continued her education and became a lawyer or politician for black rights. In many ways, this scene recreates a classic debate over the relative virtues of working in the system and outside of it and mirrors New Left anger at liberal parents (Kiswana's parents are in NAACP which she thinks is a sell-out organization). When Kiswana insults her mother about being a "whiteman's nigger" Mom blows up and gives her a fiery lecture about her ancestry and her proud heritage that gets around to the question of the name:

It broke my heart when you changed your name. I gave you my grandmother's name, a woman who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shotgun when they tried to drag off one of her sons to jail for 'not knowing his place.' Yet you needed to reach into an African dictionary to find a name to make you proud.²⁹

This is very reminiscent of Walker's story, where she named her daughter for a beloved female relative. Kiswana is devastated by this tirade and realizes her naivete and arrogance, but can say nothing until her mother rescues her:

Mrs. Browne lifted Kiswana's face gently. "And the one lesson I wanted you to learn is not to be afraid to face anyone, not even a crafty old lady like me who can outtalk you." And she smiled and winked.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., 86.

³⁰ Ibid., 87.

The story ends with them "coming together" around typical women's things -shoes, toenail polish, etc. After an unusual conversation about men and sex, Kiswana is amazed at the recognition that they "inhabit the same world":

I'll be damned, the young woman thought, feeling her whole face tingle. Daddy's into feet! And she looked at the blushing woman on her couch and suddenly realized that her mother had trod through the same universe that she herself was now traveling. Kiswana was breaking no new trails and would eventually end up just two feet away on that couch. She stared at the woman she had been and was to become.³¹

Meridian, a 1976 story by Alice Walker,³² also works the mother/daughter relationship through the lens of political struggle. This early story of Walker's of a woman living through, and past, the Civil Rights Movement is interesting, even though it is not a "mother/daughter" story in any explicit sense. What is interesting is that the main character, *Meridian*, *does* reject her mother, as in many white feminist novels, but she expresses it in such a different way as to render that rejection both more complex and more poignant. Indeed, just the fact that the daughter's remembrance of the mother is referenced through the Civil Rights Movement renders this emotional turmoil differently:

Meridian found, when she was not preoccupied with the Movement, that her thoughts turned with regularity and intensity to her mother, on whose account she endured wave after wave of an almost primeval guilt. She imagined her mother in church, in which she had invested all that was still energetic in her life, praying for her daughter's soul, and yet, having no concern, no understanding of her daughter's life whatsoever; but *Meridian* did not condemn her for this. Away from her mother, *Meridian* thought of her as Black Motherhood personified, and of that great institution she was in terrible awe, comprehending as she did the horror, the narrowing of perspective, for mother and for child, it had invariably meant.

³¹ Ibid., 87-88.

³² Alice Walker, *Meridian* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

Meridian felt as if her body, growing frailer every day under the stress of her daily life, stood in the way of a reconciliation between her mother and that part of her own soul her mother could, perhaps, love."³³

Her mother doesn't understand her rejection of her religion, doesn't understand her politics, etc., but Meridian's feelings about the ever-widening gap between them are expressed in almost neutral and matter-of-fact tones, as here when Meridian has rejected the Church that remains so fundamental to her mother's identity: "Her mother's love was gone, withdrawn, and there were conditions to be met before it could be returned. Conditions Meridian was never able to meet." ³⁴

Throughout the story, as Meridian thinks back through the mother, she parallels her own grief at her mother's unlovingness with a neutral yet detailed account of her mother's sacrifices and the price they both paid for the inescapability of motherhood. Here Walker states the realization of her mother's own loss within the confines of motherhood and marriage, but says it so matter-of-factly, never referring back to herself as the one who suffered because her mother shouldn't have had kids, "Her mother was not a woman who should have had children. She was capable of thought and growth and action only if unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, requirements, of a husband."³⁵ Here again she states flat-out this loss in realization of the mother's independence as a teacher that she submerged upon falling into the

³³ Ibid., 92-93.

³⁴ Ibid., 17.

³⁵ Ibid., 39.

myth of family life, "She could never forgive her community, her family, his family, the whole world, for not warning her against children." ³⁶

This sense of the mother's life as circumscribed by the dictates of family and husband is a familiar one to feminist fiction, both white and black. But the difference here is that the daughter is *chronicling* her mother's sorrow and, while the effect on the daughter is implicit, this chronicler is also able to move away from blame and towards a politicized understanding, "When her mother asked, without glancing at her, "Have you stolen anything?" a stillness fell over Meridian and for seconds she could not move. The question literally stopped her in her tracks." ³⁷ Here we see the classic feminist daughter's dilemma, of having - by her very existence - cut short her mother's possibilities. Yet Meridian never questions the reality of her mother's "serenity" being "stolen" and thus validates both that reality as well as her own, in her knowledge that it was not her fault, "It was for stealing her mother's serenity, for shattering her mother's emerging self, that Meridian felt guilty from the very first, though she was unable to understand how this could possibly be her fault."³⁸

It is important, also, that Meridian recounts her mother's herstory: how her mother went without and struggled to make sure she got educated and how she rewarded her mother's endurance by becoming a schoolteacher.³⁹ The sense of endurance is passed on to Meridian:

³⁶ Ibid., 40.

³⁷ Ibid., 41.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 122.

When her mother talked about her childhood Meridian wept and clung to her hands, wishing with all her heart she had not been born to this already overburdened woman. ...It seemed to Meridian that her legacy from her mother's endurance, her unerring knowledge of rightness and her pursuit of it through all distractions, was one she would never be able to match. It never occurred to her that her mother's and her grandmother's extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity. They had not lived in an age of choice.⁴⁰

And, finally, Meridian comes to realize the meaningfulness of simple endurance in the face of racism and poverty and is able to beautifully reverse the theme of "surpassing the mother" that is so prevalent in both white fiction and white theory:

To Meridian, her mother was a giant. She had never perceived her in any other way....Besides, she had already forgiven her mother for anything she had ever done to her or might do, because to her, Mrs. Hill had persisted in bringing them all (the children, the husband, the family, the race) to a point far beyond where she, in her mother's place, her grandmother's place, her great-grandmother's place, would have stopped." ⁴¹

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, of course, offers up a reading of the mother/daughter relationship that is precisely so horrifying to the in the extent to which it deconstructs typical renderings by its radical "located-ness." Morrison's own words, I think, speak most accurately of the implications of this kind of story-telling:

I'm just interested in showing what is hazardous to us and what happens to women when things are carried to an extreme. I want to present the dangers so that we as women can find the balance. For Sethe for instance the condition under which she has lived ie. slavery is such that when her children are threatened with re-enslavement, murder becomes an act of mother love. 'I took my babies and put them somewhere they'd be safe.' Mother hood was her identity. She lived in a world that tried to deny her responsibility for her children. So she protected them with the ferocity of a lioness. That is the dilemma of the novel.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid., 123.

⁴¹ Ibid., 120-121.

⁴² Interview with Toni Morrison, *Spare Rib* (1988).

Amy Tan's 1989 bestseller, *The Joy Luck Club*,⁴³ exemplifies with particular force the rich possibilities for mother/daughter representations that these earlier texts have already indicated. This novel recounts the stories of four Chinese mothers and their assimilated Chinese-American daughters. The mothers, immigrants to San Francisco, have for 40 years maintained a regular meeting where they play mah-jong, eat elaborate meals, and share their lives with each other. The telling of the stories is inaugurated at the death of one of the mothers.

The book is divided into four sections, each beginning with a Chinese parable concerning mothers and daughters. Each section contains four stories. In the first section, the daughter of the dead Suyuan Woo recounts her entry into Joy Luck, and the three remaining mothers tell their stories. The second two sections contain daughter's tales, each one ending with Jing-Mei, daughter of the missing member. The final section again returns to the mothers with Jing-mei at the end.

The structure of *The Joy Luck Club* is important, as it moves away from the linear chronological model which has lent itself so easily to the dual tropes of "surpassing the mother" and the daughter as repository. Instead, it puts in place of this a much more dialogic mode where the often suppressed voices of the mothers emerge with full force: they speak their own stories, their own bitterness. And again, this dialogic mode allows for the full and various experiences of both mothers and daughters to emerge in way that implicitly argues against any simple construction of blame.

⁴³ Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989).

This is not to say that these stories are without their pain and anger; on the contrary, they are often full of a bitterness and misunderstanding on both sides. But simply by allowing the mother's voices to speak of their lives, and their understandings of their daughters, we are immediately placed in a different emotional territory. In Waverly Jong's story, we feel the huge chasm that so typifies the experience of first and second-generation immigrants but we also see the attempt to know the other, to see her world, her life, her options, her ways of living in this world that both mother and daughter inhabit. After a long and confusing battle with her mother, Waverly is able both to express her own desire for selfhood without simultaneously negating her mother's:

I saw what I had been fighting for: It was for me, a scared child, who had run away a long time ago to what I had imagined was a safer place. And hiding in this place, behind my invisible barriers, I knew what lay on the other side: Her side attacks. Her secret weapons. Her uncanny ability to find my weakest spots. But in the brief instant that I had peered over the barriers I could finally see what was really there: an old woman, a wok for her armor, a knitting needle for her sword, getting a little crabby as she waited patiently for her daughter to invite her in.⁴⁴

In the story of An-Mei Hsu, one of the mothers, we get a vision of generational regeneration, as she recounts an event from her life in China that involves the death of her beloved grandmother Popo. An-Mei's own mother had left her, and she had been raised by this grandmother. But her mother has now come home to take care of Popo and what ensues creates in An-Mei an appreciation of her mother that is far removed from the idealized images she had kept alive in her fantasy. As the child An-Mei watches her stranger/mother administer to her dying grandmother, she comes to know of a daughter's love:

⁴⁴ Ibid., 183-184.

