

January 2019

Maternal Instinct: Exploring The Dynamic Between Mother And Non-Mother Characters In Contemporary Plays

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**MATERNAL INSTINCT: EXPLORING THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN MOTHER AND NON-MOTHER
CHARACTERS IN CONTEMPORARY PLAYS**

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2019

MAJOR: THEATRE

Approved By:

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project, like many things in my life, would not have been possible without many people. I would first like to thank my cohort of PhD fatales, Drs. Jennifer Goff, Katherine Skoretz, and Bilha Birman Rivlin. You have been my sanity and support-system throughout this process, and I believe I could not have completed this project without your friendship and support.

Dr. Mary Anderson, as my chair, has supported me and emboldened me to be independent in my scholarship, as well as in my career. Dr. Ashley Mack has been a welcome addition to my committee, providing unique insights and guidance in this work. Drs. James Thomas and David Magidson have provided me mentorship, tough life lessons, and challenges, all of which have made me a better scholar. Indeed, all the remarkable faculty of Wayne State University's Maggie Allesee Department of Theatre and Dance have been amazing inspirations and supports over the last several years.

I owe a special thanks to my family, who always give me a place to land, especially when my flight has not been smooth. I would be remiss not to mention Sarah Mattie, who so expertly edited this work, as well as provided excellent comedic relief throughout that process. I would also like to thank every barista who has ever poured me a cup of coffee. Without them, this work would not have been completed.

But mostly, I would like to acknowledge the students and artists I have worked with while developing this project. Theatre is a team sport, and without the constant inspiration, collaboration, and sense of community from you all, I would not have had the stamina to see this crazy thing through.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation evaluates selected plays by playwrights Tina Howe, Sheila Callaghan, and Sarah Treem, using a variety of script analysis and close reading methods. These plays each present motherhood and childlessness on stage in ways that subvert the tropes and expectations of figures in those positions, and these works will be examined for how they present problems and opportunities to the directors and actors who tackle them.

The plays examined in this dissertation each deal with the question of motherhood and its value to the female experience. Characters in all three plays are forced to confront the possibility of parenthood, but the plays also focus on broader women's and human issues. *Birth and After Birth* is an absurdist take on the preparation and execution of a child's birthday party in two respective acts. Its central characters are two women on either side of the motherhood decision. As they confront their own choices, as well as inflict those choices onto each other, a complicated sketch of what it truly means to mother is enacted for the audience's consideration. *Crumble (Lay Me Down, Justin Timberlake)* presents a mother and daughter at the anniversary of their husband/father's unexpected death. In the wake of tragedy, the family unit is crumbling, and each character must address her own patterns and confront the voices that have dictated those behaviors, some literal and some metaphysical. *The How and the Why* puts the question of maternity center stage, as two biologists with conflicting research debate the veracity of their hypotheses, while the fate of their own bond hangs in the balance. It is not until these women realize that there is room for both of their theories that they are able to mend their broken personal relationship, that of a mother and an abandoned daughter.

The similarity of subject within these plays provides a unique opportunity to compare the presentation and treatment of these character types, who represent the seemingly contradictory roles women take up in society. By looking to the ways in which characterization and plot engage the Woman question—what should women do?—I will invoke a series of analytical practices. These practices include formalist script analysis, action analysis, close reading, deconstruction and feminist analysis, in order to illuminate the ways in which these playwrights tackle such a question.

In these characterizations, we see what feminist scholar Kelly Oliver notes as “The guiding principle...of Simone de Beauvoir, that women cannot have it all; and having independence meant giving up motherhood” (761). This risk of sacrifice is presented in each of the plays selected for this study, and the shared construction of posing mother- and non-mother-characters against each other serves to deepen this debate.

These types of characters are no strangers to the contemporary stage. Twentieth century drama has brought a wide range of self-sacrificing mothers to the boards. These character types are long-suffering, put-upon women (for example, Rose in *Fences*, Mrs. Gibbs in *Our Town*, and Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman*) who tend to serve as the confidante to a protagonist. Alternatively, we often see the destructive, antagonistic, monster-mothers that cause the suffering of others (Violet in *August, Osage County*, Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, and Mama in *Night, Mother*) and are characters from which to escape. These characters, reductively presented on either side of this chasm of motherhood, have either sacrificed a part of themselves for the sake of mothering or have sacrificed mothering for the sake of their own priorities. Conversely, childless women also have a history of being almost exclusively presented on stage

as flawed, damaged, or incomplete women. The women in these plays receive similar treatment. Carolyn Morell outlines ‘three dubious discourses of childless women’ as ones of “*derogation*: (these women are morally flawed); *compensation* (not-mothers’ activities and attachments are simply efforts to make up for the absence of children); and *regret* (the only future for the childless)” (76).

When these dynamic characters grace our stages, how do they utilize and subvert the tropes of essentialized motherhood, and how can directors and actors approach these characters sensitively and astutely? Howe, Callaghan, and Treem inherited the legacy of these mother characters, and it is this inheritance that serves as the experimental content of their plays. As Irene Oh comments, “Motherhood...ought to be understood as performative. That is, motherhood as performative emphasizes mothers’ agency by focusing upon what mothers self-consciously do rather than what mothers biologically are. The concept of performativity thus offers a robust account of maternal identity” (4). Oh’s identification of performative motherhood provides an intriguing and useful frame for addressing depictions of mothers on stage. In keeping with this theory, an analysis of the characters’ actions will be conducted with formalist script analysis practices, as well as with a deconstructive approach that utilizes feminist theory and mother theory to illuminate the implications of these characters’ choices. Using Tina Howe’s *Birth and After Birth*, Sheila Callaghan’s *Crumble (Lay Me Down, Justin Timberlake)*, and Sarah Treem’s *The How and the Why*, this dissertation will examine three exceptional presentations of mother and non-mother characters to explicate how these characterizations intentionally manipulate the devices commonly associated with such characters, as well as how script analysis and feminist theory can help to unpack these dynamic portrayals.

Tina Howe, Sheila Callaghan, and Sarah Treem are by no means unknown playwrights, and yet they exist on the periphery of the zeitgeist. Howe is perhaps the most notable of the set, due only partially to the duration of her career in comparison to the others. She made a name for herself as an absurdist playwright in the manner of Eugène Ionesco, and her work is often anthologized¹. Howe's affinity for exploring the absurd in realistic settings makes her work ideal for this study, as her domestic landscapes provide a complex and rich world of symbolism from which to mine thematic content.

Tina Howe wrote her first play as a student at Sarah Lawrence College² and was exposed to Eugène Ionesco's works while studying in Paris³. She notes that, to her, Ionesco's writing seemed realistic⁴. This understanding of the absurd reality of life has framed her many critically acclaimed plays and is seen as an identifying characteristic of her work (Tallmer). Her own spirit, as well as her absurdist influence, is readily apparent in her writing, but her play *Birth and After Birth* is perhaps the work most indicative of her style and journey as a playwright. Written in 1973, the play was not professionally produced until 1995. The play received one more major revision for its New York debut in 2006, which will be the version predominantly utilized in this analysis. The complicated depictions of motherhood and non-motherhood, as well as the linguistic dexterity that Howe exhibits, make *Birth and After Birth* an important component of this study. In keeping with absurdist trends, the plot is a loose framework through which the

¹ *Plays from Contemporary American Theatre*, ed. by Brooks McNamara; *Women on the Verge*, ed. by Rosette Lamont; *The New Women's Theatre*, ed. by Honor Moore, to name a few...