I saw my mother on the other side of the room. Quiet and sad. She was cooking a soup, pouring herbs and medicines into the steaming pot. And then I saw her pull up her sleeve and pull out a sharp knife. She put this knife on the softest part of her arm. I tried to close my eyes but could not.

And then my mother cut a piece of meat from her arm. Tears poured from her face and blood spilled to the floor.

My mother took her flesh and put it in the soup. She cooked magic in the ancient tradition to try to cure her mother this one last time.

...Even though I was young, I could see the pain of the flesh and the worth of the pain.

This is how a daughter honors her mother. It is *shou* so deep it is in your bones. The pain of the flesh is nothing. The pain you must forget. Because sometimes that is the only way to forget what is in your bones. You must peel off you skin, and that of your mother, and her mother before her. Until there is nothing. No scar, no skin, no flesh.⁴⁵

In a later story, Ying-Ying St. Clair, another mother, details from the mother's position the gap that separates mother and daughter:

For all these years I kept my mouth closed so selfish desires would not fall out. And because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me. She sits by her fancy swimming pool and hears only her Sony Walkman, her cordless phone, her big, important husband asking her why they have charcoal and no lighter fluid.

All these years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me. She sees a list of things to buy, her checkbook out of balance, her ashtray sitting crooked on a straight table.

And I want to tell her this: We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others.⁴⁶

This piece so poignantly encapsulates the experience of so many mothers, afraid to speak, to give voice to their self, lest their "selfish desires fall out." The daughter, now unable to see or hear the mother who has kept herself so tightly wrapped in, sees

⁴⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 67.

and hears only the sad detritus of an assimilated suburban marriage. And Ying-Ying goes on to tell of how she lost herself, thus giving depth and history to the mother's hiding and absence and giving voice to her own desire to be found, found by her own daughter as well as by herself, echoing here Waverly's moment of understanding of her own mother's desire to be "invited in" by the daughter.

This sense of mothers and daughters finding each other is treated in Tan's book in a deeply anti-romantic vein, implicitly challenging traditional (Western, patriarchal) notions of the autonomous self who struggles for her independence. The story of Lindo Jong, Waverly's mother, exemplifies this beautifully. Waverly wants to go to China for her second honeymoon, and her mother has been questioning her ability to fit in. Lindo muses on the incommensurability of "American circumstances and Chinese character" and wishes for her daughter the knowledge that "...Chinese thinking is best.":

No, this kind of thinking didn't stick to her. She was too busy chewing gum, blowing bubbles bigger than her cheeks. Only that kind of thinking stuck.

"Finish your coffee," I told her yesterday. "Don't throw your blessings away."

"Don't be so old-fashioned, Ma," she told me, finishing her coffee down the sink. "I'm my own person."

And I think, How can she be her own person? When did I give her up?⁴⁷

This next scene, where Waverly has taken her mother to "Mr. Rory" to get her hair done before the wedding, points out again the *mother's* sadness at the implications of the daughter's vehement assimilation: her denial of the mother's reality and presence.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 254.

When Waverly treats her like a "dumb foreigner" in the hairdresser's - translating for her, speaking for her - Lindo is deeply saddened:

I smile. I use my American face. That's the face Americans think is Chinese, the one they cannot understand. But inside I am becoming ashamed. I am ashamed she is ashamed. Because she is my daughter and I am proud of her, and I am her mother but she is not proud of me.⁴⁸

What a reversal this scene is! Typically, we hear the beleaguered daughters bemoaning the fact that they will never be able to please their disapproving mothers, never be able to make them proud. And here, instead, we have a mother, expressing the simple desire to be known and admired by her daughter.

In all of these stories, and in so many more, the difference emerges both from cultural choices of the novelists and from their personal/political location as well. One of the issues that is seeming to arise has to do with the question of address and narrative in various mother/daughter discourses. For example, in the fiction, what are the implications of a narrative that tells of the mother's life through the eyes of the daughter? (eg. Steedman, Duffy, Chernin, Morgan) First, are they more prevalent than the other way around? And, second, if the mother is narrating, are the same issues and themes apparent (eg, blame, judgement on value of life, etc.) In other words, I think it is important to distinguish who, exactly, is telling the story of a mother and daughter. Is it the mother, daughter, or from another, male, point of view? And how does this shape the narrative itself? Are there ever narratives that don't speak from either the mother's or the daughter's position? This raises the important question of whether feminism has allowed for the voices of both mothers and daughters to

⁴⁸ Ibid., 255.

emerge. It has clearly allowed for the daughters (mostly negative and complaining) voice to emerge, yet it is not clear if the voices of mother's are still being submerged under various ideologies of motherhood.

In film, too, this is important. In *Mildred Pierce*, Mildred narrates the story to the detective, but who's point of view is really shown? In *Now, Voyager*, the doctor clearly is the one who pronounces the sentence on the relationship. Surely, Davis's mother's point of view is hardly acknowledged. In a contemporary film such as *Terms of Endearment* with its alternating and paralleled scenes, are we first getting to see, in some sense, both sides of the story?

In any case, the differences between these two discursive movements should by now be apparent. The work of these third world women writers should point to the possibilities of feminist representations that construct a dialectic of mothers and daughters within the context of a social and political world in which both of their lives have been circumscribed to a certain degree. It is this rootedness in a world, in a history, that allows for these more complex and empowering representations to emerge, a rootedness that is perhaps an imperative for third world writers in a way that it is not for white writers. But this does not imply that similar choices could not be made with equal vigor by white feminists.

CHAPTER EIGHT
WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY?
FATAL RETRACTIONS IN THE BACKLASH EIGHTIES

As I begin this chapter, it is July 4, 1989. Only yesterday, the Supreme Court handed down what has surely got to be the most regressive decision regarding women's lives that we have witnessed for decades. While *Roe vs. Wade*, the historic 1973 decision legalizing abortion, has not been completely struck down, it has been dealt a blow from which it may never recover. Indeed, predictions are that, in this next term of court, *Roe* will actually be overturned. When I constructed the title for this chapter,¹ I never realized how chillingly apt it would turn out to be. And, falling as this

¹ Tellingly, the title *Whose Life is it Anyway?* means different things to different people. For the writer Adrienne Popper of *Parent's* magazine, the question is addressed from daughter to mother: "The division between mothers and daughters here, as always, is one of control, a question of 'whose life is it anyway?' Undoubtedly, daughters can derive enormous benefits from mothers who allow them to live their own lives with maximal maternal support and minimal interference." (Adrienne Popper, "Mothers and Daughters, *Parent's*, April 1982, 57) This question of 'whose life is it anyway?' needs rather to be addressed by all women (daughters *and* mothers) to the institutions and persons of male power and patriarchal authority. The difference is not simply one of enunciation (who speaks what question to whom) but is instead a radically political difference: the difference between turning inward to locate oppression or turning outward to challenge it.

decision does on the day before America's great annual hurrah of freedom and equality, it renders this July 4 more than a little ironic.

But the irony doesn't end there. The eighties have indeed been a strange decade. For, on the one hand, we are undoubtedly in the midst of a tremendous backlash against the women's movement and civil and human rights of all shades. This latest decision is the final chapter in a decade-long right-wing agenda that has whittled away at the already dwindling welfare state and sent the message to many Americans that if you aren't a middle class white male, you don't matter. Homelessness, rampant ghetto drug use, the destruction of the environment, the deunionization of industry, the feminization of poverty - these are all the watchwords of a society increasingly defined by its harsh assertion of the rights of so few over the rights of so many.

Yet, yet... For those of us involved in feminist academic life, things have never been so good. Women's studies courses are burgeoning all over the country, journals popping up on feminist cultural studies, reproductive and genetic engineering, radical social theory. There are jobs to be had in the colleges and universities - one can even teach feminist studies and popular culture, get a post-doctorate in feminist theory, attend numerous meetings and conferences where one's work feels validated and respected. As we have seen from the previous two chapters, feminist cultural practice has exploded, with women's writing taking its place within the established lists of bestsellers and Pulitzer Prize winners.

Perhaps it is this very disjuncture that best describes what contemporary social critics have chosen to call the "postmodern condition." Perhaps it is this very lack of continuity, this very absence of a sense of some wholeness and coherency to a "epoch"

or even a decade that describes so palpably what it means to live in the ruins of modernism, in this strangely confusing fin-de-siecle. If *Father Knows Best* made sense in the world of 50s domesticity and the politics of containment, then what does "Cagney and Lacey" mean in the age of clinic bombings and the erosion of the Civil Rights Act? Perhaps the defining feature of our era is that there is no defining feature. The orderly and dignified dialectic has been replaced by the cracked-out pastiche of a postmodernist miasma.