² Tallmer, n.p.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ "The minute the curtain rose on *The Bald Soprano* I was struck with such rapture I thought I'd expire. What scholars label 'absurd' was totally familiar to me!" (Howe qtd. in Tallmer).

ideas of the play express themselves. The birthday party scene, while the catalyst for the events of the play, seems more like the arbitrary scenario established for the more significant ideological debates to occur. Of course, as in all things absurd, there is no arbitrary content⁵, but the celebration of the birthday in this case seems far less important to the meat of the play than the act of birth the play recounts. As James Thomas notes, “non-realistic plays are about *generalized* people, places, and events; hence their given circumstances are driven by theme” (65). The play’s central characters are Sandy, a stay-at-home mother who fears she is unable to have another child, and Mia, a successful anthropologist who is terrified of becoming a mother. Though Sandy is currently a mother, she has become barren, and that reality is causing her to literally crumble apart. With each scratch of the head, a few more grains of sand fall to the ground. Her teeth loosen and fall out. She calls herself a “ruin” and thinks she is losing her hair. She has internalized the stress of being barren, which is now manifesting itself through physical means. She is symbolically, physically and emotionally falling to pieces. Mia, on the other hand, embodies the acronym MIA, missing in action. Mia has recently been exposed to a birthing ritual, and through that experience, has had to confront her fears surrounding motherhood. She does not physically fall apart, but is instead experiencing extreme emotional strain, as she is not equipped to handle the pressure of resisting societal expectations. When Mia is led through the birthing ritual again, this time at the hands of her family, her fear of becoming a mother is so severe, and the pressure

⁵ Eugène Ionesco, Howe’s mentor, calls for an abstract conflict that is freed from the external distractions of plot, accidental characteristics, names, background, and apparent reasons, justifications and logic for dramatic conflict (Carlson, 412). In this way, he hoped theatre could concern itself with man’s “most deeply repressed desires, his most essential needs, his myths, his indisputable anguish, his most secret reality and his dreams” (Ionesco, 181).

to acquiesce is so great, that she has no means of escape except to faint. With these characters in mind, Tina Howe's play is an ideal candidate for this type of study.

Sheila Callaghan is an on-the-rise playwright, with particularly notable success in off-Broadway venues, whose works are both shocking and poetic. Her work, while less widely known than that of Howe, has been critically recognized through numerous awards, grants, and fellowships⁶. Callaghan, like Howe, uses seemingly realistic and familiar worlds to stage her criticism. Her style, unlike Howe, relies more on a "manipulation of the bounds of reality" (Goff 33) and falls closer to the realm of 'postmodernism'⁷ than absurdism⁸, relying on magical realism as a means of criticism. *Crumble (Lay Me Down, Justin Timberlake)* engages domestic issues that radiate beyond their boundaries to cast light on self-destructive patterns of behavior. With the help of levitating heartthrobs and otherworldly tableaux, *Crumble* sets a unique challenge to the analyst who must carefully dissemble the play's many layers of meaning to understand not only each one individually, but also the play as a whole.

The overture presents archetypal tableaux for each character: Mother is busy preparing food in the kitchen; the childless aunt, Barbara, is opening a can of tuna to feed her fifty seven cats; preteen Janice is listening to her Walkman; Father is falling through space and time; and the Apartment is the floor, moaning. This is the first clue that the audience may not be in for a night

⁶ Callaghan has received the Susan Smith Blackburn Award, a Cherry Lane Mentorship Fellowship, a Princess Grace Award for emerging artists, and several other awards and fellowships.

⁷"Postmodern staging is less radical, less systematic, than the historical avant-garde movements of the first third of the twentieth century. It frequently obeys several different and contradictory principles, is not afraid to combine disparate styles or present collages of heterogeneous acting styles" (Pavis 280).

⁸ "The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin 331).

of reconstructed Chekhov. The overture, a literal image for this play, establishes the characters, but also presents them in separate, insular, lonely relation to each other. Mother, who is named in the script, but functionally referred to only as 'Mother,' embraces the stereotypical role of dutiful mother. She is an accomplished chef and frequently whips up four-course meals when she makes something 'light'⁹. Mother attempts to be the 'perfect mother' in the wake of tragedy, but she knows that she is failing in helping her daughter process her grief. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English note in their survey *For Her Own Good*, "The mother herself has been turned into a child. Regressed to a psychological replay of her own infancy by the experience of motherhood, she is expected to turn an obedient and worshipful ear to the father figures who will coach her in her new role" (246). In keeping with this adherence to the authoritarian 'other,' Mother turns to her sister for advice. Barbara, while not a mother herself, is certain she can help and proceeds to treat Janice childishly and then appease Mother that the root of Janice's problems is 'boys'¹⁰. As the play progresses, the audience learns how wrong Barbara is, and Mother begins to learn this herself. Mother finally confronts Barbara for meddling and reclaims her family and her role as mother. Mother presents a complex and detailed depiction of the standard tropes of motherhood, while illuminating how those depictions are often hollow and confining.

Sarah Treem, while a prolific playwright early in her career, is best known for her television writing. Her theatrical writing typically starts, "with a question...that can't be

⁹ Mother describes at one point, "I'm making something light. Ah, starting with bruschetta and an olive tapenade, and then pork tenderloin glazed with a brown sugar and bourbon sauce topped with a honey Dijon, and a roma tomato salad with fresh basil and garlic on the side. And peach bread pudding for dessert. And I made some mint lemonade spritzers" (Callaghan 60).

¹⁰ BARBARA: Boys on the brain

MOTHER: Is that all?

BARBARA: It seems. But I set her straight. (Callaghan 71).

answered, a huge question, one that's keeping [Treem] up at night" (Kilcrease). In *The How and The Why*, Treem relies on conversation and debate as both plot device and thematic discovery. Treem's play introduces us to two characters, a biological mother and daughter pair, meeting for the first time in the former's office. In a nod to Greek tragedy, much of the action takes place offstage, being recounted for the audience through the dialogue between the two women. The play holds two major points of conflict that oscillate as the play unfolds: the emotional friction between a forsaken daughter and the offending mother, and the contention between an established expert in her field, evolutionary biology, and a presumptuous up-start. Throughout the majority of the play, the two characters are at odds with each other, as the daughter, Rachel, prematurely asserts her independence from Zelda, her biological mother, and Zelda points out the weaknesses in her argument. The rising action of the play follows the progression of this dynamic, as both personally and professionally Rachel attempts to dominate Zelda, and Zelda insists on her superiority. As their research theories conflict and threaten each other, with neither character/theory giving way, and fail to merge into a comprehensive theory, so too does the relationship between Zelda and Rachel seem uncertain and tense. It is not until the denouement that Zelda and Rachel see a way to combine their theories and in turn are able to come together personally. Though the play is poised as a parent/child coming-together, the tension between their research dictates the uncertainty in that outcome. Their work must align so that they can come together. In this way, these characters are more than their biological relationship. They are autonomous entities who still seek to rectify their familial relationship. The process of their coming together is neither assumed nor easy.

The work of these playwrights, representing a wide range of theatrical styles, provides the material environment from which my examination will emerge. The feminist content of each play selected for this study speaks to the diversity of form that a single concept can evoke. Though all three scripts grapple with the “mother question”—that indefatigable concern: ‘to be [a mother], or not to be [a mother]’— all three use vastly different forms to enter the debate. In this way, they are tremendously strong choices for such a study. Since the subject matter presented in each play bears many similarities, the variations in form found across each play illuminate the difficulties in ascribing a singular performance trope or stereotypical presentation. Together, these plays create a rigorous collection to challenge the analyst and theatrical practitioner. Yet, through analysis that is sensitive to feminist theories and a variety of script analysis techniques, a deeper understanding of the characters and themes can be found.