One's sense of the movement of history is thrown up for grabs when faced with this: my mother's generation grew up without the right to abortion, felt the special terror of sex that accompanies that reality, knew what it meant to make furtive phone calls, drive women to dark anonymous buildings, hope for the best. And my mother, and her generation, fought to change that bleak reality, to provide women with at least some control over their bodies, over their sex.

And I, and my generation, have grown up with this hard-won right, accepting it *as a right*, much as we knew we had a right to vote, even if we didn't exercise it all the time. We came to our sexual maturity without that particular and potent fear of sex. And now, like our mothers, we have witnessed a reversal in our lifetimes, but this time not a reversal towards freedom, but a sharp turn towards unfreedom. Are we destined, then, to repeat our mother's labor, to engage once more in a battle that we thought they had already won for us? And what of our daughters?

It is in this context that the term "post-feminism" emerges and illustrates this overwhelming sense of incongruity that typifies the decade we now live in. For, as feminist culture and theory have flourished and developed, it *has* undergone a number of significant intellectual shifts from the early 70s to the late 80s that could allow us

to speak of a generation of writers and thinkers that have moved *past* the basic tenets of feminist thought and integrated these with a highly sophisticated understanding of the intellectual currents of postmodernity.

Yet, yet...As the latest Court decision assures us, our *political* era is hardly *feminist*, much less "post-feminist." If one of the cornerstones of feminist practice and thought has been the pro-choice movement, and the concomitant knowledge that the heart of patriarchy is the control over women's bodies and women's reproduction, then we are most assuredly moving into a "pre-feminist" era. There are other indicators of this as well. A woman in Washington, for example, sits for two years in a jail cell for refusing to obey the (male) judge and reveal the whereabouts of her young daughter, a daughter she claims, with vast evidence, has been repeatedly abused by her ex-husband. For protecting her daughter, she is incarcerated. A parade is held in honor of her ex-husband, her daughter's father, a rapist. But another woman in New York is condemned by the public and feminist writers alike for *not* protecting her child, for "allowing" the abuse to escalate until death released both mother and daughter from their father/captor. People Magazine prints both stories, defending both women.

What, then, to say of mothers and daughters in the 80s? First, and most obviously, one can say that the representations of the mother/daughter relationship have not escaped this overwhelming sense of imploding contradictions. For, on the one hand, there has never been so much *stuff* out there on mothers and daughters. Although sitcom and series television, except for that glorious interlude in the mid-seventies, maintains a glassy silence on the subject, mothers and daughters have positively exploded as a media subject. Talk show superhosts Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey do regular specials on mothers and daughters, dragging out dirty linen,

amusing anecdotes, and glib truisms. Cable stations HBO and Lifetime produce their own movies on mothers and daughters, replay network movies-of-the-week, and air smarmy mother's day specials urging viewers to write in with their "mom of the week." Prime-time television annually airs the "Mother-Daughter Beauty Pageant,"² thus firmly ensconcing mothers and daughters in the popular rituals of our time. Mothers and daughters become a trusted topic for women's magazines off all stripes, and film treatments emerge again after the long hiatus of the 60s and 70s. As opposed to earlier periods of history, the problem here thus cannot be so simply characterized by absence and lack: the women's movement has irrevocably pushed this long-shadowed relationship into the cultural and ideological spotlight.

While this new "presence" is heartening, it needs to be examined carefully. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, the specifically feminist discussion of this relationship has been deeply problematic, often relying on traditional patriarchal ways of understanding and knowing. Looking now at more mainstream images of mothers and daughters, one is struck by the contiguous nature of the mainstream images and the feminist images. They are not "worlds apart," but are indeed often quite identical in the fundamental framework they apply to this particular relationship. This, I think, points to the real and substantial effect the women's movement and feminist thought has had on our culture, an effect, or series of effects, that are by no means unambiguously "positive."

² While watching the 1989 "Mother/Daughter International Contest" I participated in the game they play with the audience: matching up the mothers with the daughters. Needless to say, I was right on all three match-ups, and then went on to pick all eight of the semi-finalists, thus unambiguously confirming my acumen as a social researcher.

We began to see this in the women's magazines of the 70s, and certainly in tv sitcoms like *Maude*, and films like *An Unmarried Woman*. This intersection, often involving cooptation, vulgarization, etc., between feminism and mainstream culture is apparent in every one of the media analyzed here.

Because of this enormous overlap, and the difficulty in defining what is specifically "feminist," troublesome research questions plagued this section. Do I include here (or in Chapter 6 and 7) women writers whose work is popular, assuredly mainstream, yet who are clearly and explicitly addressing questions and issues raised originally by feminists? This dilemma has provoked much thought for me, and has raised many worrisome questions regarding the delineation of feminism itself. I have chosen, though, to include here work by writers such as Colette Dowling, Evelyn Basso, Ann Grizzle, Paula Caplan and Ms. Magazine articles with the rest of the women's magazines, because I believe these popular texts to be directed towards the "general public" and not towards any specified feminist readership. Therefore, the decision here is largely based on the imputed readership, a readership that marks these texts out as significantly different than those discussed in the previous two chapters.

Indeed, content is less the issue than is availability and style, for I will be arguing, and I think it will be quite apparent, that many of these popular texts written by women (perhaps we should call this "popular feminism?") end up at the same psychological resting place as do the more sophisticated and "academic" works of explicitly feminist writers like Chernin, Chodorow, etc. The exception in this is the work of Paula Caplan, a valiant yet ultimately failed attempt to counteract the mother-blame so prevalent in our culture.

This resting place, though, is not a completely unified one, although it is dominated by the object-relations school of psychology made newly respectable by Nancy Chodorow and popularized by any number of writers. Above, I claimed that the defining feature of our postmodern era is the lack of any single defining feature. To a great extent, I think this is true. But the representations of mothers and daughters in the 80s *do* present some striking themes that differ sharply from both their early feminist 70s predecessors as well as from the more class-based discourses of the 30s and the psychological and domestic discourses of the 40s and 50s.

In one sense, the historical movement *has* definitely been towards the increasing definition of this relationship in solely psychological terms. Yet the women's movement of the seventies provoked a break away from this overwhelming restrictiveness, and representations and discourses emerged that had as their referent not the eternal psychological "truths" but rather the newfound specificity of patriarchy and the various configurations of women's oppression and women's struggle. While mothers and daughters can never, I believe, be completely relegated again to the psychological closet, this backlash decade has brought a return, or rather a new set of (familiar) discourses, to constructing and imagining the relationship of mothers and daughters as a fundamentally psychological one.

A 1983 article in *Cosmopolitan* states in its title what I take to be the new discursive structure of the mother-daughter relationship: "Mothers & Daughters: The Eternal Love-Hate Relationship," where the author claims that "Women spend their most valiant moments breaking away from their mothers in order to survive."³ While

³ Madeline Pober, "Mothers and Daughters - The Eternal Love-Hate Relationship," *Cosmopolitan*, July 1983, 199.

the idea of mothers and daughters in a contentious relationship is not new, the discourse of the 80s that structures it in terms of an *inevitability*, helps to produce a relationship *constructed in conflict*, where the mother and her daughter are depicted as eternal combatants in a bloody and unavoidable battle. The issues in this battle are significant: independence, autonomy, individuation, separation. As Pober again notes:

Women *do* sever the maternal connection, and the process can be violent - for rebellion, if it is to result in true autonomy, often entails watching the mother you love suffer pain and confusion because you choose to live a life alien to her.⁴

Again, while we have seen these themes in earlier periods, they have never been so strong or so all-encompassing as in the present decade. These phrases, and the psychological theories they imply, *are* what the mother/daughter relationship is seen to be all about. Except for the rare feminist exceptions, discussed in the last 2 chapters, this thematics of antinomies (love/hate, bond/separate, enmeshment/autonomy) runs through almost all the cultural material on mothers and daughters in the 1980s.

Just a glance at the titles of several articles from the magazines illustrates this thematics: "You and Your Problem Mother," "Mothers and Daughters Who Can't Get Along," "Your Mother, Your First Love - Can You Ever Get Over Her?," "Are You Still Trying to Please Your Mother?," "Should You Divorce Your Mother?," "Daughters and Mothers: Making Peace, Making Friends," "Are You A Better Mother Than Your Mother?" Popular books are no exception, with titles such as *Mothers and Daughters: Loving and Letting Go*; *Mother Love, Mother Hate: Breaking Dependent Love Patterns in Family Relationships*; *Mothermania: A Psychological Study of Mother/Daughter Conflict*; and Colette Dowling's newest book, *Perfect Women*, whose

⁴ Ibid., 245.

first chapter is entitled "Mothers and Daughters: A Shared Disorder." The list goes on. If the books and articles don't explicitly explore the inevitable conflict paradigm, they instead offer homilies of togetherness, themselves based on overcoming the inevitable conflict and becoming "friends."⁵

Even articles which set out as critical of the inevitable conflict paradigm end up repeating many of its terms. For example, an article by Grace Baruch, Rosalind Barnett and Caryl Rivers attempts to provide alternative data to counter the new wave of mother bashing that Nancy Friday made acceptable (especially to women) in *My Mother/My Self*. The authors acknowledge that,

The American mother has not had an easy time of it over the last few generations. In the 1940s she was roundly charged with "Momism" - of being overprotective and too indulgent towards her children,... Then, when she looked to her own life, bending over backward not to "smother," new experts appeared to tell her she might be causing "alienation" by too *little* mothering.⁶

And Nancy Friday herself is taken to task for seeing mothers "...as being locked in mortal combat with her daughters."⁷ They report, on the contrary, "...that the majority of relationships between adult women and their mothers are characterized by warmth,

⁵ The theme of mothers and daughters as "friends" is a prominent one. Almost all happy and healthy mother/daughter relationships are described in terms of friendship (eg. "she's not just my mother, she's my friend"). As Jean Marzollo writes in the May 1983 edition of *Mademoiselle*, adult mother/daughter relationships can be urged along by these two helpful hints: "Whenever it might be helpful, try to forget that the two of you are related [and] don't say anything to your mother that you wouldn't say to a friend." (Jean Marzollo, "Are You Still Trying to Please Your Mother?" *Mademoiselle*, May 1983, 224.

⁶ Grace Baruch, Rosalind Barnett and Caryl Rivers, "How Women and their Mothers Become Friends," *McCall's*, April 1980, 32.

⁷ Ibid.

companionship and compassion."⁸ But what they give with one hand, they take away with the other. For this alternative data is placed within a developmental framework that allows for the positive data while at the same time allowing for the opposing position vis-a-vis separation, struggle and the quest for autonomy. Lest anyone worry that this data indicates "...that all the mother-daughter *angst* we have been hearing about is nonexistent," or that it is all "a tempest in a teapot," the authors are quick to stress that they are speaking primarily of adult mothers and daughters, where the inevitable struggle battle has already been waged. By using a simplified Chodorowian framework, they are then able to argue that, on the contrary, "...it is not surprising that many younger women seem locked in ego-conflict with their mothers," because they are not yet able to see them as less than "giants." In claiming that the adult relationship is different, they thus rely on the inherent conflict/generational model:

But by age 35...most women have completed this process. The inherent conflict in many mother-daughter relationships need not signify a permanent, ongoing battle; it may simply be a part of that difficult process of growing up.⁹

While the framework has been modified to portray the battle in time-limited and developmental terms, the fact remains that the battle metaphor, and the idea of inherency itself, remains unaltered.

This idea of inherent struggle is almost always connected with its developmental result: separation. The "loving and letting go" motif emerges in 80s popular culture with a vengeance, cropping up in practically my entire sample. Evelyn Bassoff's 1988 *Mothers and Daughters: Loving and Letting Go* states this explicitly in her first

⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁹ Ibid., 32.

sentence: "Although most love relationships are a coming together, the love relationship between a mother and her adolescent daughter requires that each take leave of the other."¹⁰ As much as possible, this "loving and letting go" theme is naturalized, so as to appear as the eternal psychological truth about the relationship:

Maternity has two seemingly opposite aspects: A mother's tasks are to create a unity with her child and then...to dissolve it. Yet, as psychoanalyst Helen Deutsch wrote, most mothers suffer as the cut the psychic umbilical cord that ties them to their children; the wish to preserve this tie is inherent in motherliness and its renunciation is one of the major challenges of motherhood.¹¹

Not only must mothers separate from their adolescent daughters, but they must cut the "ties that bind" from their own mothers:

In order to realize the full possibilities of her individual life...the middle-aged mother must not only separate from her adolescent daughter, she must also complete her separation from her aging mother. It is, after all, only as mothers and daughters *grow* apart, that each becomes a full woman.¹²

This final line, I believe, says it all: a woman's selfhood is here defined as her ability to "grow apart" from another woman. Not only does this define feminine selfhood negatively, but the only positive affirmation of selfhood indeed comes through the identification with men. Bassoff again reiterates explicitly what is implicit in so much

¹⁰ Evelyn Bassoff, *Mothers and daughters: Loving and Letting Go* (New York: NAL Books, 1988), xi.

¹¹ Ibid., 2. Importantly, here we get a hint of a very powerful theme in both feminist and nonfeminist writing of recent years: the "natural" move of the mothers towards "symbiotic unity" with their daughters. In order to maintain the separation battle motif, mother must be understood as inherently reluctant to "let go": she naturally yearns to keep you her "little girl," or, as Madeline Pober puts it "Mothers strive for fusion, while their offspring seek disengagement." (Pober, "Mothers and daughters - The Eternal Love-Hate Relationship).

¹² Ibid., 215.

of the ideological framework of separation: that the end result of separation from mother is not only "autonomy" or "maturity" but, more exactly, identification with men:

As the little girl grows into young womanhood, her awakening sexuality threatens the exclusive mother/daughter bond....As a young girl passes into womanhood, she leaves the open sunlit world of childhood and moves into the mysterious dark world of love and passion. She leaves her mother behind to meet her lovers.¹³

This was, after all, Nancy Friday's bottom line: that ties to mother retard/distort/inhibit the full realization of patriarchal femininity.

Writing in *Woman's Day* in 1981, Janet Chase¹⁴ spells this out clearly and adds to the traditional separation motif an added dimension of mother's lost opportunities that is clearly ideological run-off from the feminist critique of domesticity:

One of the hardest things a mother must do...is to allow her daughter to grow up,...And that brings up an important issue: The woman who has ignored other-than-mother dimensions of her self-image may well have a much tougher time letting her daughter separate and grow up.¹⁵

The double-bind here is extraordinary: mother cannot "let go" properly if she is too domestic (only a mother) yet that very ideology of woman as wife/mother was precisely the one she was reared on. The difference here between the Wyliesque version of "momism" and this 80s version is that, here, mothers culpability lies not in

¹³ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴ Chase's language here is interesting in its similarity to that of the doctor in *Now, Voyager* condemning the mother for ruining Charlotte. Development as botany seems to transcend historical differences: "The only way you can continue to have a relationship with your daughter that is perennially flowering is to let her go, to help her separate her image from yours, and to see yourself as a separate being. Then a real friendship can blossom.... (Janet Chase, "What mothers and daughters can give each other," *Woman's Day* 14 July 1981, 55).

¹⁵ Ibid., 54.

their attempt to be too "masculine" (eg. not in their position as workers) but rather the opposite: mothers now are made into "moms" because of their very *lack* of a more engaged and social life. But, in either scenario, maternal culpability and neurosis is unquestioned.

This theme of the mother/daughter relationship as a "love/hate" one is typified in a recent work by family therapist Ann Grizzle. Like many other texts and articles, much is said in the title itself: *Mother Love, Mother Hate: Breaking Dependent Love Patterns in Family Relationships*. The move here, as in so much of the literature, is from a more inclusive discussion of "family relationships, (which could include fathers, for example) to a specific and definite location: mother. Grizzle's book, relying on her own experience as a family therapist and using clinical anecdotes, describes "loved and loving people" who have "real and even crippling problems" due to a family pattern "...in which necessary, caring love isn't balanced by the encouragement of independence."¹⁶ In other words, she is speaking here of "overprotectiveness." Grizzle then goes on to describe the basic ingredients of the Dependent Love Pattern which includes a mother who is overinvolved and a father who is underinvolved.¹⁷ While Grizzle, like so many of her colleagues, is quick to point out that no one person is to blame for this unhealthy family pattern, all her examples are of "overinvolved" mothers and their correspondingly infantilized daughters or sons. Even the test she gives to ascertain if the reader is an overdependent child only contains explicit references to

¹⁶ Ann Grizzle, with William Proctor, *Mother Love, Mother Hate: Breaking Dependent Love Patterns in Family Relationships* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1988), 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

actions relating to the mother, such as "You secretly worry about what Mom would do if she didn't have you to fuss over," or "Your mother-in-law, or your mother, is more in charge of your life than you are."¹⁸ The so-called underinvolved father only signifies a mild "lack," while the overinvolved mother is the creator of the dysfunction itself:

What I've written in the following pages has been intended for those who have experienced love in their families, but whose personal growth has been stunted by overconcern and overprotection.¹⁹

The cure, as usual, is more father and less mother:

The greatest challenge for adult children who have grown up in loving but over-caring homes is to break free of the Dependent Love Pattern...To achieve this goal, you first must learn to "leave" home. Most likely, you're too closely tied to your mother; you lack a deep relationship with your father.²⁰

Along with this "love-hate" relationship theme, is the everpresent ideology of separation and the need for the daughter to claim herself as an "independent person." This is often placed in the context of a scenario that depicts mother as clinging on to daughter-as-little-girl, and daughter as struggling to be free of the weight of maternal overinvolvement. Almost all "friction" between mothers and daughters is explained using this one narrative strategy. Dr. Rubin, writing in *Ladies Home Journal*, responds to a daughter who complains that she and her mother have been fighting a lot lately and her mother has not been as supportive as she used to be. Working only from that small bit of information about the two women, the doctor makes this pronouncement:

It's no coincidence that suddenly there's friction between you and your mother. The reasons are complex. For one, your mother is obviously

¹⁸ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

²⁰ Ibid., 219.

having trouble seeing you as a separate person. Like many mothers, she's made you into an idealized version of herself - and then feels compelled to compete with you.²¹

He then goes on to invoke the daughter's need to "cut the umbilical cord" that ties her to a mother who is, he claims, motivated by over-identification as well as envy of the daughter's success. A 1986 article in *McCall's* called "How to get over your mother," visualized this idea perfectly. The picture introducing the article is of a "dress for success" young woman with a rope around her waist, trying to cut the rope with a pair of scissors. At the other end of the rope is an older woman dressed like a "housewife" who is holding on to the rope.