Theory

Feminist Theory

As feminist theory has developed, it has defied neat, clear-cut categorization and definition. Instead, theorists have tried to tie certain schools of thought together into a semblance of organization. The result is a series of categories and sub-categories that offer an incomplete but palatable entrance into the complicated web of subversive theory.

The philosophical beginnings of feminism are often debated. Some accredit Ancient Greek philosopher Sappho, medieval Germanic philosopher Hildegard de Bingen, or Mary Wollstonecraft with introducing the roots of feminist thought, but all agree that the formal beginnings occurred with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, which established the first wave of feminism and the first organized effort to achieve equal rights for women (Rampton). Since

the inception of the first wave, two more established waves have been identified, yet their objectives and methods have been complicated by a plurality of beliefs. Thus, not only have the waves been identified, but traced within and across them are separate avenues of thought, the most notable being liberal, radical, and material feminism.

Liberal feminism is perhaps the oldest school of thought, with such notable names as Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor (Mill), and Betty Friedan, as well as notable groups such as the National Organization of Women contributing to the philosophy. Liberal feminism dates back beyond the first wave and therefore is a useful starting point to establish the shifting goals of the various waves of the beliefs. Rosemarie Tong identifies the goals of liberal feminism in her work *Feminist Thought* as: equal education, equal liberty, suffrage, equal rights, and sameness versus difference. As Tong charts the varying efforts, contributions, and pitfalls of the liberal feminist agenda, we see that the enduring goal of liberal feminism is “creating a just and compassionate society in which freedom flourishes” (13), and continues, “the ability to single one’s self out of one’s relationships is important to one’s sense of self as being unique and worthy of other’s consideration” (47).

Radical feminism stemmed from liberal feminism during what is commonly referred to as the Second Wave of the 1960s and '70s, as the fundamental tenets of liberal political thought sought to find a place for women within the system, while more radical thinkers thought to break the system entirely. As Sue-Ellen Case notes, “Radical feminism is based on the belief that the patriarchy is the primary cause of the oppression of women” (63-64). Radical organizations such as the Redstockings, New York Radical Women, or Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH) sought to renounce and revolutionize social systems out of the belief that

“women’s oppression *as women* is more fundamental than other forms of human oppression” (Tong 51). Even within the radical feminist camp, there are subsets of radical-libertarian and radical-cultural feminisms, each with their own methods and goals of revolution. Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, both notable radical-liberal feminists, identified the sex/gender dynamics of the patriarchy as the force of women’s oppression, claiming, “the material basis for the sexual/political ideology of female submission and male domination was rooted in the reproductive roles of men and women” (Tong 56). Radical-cultural feminist Adrienne Rich agreed with the basis of this critique; however, she was not so harsh regarding the experience of chosen biological motherhood, identifying the distinction between motherhood as ‘an institution’ and a ‘potential relationship’ (13).

The final avenue of feminist thought I will address is materialist feminism, a combination of Marxist and socialist feminism. This brand of feminism seeks to move beyond sexism as the root of female oppression and to integrate class, sex, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation into the methods of women’s subordination. Case notes,

Rather than assuming that the experiences of women are induced by gender oppression from men or that liberation can be brought about by virtue of women’s unique gender strengths, that patriarchy is everywhere and always the same and that all women are ‘sisters’, the materialist position underscores the role of class and history in creating the oppression of women. (82)

Classical Marxist feminists operate within the theoretical works of Marx, Engels and Lenin, placing the blame of women’s oppression on class issues. Socialist feminists tend to reflect on post-Communist Russia as an example of the pitfalls of a purely classist analysis and have broadened the roots of oppression to both sex class and economic class. These modes of thought can best be understood by referring to Juliet Mitchell’s *Woman’s Estate*, where she suggests that

women's role in (material) production, reproduction, socialization of children, and sexuality all work as sources of oppression, stating,

The error of the old Marxist way was to see the other three elements as reducible to the economic; hence the call for the entry into production was accompanied by the purely abstract slogan of the abolition of the family. Economic demands are still primary, but must be accompanied by coherent policies for the other three elements (reproduction, sexuality and socialization), policies which at particular junctures may take over the primary role in immediate action (59).