Mother is not only demonized in this 80s version, but made pathetic as well: we are to pity these mothers whose own lives have been so paltry, so lacking, and who thus feel the need to drain us of our young vibrant life, suck from us not only the juices of our youth but the excitement of our careers:

Besides, when your mother undermines your confidence...your intelligence..., and your diet...you know it has more to do with her than you. Emotionally, you lurch into a fetal position, but intellectually you understand she's just competing, compensating and trying to maintain her control.²²

How far is this from the work discussed in chapter 6? From the explicitly feminist work of writers like Eichenbaum and Orbach, and Chernin,²³ The popular discourses are now borrowing from feminism to put a new spin on maternal culpability: Mothers are now seen to be "poignant" in their inability to "love and let go," their inability to

²¹ Theodore Rubin, "Psychiatrist's Notebook: Mothers and Daughters Who Can't Get Along," *Ladies Homes Journal*, February 1981, 54.

²² Cynthia Wolfson, "Getting Mad at Mom and Living Happily Ever After," *Glamour*, May 1986, 54.

follow the scripts written for them. Aimee Ball, writing in *Mademoiselle*, describes this poignancy and her language - the language of violence and death - is telling here:

There is a poignancy that comes from the recognition of how desperately our mothers still need us to be their children. We forge our emotional distance early on, killing them with small stab wounds, and then we make the job complete with physical distance - a distance they are constantly trying to close up.²³

The metaphors of separation as a violence, a wounding to mother is no accident. Indeed, it is a defining feature of contemporary images, from the lighthearted *Rhoda* episodes in which the daughters consistently employed battle metaphors to describe their negotiations with their interfering mother, to 80s magazines where this metaphor reveals its ugly underside. What Gardiner has said of feminist fiction is true here of its more popular variants: "In the Oedipus myth, the son murders his father in order to replace him. Contrastingly, in the new woman's myth, the daughter 'kills' her mother in order *not* to have to take her place."²⁴

If this separation is depicted as a violent and inevitable battle, then what are the consequences for a daughter who does not win this particular war? And here is where enmeshment emerges as the new pathology of female psychology. It is important to remember that in this narrative, separation and struggle are not problematic, and are rarely questioned, but are rather necessary parts of this teleological move towards mature adulthood:

"If there were such sameness," says Donald S. Williamson, Ph.D., director of the Houston Family Institute, "we would be looking at a very

²³ Aimee Ball, "The Secret Life of Mothers and Daughters," *Mademoiselle*, January 1985, 139.

²⁴ Judith Kegan Gardiner, "A Wake for Mother: The Maternal deathbed in Women's Fiction," *Feminist Studies* 4 (June 1978): 146.

immature daughter, a person in whom no developmental process had taken place. The more extensively a woman reflects her mother, the less likely it is that she possesses an authentic self."²⁵

So there it is, no minced words. The carrot on the end of the stick of separation is maturity and adulthood. What is this saying, too, about mothers? If to reflect mother is to be inauthentic, then mother herself is necessarily demeaned and inauthentic. If it is "immature" to be like someone, to resemble them, then mustn't we assume that that person is not worth being like, is not worth resembling?

More pointed attacks on the perils of resembling mother can be seen in many of the TV specials on mothers and daughters. One stands out dramatically, as it seems, on first viewing, to resonate with many of the ideas of the feminist movement. In other words, this program, called *Supermom's Daughter*, borrows from feminism very selectively and, in doing so, presents an ideological orientation that is infinitely more subtle in its sexism than, say, *Father Knows Best*. In this HBO special, star tv news reporter Mom is horrified to learn that her teenage daughter has swerved off the academic fast-track, and is instead intent on achieving an early marriage, producing lots of children, and working in early childhood education.

Thus, every feminist mother's worst nightmare comes true: her daughter wants nothing of the life she has struggled to make available to her. Mother's horror here is treated with gentle humor and, in one particular scene, her guilt ("I haven't been a good mother...I didn't bake cookies for you...") is playfully negated by the daughter's insistence that her choice has nothing to do with her mothers life-style. Yet, as in

²⁵ Barbara Creaturo, "Making Friends with Mom," *Woman's Day*, 21 May 1985, 24.

Night, Mother, we find that a bit hard to believe, as all our cultural signposts point ineluctably to mother's responsibility.

Even more significant, though, is that a tv show like this locates itself firmly within the ideological framework of the 1980s, which present an image of beset womanhood, of striving career women suddenly faced with the deep truth of their bottomless need for hearth and home, hubby and the kids. In this age of *Fatal Attractions* and *Baby Booms*, feminist struggles and gains are reduced to the issue of personal choices, choices that we are now informed have created a no-win situation: we can't have it all.

The messages of many 80s films, tv shows, and other forms of popular culture is precisely this: to further dichotomize mother and woman, this time adding on a sort of post-feminist gloss to it by identifying "woman" not only as sexual, but as climbing-to-the-top "Superwoman." The "you can't have it all" issue emerges specifically as a response to real and substantive feminist changes in the workplace and in social and personal life. Thus, the Supermom of the tv show confides to her housewife friend (and idol of her daughter) that she often envies her domestic life, and the friend appropriately follows suit, thus reinforcing the work/family dichotomy that has come to be defined as the crucial "post-feminist" issue.

Another 1980 HBO Special, *Mother and Daughter: the loving war* reiterates this framework even more forcefully by making the mother a single parent who is clearly coded as "overinvolved" and has very little life outside taking care of her daughter. This working-class mother scrimps and saves so the daughter can go to college and do more with her life than she was able to do with hers, and, true to form, this 80s daughter rejects the values of her mother to opt for the glories of wifedom:

Mother: "When Reenie grows up she's going to have a profession if I have to grind myself into dust in that dime store."

Daughter: "I don't want a profession! I want to get married and have babies like Aunt Marie."

Mother: "You'll do what I say...A woman has to have a profession!"

But of course, the point here is, a woman doesn't. Feminism, as a positive and constructive theory and political practice, is here circumscribed around the issue of choice (eg. feminism means having a choice to be a worker or a housewife) and then denigrated by a discourse that declares that too much choice has ruined American women and deprived them of the joys of family and motherhood.

In both tv specials, importantly, mother's work/career is not denigrated or depicted Mildred-style as having a deleterious effect on the psyche of her daughter. Indeed, the ideological discourse has shifted to new ground, implicitly challenging the meaning and substance of feminist gains by portraying these "daughters of feminism" as finding fulfillment as barefoot and pregnant teenagers.

If *Psycho* is the classic psycho-thriller against which all subsequent films must be measured, then *Terms of Endearment* is most assuredly the contemporary "classic" mother/daughter film whose very title brings instantaneous recognition. It was, needless to say, an immensely popular film, winning Academy Awards for its star, Shirley MacLaine, its co-star, Jack Nicholson, and its director, James Brooks.

In *Terms of Endearment*, we have Shirley MacLaine and Debra Winger playing a mother and daughter locked in a repetitive cycle of mutual need and denial, resolved only by the daughter's tragic death and relinquishment of *her* children to her newly maternal Mom, already "saved" by the lecherous but loving spaceman, Jack Nicholson.

Terms of Endearment has been heralded as a "breakthrough" film about mothers and daughters, and about women in general. In large part, this reading is based on the fact that an older woman, a mother, is here shown to be sexually active while still retaining her maternal orientation. And, indeed, we cannot overlook the importance of that fact. Yet, I think *Terms* reinforces the "love/hate" or "loving and letting go" themes that we have seen have dominated the women's magazines and much of the more explicitly feminist work as well. Importantly, *Terms of Endearment* presents itself as a work responsive to the women's movement; in other words, a film that moves decisively away from the demonized and desexualized mothers that typified films of an earlier era. *Terms* presented itself as a timeless tale of the enduring and loving bond between mother and daughter.

Yet, while there is a certain rapprochement at the end when the daughter dies, the daughter does, after all, die, and the mother is left to redo her mothering: she now takes her daughter's children, marries the astronaut, and returns to mothering. By film's end, she is brought back into the nuclear family, as Ellen Seiter has noted:

In *Terms of Endearment* Aurora Greenway, Emma's mother, presents a problematic figure because she is unmarried. Throughout the film, Aurora creates disruptions. The film's narrative can be seen as the process of recuperating Aurora into a 'normal' relationship with a man within a family. The story redeems Aurora as a mother at precisely the same time that it redeems her as a woman, by finally replacing her within the family as the one who cares for children.²⁶

In *Terms of Endearment*, Aurora is a bad mother *because* she is not in a relationship with a man - it is after her affair with the astronaut that she stops nagging her daughter, stops calling all the time, etc. -her affair "cures" her of her

²⁶ Ellen Seiter, "Feminism and Ideology: The *Terms* of Women's Stereotypes," *Feminist Review* 22 (February 1986): 70.

overmothering, her selfishness, her hysterical behavior. She becomes a sympathetic character only after she relinquishes control with the man.

In that sense, the classic narrative strategy of recuperating the wayward women is reproduced. In addition, though, this film introduces the "love-hate" theme that we saw has been so popular in recent years. Throughout the film, as it moves through the life cycles²⁷ of these two women, we get the sense of this endless and almost timeless push-me-pull-you pendulum.

In a darker vein, the evil mother theme re-emerges with a vengeance that much surpasses Charlotte Vail's almost quaintly Victorian misguided mother. No film typifies the image of the demonized mother more than *Mommie, Dearest* (1981). Indeed, the wire hanger scene has come to signify to daughters everywhere the violence behind the facade of maternal nurturance. This film also points to what Nietzsche might have called eternal recurrence, or Freud might have called the return of the repressed. For, in *Mommie, Dearest*, Faye Dunaway portrays Joan Crawford as the evil mother incarnate, Joan herself having played a less virulent version of this in one of the most famous (fictional) mother-daughter narratives of all time, *Mildred Pierce*. The star and the story, the person and the myth here merge to collapse both representational and historical distinctions. Indeed, there are even scenes when

²⁷ The notion of life cycle is important here. Much of the popular representations of the mother/daughter relationship in the 80s construct the narrative in terms of life cycle theory, itself gaining increasing popularity in the late 70s and 80s within the social sciences. The demarcations of a women's life are set in stone here as moving from childhood intimacy ("bonding") through adolescence ("separating") and then to marriage and children, which supposedly brings a new form of bonding based on the daughter's new "role" as mother. Often these narratives include the "role-reversal" scenario where daughter now "mothers" an old and infirm mother. But more about that later.

Dunaway-as-Crawford rehearses lines from *Mildred Pierce* with her victim/daughter. All this within the cinematic context of a film taken from a "tell all" account written by none other than Crawford's own daughter, Cheryl.²⁸

Very early on, the etiology of Joan's neurotic behavior is spelled out: *her* mother was bad; she had too many husbands, they were poor, she never had a father so now she thinks she can "do it all": "I never had a father... I can be a father and a mother." So Joan's evil is here, in true psychoanalytic fashion, referred back to her own slovenly mother and the lack of a father figure. Again, I would venture a guess that this constant referring back (the "mommy did it to me" school of thought) is particular, or at least much more pronounced, in the present period. Although certainly it was the case with *Now, Voyager*, it was not as persistent and as seemingly inevitable as it appears to be in contemporary narratives.

Indeed, even Joan's obsessive cleaning is portrayed as a response to the uncleanliness of her mother. And the desire to have a child is again seen as shaped

²⁸ This trope (tell-all biographies of evil star mothers written by angry daughters) seemed to become very popular in the 80s. Crawford's daughter wrote the most famous one, but Bette Davis's daughter B.D. Hyman also wrote one (*My Mother's Keeper*) as did Cheryl Crane, daughter of Lana Turner. The irony that all three of these real-life mothers played in famous mother/daughter films sorely tests any theory of the media that sees images as soundly set off from what we call "real life." Davis did, though, in her own biography (*This 'N That*) reply with typical Davis sarcasm and wit to her daughter's attacks. She ends her biography with a letter to her daughter, just as her daughter had ended her account with a letter to her mother. Davis claims a confusion was made between real life and the screen ("Many of the scenes in your book I have played on the screen. It could be that you have confused the "me" on the screen with the "me" who is your mother.") and ends her letter with a caustic "p.s": "I hope someday I will understand the title *My Mother's Keeper*. If it refers to money, if my memory serves me right, I've been your keeper all these many years. I am continuing to do so, as my name has made your book about me a success." (Bette Davis with Michael Herskowitz, *This 'N That* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1987, 197-198.)

by her own miserable childhood and the desire to "do it differently." As Joan says, "I'm going to give you all the things I never had." Here we get a hint of the "Mildred Pierce" theme in that Joan's motivations for adopting a daughter are made immediately suspect: she wants to "give her everything" which we all know is no good to do to a child. She is punished for *wanting and desiring* too much, a la *Mildred Pierce*.

She is also punished for what can only be described as her narcissism. The daughter is made to be an object for the cameras at all times. This presents an interesting aspect of the male gaze question: Joan is placed as the person who offers up her girl-child as a spectacle for the publicity men, and the blame for this seems to be placed firmly on the mother's head, who is, after all, herself a "victim" of the male gaze as well.

'*Night Mother*, made in 1986, deserves brief mention here, although the poor quality of the film doesn't do justice to what was a significant and thoughtful stage play about mothers and daughters. For some reason unbeknownst to any spectator, Ann Bancroft chose to play the mother as a stupid and slightly hysterical Southern white trashy woman. And Sissy Spacek's anemic portrayal of a daughter who decides to take her own life never gets at the anger and venom that was directed at the mother in the play version.

In many senses, '*Night Mother* is a filmic version of the "too much mother/not enough father" trope that is underneath current discourses on mothers and daughters, feminist and nonfeminist alike. The specter of the dead Father really haunts this film. *His* picture is moved around the house, *his* gun is the one she uses, they fight about the mother's relationship to the father when daughter questions her about it, etc. That

discussion is the catalyst for their battle throughout the film. In some ways, this film is about a "daddy's girl" whose one link to any depth and vitality was through her father. Indeed, the mother accuses her of caring for her father more than her, and daughter says, "You were just jealous because I'd rather talk to him than wash the dishes with you." Mother: "I was jealous because you'd rather talk to him than anything."

This is a important scene because it typifies the mother's dilemma: here *she* is the one faced with her daughter's suicide threats, faced with daily life with her daughter (symbolized by the "washing dishes") and the father represents the escape from that life, from "reality" in a sense. *Of course* the mother's jealous, who wouldn't be?

The climatic scene, though, is the guilt scene, where the mother is pleading for her daughter to stop this, and says the classic lines:

Mother: "It has to be something I did... 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."

Daughter: "It doesn't have anything to do with you."

Mother: "Everything you do has to do with me Jessie. You can't do anything,...wash your face or cut your finger..."

Again, the double-bind is so vividly expressed here: the whole film leads us to believe that it *is* the mother's fault, but the daughter says no, yet also says yes: she's doing it to escape the mother. But the mother, of course, doesn't know what to do, how to reverse the "damage" she has unwittingly wrought on her daughter.

Woody Allen's 1987 Bergmanesque film *September* presents a very 80s twist on the evil mother/victim daughter theme that is, I believe, very similar to both

Mommie, Dearest and earlier depictions such as *Mildred Pierce*. Allen has never been known to be a filmmaker sympathetic to the situations of women, quite to the contrary in fact. Indeed, women typically play the role in Allen's films of beautiful Gentile foils to his nebbishy neurotic Jewish prince narratives.

September is somewhat of an exception to this, as it moves out of the urban Manhattan world and into Allen's American equivalent of the Bergman petit-bourgeoisie suburb. This film is one of Allen's recent attempts (like 1978's *Interiors*, another film rich in mother/daughter material) at out-Bergmaning Ingmar Bergman. Filmed in yellow/orange sepia tones, the entire film takes place over a weekend in the rambling Vermont country home of Lane (Mia Farrow). Intersecting with Lane's post-breakdown angst are her good friend (Diane Weist) who has come to stay for a bit, a young tenant and would-be writer Peter with whom Lane has carried on an affair over the summer, an elderly neighbor who loves Lane, and - of course - Lane's visiting mother Diane, a former film star (Elaine Strich) and stepfather.

In this Swedish-style soap opera there is really no plot, just lots of egos on a collision course with one another. The central theme is the tension between mousy, insecure Lane and her vibrant, loud, egocentric mother, a former movie queen. The family secret, revealed in a climatic confrontation scene, is that when Lane was 14 she killed her mother's gangster lover (a la Lana Turner's daughter, Cheryl Crane). But the *real* secret, which we find out almost at the end of the film, is that Mom actually pulled the trigger, but Lane was forced to take the rap for her. So the mise-en-scene is something like this: Mom's driving daughter nuts, everyone's morose, Lane is trying to sell the house so she can move to New York and get on with her life (after a recent suicide attempt), and the writer with whom she is in love is himself in

love with Lane's friend Diane. The Mother says she wants to keep the house and Lane gets very upset (this is when "truth" is revealed), causing Mother to eventually give in, leaving Lane the house at the end of the film.