Materialist feminists are concerned with labor issues, the pay gap, and the value of women's work in the global market.

Each aspect of feminism provides a distinct take on women's oppression. For this study I will engage all three, as attitudes on motherhood are voiced and debated in the plays in question. As echoes of these theories present themselves in the plays, their views and effects on motherhood and mothering will help expose the philosophical content at work within these scripts.

Women's Time

The transformative centerpiece for my approach to analyzing the three scripts in this dissertation is Julia Kristeva's concept of monumental time. In "Women's Time," Julia Kristeva poses her most directly feminist analysis by addressing the question of the relationship between feminism and femininity. As Toril Moi notes, "Kristeva's explicit aim is to emphasize the multiplicity of female expressions and preoccupations so as not to homogenize 'Woman,' while at the same time insisting on the necessary recognition of sexual difference" (187). Kristeva's distinction is brought about through an analysis of time. She recognizes two ways of interpreting time: *linear time* represents the actuality of history, whereas *monumental time* is the anthropologic understanding of history; that is, linear time is the sequence of events, while

monumental time is the meaning inherent in that sequence. This distinction is important for Kristeva's essay, as it not only looks at subsets of women as representative of the linear time, but also through the lens of monumental time. Monumental time, a term derived from Nietzsche, takes precedence in her analysis, as it "englobes these supra-national, socio-cultural ensembles within even larger entities" (Kristeva 189).

Monumental time, when compared to linear, allows for a deeper dive into a subset of a population (e.g. women). To explain her theory, Kristeva first focuses on the suffragists. The suffragists sought an equal place in linear time through representation in political process. Their struggle was rooted in the socio-political life of Western nations. When the western world was industrialized, the value of 'women's work' was lessened as preference was given to works that benefited society over the family.

In 1968, Kristeva notes a shift cohesive enough in goal to demarcate a new movement of feminism, commonly referred to as the 'second wave'. In this new wave, a distrust of the political dimension of the suffragists' issues developed. Not satisfied with the suffragists' goal of linear representation, members of this movement sought to rejoin the cyclical and monumental temporality associated with Women, in effect fundamentally distancing themselves from the suffragist movement. In essence, second wave feminism dealt with a symbolic question of sexual difference in relation to power, language, and meaning (Kristeva 196)¹¹.

¹¹ "Is it so hard to understand that emancipation, the right to full humanity, was important enough to generations of women...that some fought with their fists, and went to jail and even died for it? And for the right to human growth, some women denied their own sex, the desire to love and be loved by a man, and to bear children?" (Friedan 139).

This difference, in Freudian terms, refers to ‘the lack’ and ‘primal scene,’ or the castration fantasy. Kristeva notes that the reality of the primal scene is hypothetical, a psychological big bang that is necessary only as a theoretical origin for sexual difference (197). It is a representation of a sacrificial relationship of separation and articulation of differences between the sexes, which produces meaning (Kristeva 199). The second wave views this sacrifice as against their will and seeks to revolt against the dynamic as a source of resurrection of Woman. As a result, the second wave poses a ‘counter social order’ that offers a more egalitarian relationship between the sexes, one that redefines the monumental gendered differences inherent in the extant social order. In this manner, the second wave not only became a criticism of capitalism and the patriarchy, but Kristeva feels that it also became a new form of sexism: “the very logic of counter-power and of counter-society necessarily generates, by its very structure, its essence as a simulacrum of the combated society or of power” (203).