The film is difficult to type, because in many ways it represents a very modern perspective on mothers and daughters. This is mother-blame of a new strain, mother-blame that is concerned not with simple neglect, or with elementary overinvolvement, but with a sort of malicious narcissism born of a too independent mother and a overshadowed daughter. If this seems familiar, it might be because the ideologies of mother-blame have taken on a new edge in the age of the "working woman" and the "latchkey child". Here, mother is too sexual, too lively, too engaged with her own life: her daughter's plea here is "hey Mom, what about me? How dare you get on with your life? getting on with your life has cost me mine"

There are numerous scenes throughout the film which establish Lane's exasperation with her mother and strongly hint at maternal responsibility for Lane's inability to move on with her life. In fact, Lane is quite explicit in blaming her mother (and her mother's active life) for her own stagnation; as Lane says to Peter, re. the shooting: "Yeah, she went on with her life, I got stuck with the nightmares." And this is the heart of the double-bind message here: Mother is condemned for leaving the past behind, for not remaining forever guilty and miserable about the family tragedy, for living a happy life. She is a bad mother *because* she goes on, and because her refusal of paralyzing guilt means the daughter cannot go on. Yet if she were to remain forever guilty, forever in penance, she would inevitably oppress the daughter with that guilt, she would pass it on to her as a legacy of pain to carry with her throughout her life. She cannot win.

If the mother is too aggressive, too sexual (Lane is jealous that Peter is spending too much time with her mother), has her own life, is self-determined and independent, she has denied her daughter the proper maternal care she needs to flourish, she is a bad mother who is selfish and narcissistic. If she is self-sacrificing, solely domestic, selfless, the daughter wants to escape from her, to leave that boring and depressing domestic world of her mothers'. No daughter ever wanted to grow up to actually *be* June Cleaver or the anonymous mother in "Father Knows Best." Those domestic icons of the fifties are just that, icons, and almost never an image modern women actually strive to emulate. In this film, mother has dared to be "not just a mother" and daughter will inevitably suffer from this.

Importantly, in this contemporary film where a mother *is* actually allowed to be sexual and alive, she is shown to be predatory, competitive with her daughter's lover, and, by extension, a neglectful parent. And the daughter, in this case, is consequently *desexualized*, *desensualized*, made out to be pathetic and a failure with men.

Right from the beginning, we know that Lane is not at all pleased with her mother's presence in the country home. Lane enters the house a few minutes into the film, leans against the door, and says (with exasperation): "God, I can't believe my mother. She's out there, she's made friends with Peter and she's trying to get him to write her biography. Her stupid life, as told to." So the sexual competition is set up right away: mother is taking her man away. Here again is the double-bind: if Mother *is* allowed to be sexual, she is predatory, competitive with daughter. And the daughter, in this case, is consequently *desexualized*, *desensualized*, made out to be pathetic and a failure with men. Indeed, in a later scene with Lane and Peter, about 5 minutes into film, Peter is complaining about his frustration with his work, and Lane blames it on

him spending too much time with her mother: "Well, if you wouldn't let my mother seduce you..." Mother is thus both more sexual than daughter, and more interesting, and this "problem" is of course referenced through the desired man: he finds mother more interesting than daughter.²⁹

This is immediately followed by the devastating line from Lane re: the shooting ("Yeah, she went on with her life. I got stuck with the nightmares") thus directly linking the Mother's seductiveness and vibrancy with the daughter's depression and suicide attempt. And this is the heart of it here: Mother is punished/condemned for leaving the past behind, for not remaining forever guilty and miserable about the family tragedy, for living a happy life. She is a bad mother *because* she goes on, and because daughter cannot.

There is another wonderful scene about 3 minutes into the film, when the mother enters from outside with her hubby and Peter, the writer. The mother comes in like a hurricane, breezes in, epitomizing the difference between her and her daughter, who has previously entered the house with slumped shoulders and an air of sad resignation. Mother says she invited some people over for drinks, daughter says she doesn't want people, her and Peter were planning to go to the new Kurosawa film. Mother says "why didn't you tell me?" Daughter says she did, Peter intervenes to say they can go another night, daughter says okay quietly, but tonight is the last night. Mother ignores the last line, and recognizes only the ok. Daughter's reality, her wishes, are thus completely blotted out by the mother.

²⁹ Of course, so does this viewer!

But really the pivotal scene in the film occurs just about ten minutes into the film. It is shot in the Mother's bedroom, where she is getting ready for the little party with her husband. She says to her husband, "Lane's changed towards me. She used to get such a kick out of me..." At that point, the daughter enters the room when mother and hubby are kissing; she hides behind the door during the entire scene, barely edges her way out. Mother takes up most of the screen, and is often shot from below to make her appear even more formidable, while the daughter seems small, afraid, childlike compared to her mother. They get into a tiff about daughter getting on with her life. Mother is clearly saying, move on already, get on with it, "If your life hasn't worked out, stop blaming me for it. It's up to you to take the bull by the horns..." Lane doesn't want Peter to write her mother's biography, and wants her and her father kept out of it. Then mother has a very poignant moment where she's looking in the mirror, feeling sad about her own oldness, and then moves this to the daughter by saying that's why she needs to make something of herself, "while she's still got the chance." She then switches abruptly from this to a brisk concern about her clothes for the evening.

Again, this scene reinforces the idea of mother as self-involved, domineering, unconcerned with daughter's problems, yet at the same time intrusive and judgmental (re. her comments on Lane's last man). She is sensitive only when it concerns her, then she is off to breezy trivialities again. But this scene *could* be read a different way:³⁰ as mother as powerful, refusing to take responsibility for the daughter's life, but

³⁰ Strangely enough, upon first viewing I read it completely "against the grain," contrary to the "preferred reading" offered up by the text. In that particular scene, I perceived Lane as insipid, whining, complaining: blaming her mother for whatever

taking full responsibility for her own, as concerned about the daughter and as supportive (re: how much Peter likes her, talks about her) as energetic and full of life; as wanting her daughter to live fully, as she had, wanting to pass on her own youth to her.

The only moment that the mother is rendered sympathetically is qualified by her obvious drunkenness, rendering her apparent love for her daughter more than a little pathetic. She is sitting rather drunk over a Ouija board and talking to her dead husband, father of Lane. "Your daughter hates me. Our daughter hates me and I love her. She's my one child and I want her to be happy."..."I want her to forgive me." This is a very poignant scene, and the mother comes off very well: she can't be seen as completely uncaring or unfeeling after this.

Yet , on the other hand, it could be seen as yet one more instance of her selfishness: she wants her to forgive *her*, so she can rest easier. But I think it is perhaps still a bit ambiguous; the mother can't be just written off as a "baddy" in this film.

This film perfectly points out some of the double-binds mothers and daughters are placed in. If a mother is too aggressive, too sexual, has her own life, is self-determined and independent, she has denied her daughter, she is a bad mother who is selfish and narcissistic. (Mother here is endlessly talking about how she looks, how

befell her. I completely identified with the mother's exasperation ("stop blaming me...get on with your life") and felt annoyed at Lane's continual attempts to squelch her mother's exuberance. Clearly, I read it this way at least in part by having done this research on mothers and daughters, for everyone I questioned (informally) about this film, while not exactly thrilled with Lane's excessive whininess, nevertheless saw it as resulting from this narcissistic and overblown mother.

others look). If she is self-sacrificing, solely domestic, selfless, the daughter wants to escape from her, to leave that boring and depressing domestic world of her mother's. If she does much for her daughter, is engaged and involved, she is intrusive, she is controlling, she is "overinvolved." Many women blame their mothers for being boring, not engaged enough with the outside world, not "worldly" enough; yet if they are those things, they are neglectful and selfish mothers, capable of producing "Maternal Deprivation."

To a great extent, the messages of these films are directed to the daughters, and not the mothers. We have moved from a film like *Stella Dallas*, where at least we were able to see the world from both the mothers and the daughters perspective - both "point-of-views" were expressed - to a film like *September* or *Mommie Dearest* or a book like *My Mother/My Self*, in which only the daughter's (or the male culture's) point of view is expressed.

Whenever we see a period of growth in women's rights, agitation by women for equality, for expanded definitions of their own lives, we must also see a concomitant backlash against women, warnings and threats. To a great extent, those threats and warnings are raised in the familial context: eg a working mother will make a bad parent. But, applied specifically to mothers and daughters, this message becomes even more pointed. (*Fatal attraction*, *The Good Mother*, *Nuts*).

Similarly, we have moved from a golden age of television in the 70s when shows like "Rhoda" and "Maude" and "Phyliss" and "Mary Tyler Moore" explored sensitively and with great warmth the complex relations between mother and daughter - particularly in the context of changing role expectations - to a culture in which any serious depiction of this relationship is almost absent from the television screen. Is our

model of mother/daughter relating to be Fallon and Alexis on *Dynasty* - forever competing for men, forever vying for the attention of dear old Blake? It is no accident that it is Alexis' sons who work for her, not her daughter. In films and television of the late eighties, mothers and daughters gain seem to be disappearing and fathers and sons appear to be, once again, claiming center stage. No film so typifies this "re-Oedipalization" as *Indiana Jones: The Final Crusade*. In Spielberg's narrative of father/son reconciliation, women - mothers, daughter, sisters, lovers - are once again constructed as mere handmaidens to this faded myth trying to, yet again, assert its universality. Ron Howard's recent film, *Parenthood* modernizes this retro tale by making the son a doting father to his own children, eager now in these changing times to do it differently than old pop did. The father may be a newer and updated version of the benign patriarch, but he has nonetheless returned with a vengeance. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss....

CONCLUSION

TOWARDS A FEMINIST CONCEPTION OF DAUGHTERING

It will be necessary for us somehow to mourn an all-powerful maternal presence (the last refuge) and to establish with our mothers a relationship of reciprocity woman to woman, where they could also eventually feel themselves to be our daughters. In sum, to liberate ourselves with our mothers. That is an indispensable condition for our emancipation from the authority of our fathers. The mother/daughter, daughter/mother relation constitutes an extremely explosive core in our societies. To think it, to change it, leads to shaking up the patriarchal order.¹

In so many of these representations, then, mothers and daughters are inevitably lost to each other, either through sacrifice (*Stella Dallas*, *Mildred Pierce*), conflict and death (*Now, Voyager*, *'Night Mother*) or narcissism and neglect (*September*, *Imitation of Life*, *Mommie, Dearest*). In four out of the seven films there is a clear and present victor, the daughter, and in the rest we are left with a promise of future struggle and

¹ Luce Irigaray, "Le corps a corps avec la mere," (Montreal: Les editions de la pleine lune, 1981), 86; quoted in Eleanor H. Kuykendall, "Toward an Ethic of Nurturance: Luce Irigaray on Mothering and Power," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Treblicot (Totowa, NJ.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 265.

conflict. If resolution is reached, mother and daughter are torn asunder. If no narrative conclusion exists, such as in the film "September," mother and daughter seem locked in a repetitive cycle of confrontation and angst.

In more recent years, the "maternal sacrifice" genre - which at least put a "good face" on motherhood - has given way to a more visceral depiction of a clearly evil mother (*Frances*, *Mommie*, *Dearest*) and a victimized daughter; or, more generally, of a mother/daughter relationship that is structured in terms of conflict.

The double-bind in representations reflects an experienced double-bind, or contradiction, inherent in the mother/daughter relationship within patriarchal culture. And this is precisely why the themes in popular culture are both so consistent and so seemingly in contradiction. Daughters are represented as needing to separate from the mother in order to enter the world of adulthood and, more specifically, the world of male-identification. They are asked to repudiate the maternal in order to discover their own femininity.

Yet, paradoxically, we live in a culture in which the very definition of femininity is intimately connected with motherhood. For as long as we can remember, motherhood has been seen both as the natural destiny of all women as well as the act which most symbolizes their achievement of maturity and adulthood. Yet motherhood is simultaneously denigrated and devalued (witness the appalling lack of maternal leave policies and adequate child-care programs). In addition, western culture has so incorporated the dichotomization of "mother" and "woman" that the identification with the mother will always imply for the daughter a denial of her own sexuality.

Tellingly, in the films where we do see a line of continuity between mother and daughter, like *I Remember Mama* or *Little Women* or even the wonderful film of last

year, *A World Apart*,² both women are generally desexualized. The possibility of mother/daughter continuity that denies *neither* their autonomy, sexuality or adulthood - that sees them in a relationship where neither one is "all-powerful" or "all-victimized" - is an option rarely explored in popular culture.

Interestingly, television has provided a few glimpses into what this could be, with such groundbreaking shows as *Maude* and *Rhoda* which depicted adult mothers and daughters where both (in the case of *Maude*) were clearly sexual as well as being adult and independent. Not coincidentally, though, these shows were working within the sitcom format, itself a type of entertainment one was not supposed to treat very seriously. And again, it is surely no accident that these sitcoms were produced at the height of the contemporary women's movement - the mid-70s - and that we see no quality counterpart in the Moral Majority 1980s.

What is important to recognize in all of this, is that the ideas we have with us today about mothers and daughters (for example, that conflict between mothers and daughters is inevitable and in fact essential to the full development of the daughter into an adult; that too much closeness between mother and daughter is unhealthy beyond a certain age, and signals "immaturity" in the daughter and "clinging" or "possessiveness" or "overprotectiveness" or "living through" on the part of the mother; that separation from the mother, both literally and developmentally, is the hallmark of

² *A World Apart* is the story of a white South African anti-apartheid activist who is jailed and eventually murdered for her activities. It is a "true" story written by the daughter, and seen through her young girl's eyes. It is a film almost wholly set apart from the blame motifs, and I think its explicit social and political embeddedness is part of constructing this different narrative. It's not that we don't feel the daughter's real grief at the loss of an involved "mother" - we do very strongly. But we just as strongly respect and admire the mother's important political choices, and see the daughter respect them as well.

mature individuation) were not always with us or, at the very least, were constructed in significantly different ways within the somewhat unifying signifier of patriarchal culture. In other words, ideas about "good" mother/daughter relationships have changed throughout history, and it is important not only to recognize those changes, but to see how these different ideas and representations relate to larger changes and developments in the social fabric.

We need to separate out the changes in mother/daughter relationships that resulted from real, historical shifts and those that arose out of new discursive formations. Clearly, representations of mother/daughter hostility has its origins both in new contradictions arising out of industrialism, capitalism, consumerism and suburbanization, shifts in family structure etc. But these shifts have a discursive and ideological aspect to them. In other words, while the emphasis on separation had much to do with the development of capitalism and ethos of individualism, it also has to do with specific psychological discourses that are themselves ideologically loaded.

So how, then, to move beyond these limiting frames and towards a renegotiation, a reconstruction, of both these representations and the experiences they both express and provoke? Most importantly, I think, we need to tear down these naturalized psychological narratives, expose them *as* narratives, and construct in their stead not a new truth but rather a multiplicity of possibilities centered around the feminist commitment to woman-identification.

This will mean for the daughter, of course, giving up the grand old antinomial tales in which she plays beleaguered dupe to the nefarious maternal machinations. It will mean the development and elaboration of conceptions of *daughtering* that are

deconstructive of the dominant discourses that provide no context for that practice as well as the active construction of feminist modes.

We would do well, I think, to take Mary Helen Washington's words to heart:

...the educated daughters need to open the "sealed letter" their mothers "could not plainly read," to have their mother's signatures made clear in their work, to preserve their language, their memories, their myths....Before these signatures can be read clearly, we will have to free the mother from the domination of the daughter, representing her more honestly as a separate, individuated being whose daughters cannot even begin to imagine the mysteries of her life.³

But at what point does the mother stop being a daughter? At what point does she switch from the resentful to the resented, from the guilt-inspiring to the guilt-experiencing? These questions symbolize the intractable dilemmas mothers of daughters find themselves in: to be a mother, she must deny and suppress the daughter in herself, or, at the very least, split herself in two: a sexual, active daughter still struggling to separate from her denying, asexual mother, or that very same character to her own daughter. To be a mother in our culture is to be desexualized, an object of either veneration or scorn, but an object nonetheless. To take on this role, to adopt its version of reality, is to deny one's own experience of daughterhood: to become the Other within yourself.

Part of the problem is this assumed split between the identity of "mother" and "daughter". But this split is not a simple parallel: "mother" is promoted and produced as a unitary and total identity: it contains a vast and complex place in our cultural mythology. But "daughter" is more of a generational location; almost valueless and without active qualities of volition and control. This disparity in the cultural

³ Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives* (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, 1987), 352.

resonances of the two terms is significant. Immediately the terms are split between active and passive; between the doer and the done-to. Yet the contradiction here is so apparent: by ascribing to mother a unitary and total identity, her powerfulness immediately becomes obviously illusory. Unfortunately, many feminists have also bought into this split, identifying as the "daughter" overturning the oppressive mother:

The feminist movement has spoken in the voice of angry rebel daughters. Even when mothers join the movement it is often as wronged daughter in them who speaks. Each of us is familiar as daughters with maternal practice, but most of us in becoming feminists have rejected the self-sacrificing, altruistic, infinitely forgiving, martyred unconditionally loving mother - for this is how I saw my mother - have rejected the mother *in ourselves* as the part of ourselves which is complicitous in our own oppression.⁴

But if our relationships have been constructed, then they can be deconstructed. Mothers and daughters can, and indeed do, resist the discourses that confine them to either bloody battles or merging bliss. But both mother and daughter know that the movement beyond these tidy narratives involves great risk, for in toppling Oedipus we do not intend to put a maternal Electra in his place. And the fathers will resist our deconstructions, because our battles have made for good fun and have kept him fat and shiny in his ring-side seat.

Scary it may be, but to refuse to do battle, to refuse *all* the old stories and, what is more, to refuse the temptation of a new grand signifier, is to free us up to construct each other anew, this time in our own images. And in daughtering our

⁴ Ynestra King, talk at Columbia Seminar on Women and Society, Spring 1983, quoted in Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 38-39.

mothers, and in constructing ourselves dialogically, perhaps we will find the space to be women:

If a girl never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never know how to be a woman...You don't need your own natural mother to be a daughter. All you need is to feel a certain...careful way about people older than you are....A daughter is a woman that cares about where she came from and takes care of them that took care of her.⁵

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 281.

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