In this manner, Kristeva points to the heart of the second wave of feminism: a crisis of religion. Religion here does not refer to specific denominational differences, but to the desire for symbolic, not merely political, representation in civilization. Kristeva notes that “the elements of the current practice of feminism [second wave...] seem precisely to constitute such a representation which makes up for the frustrations imposed on women by the anterior code (Christianity or its lay humanist variant)” (208). Here, Kristeva points to the idea that “modernity is characterized as the first epoch in human history in which human beings attempt to live without religion” (208) and the implications of this are seen in the goals of second wave feminism. Kristeva identifies the goals of the second wave as an attempt to reclaim the monumental

temporality so as to allow an equal position in society for any woman, regardless of occupational, familial, or demographic status.

Kristeva's analysis has provided a useful and generative framework in her conception of 'monumental time' as a way of viewing the goals of any political or cultural movement or group. As Elaine Aston notes, "The binary concept of the semiotic and the symbolic has in Kristeva's work become a touchstone in feminist theoretical writings on women's theatre" (52). This concept has been adopted by many other feminist scholars as the second wave gave way to the postmodern third wave¹² of the mid-nineties. Coupled with a fluid understanding of gender, the third wave's destabilization of the 'universal woman' has forced contemporary scholars to reengage the role of monumental time in an effort to rectify the codes of the old order with the desire for liberty in the new. Louise Burchill engages the idea of the monumental temporality of womanhood through an expansive analysis of 'becoming woman' in her work "Becoming-Woman: A Metamorphosis In The Present Relegating Repetition Of Gendered Time To The Past." Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283). Taking from de Beauvoir the suggestion that a woman is "biologically destined for the 'repetition of Life' within a continuous and cyclical time while 'man's project' consists in 'not repeating himself in time but in reigning over the instant and forging the future'" (82), Burchill doubles down on Kristeva, charging women to not only be aware of the limitations of their linear alienation, but to break free of such limiting cyclical temporality so that they may reshape their monumental temporality.

¹² "In this phase many constructs were destabilized, including the notions of "universal womanhood," body, gender, sexuality and heteronormativity. An aspect of third wave feminism that mystified the mothers of the earlier feminist movement was the readoption by young feminists of the very lip-stick, high-heels, and cleavage proudly exposed by low cut necklines that the first two phases of the movement identified with male oppression" (Rampton n.p.).

Burchill sees stasis in the cyclical nature of ‘universal womanhood’ as the crux of the disparity between the sexes and locates the root of female subjectivity in such a temporal modality: “Both these modalities [cyclical and monumental] remain resolutely alien to the linear and prospective development our civilization has predominantly consecrated under the name of ‘time’” (84). This does not mean, however, that thinking in terms of monumental time should be abolished, but that the overwhelming association of cyclical time should be divorced from the concept of ‘woman.’ Burchill investigates the gendering inherent in these conceptions of time and challenges the essential femininity of cyclical time, noting that,

Not only is ‘the feminine’ as a schema quite simply impossible to identify with ‘women’ as a socio-historical type, but the fact per se that an association of ‘a feminine principle’ and a temporal modality outside of linear time has existed throughout the western tradition in no way acts to secure any sort of ‘ontological’ or ‘a-historical’ relationship between two terms supposedly endowed with a stable signification. (86)

Burchill finds that femininity as a functional schema can be dissected in a linear manner, similarly to de Beauvoir’s statement, and finds an inverse relationship that is also reflected in the work of Deleuze and Guattari: “It is not the girl who becomes a woman; it is becoming-woman that produces the universal girl” (277). In this manner, Burchill sets up the process of how becoming a woman became becoming-woman, the archetypal understanding of femininity. It is in the series of repetitive activities committed by females that are supported by a patriarchal society that the ‘universal woman’ image is created. Therefore, it is similarly in repetition that the ‘universal woman’ is destroyed. Repetition only creates meaning by taking its bearing from the past. However, if the same repetitions are divorced from past-world conceptions, they can be used to reframe the subject and free it from its congealed monumental meaning. Burchill suggests that becoming-woman should attempt a process of loosening oneself from the “over-

coding of subjective constraints” associated with gender norms in the hopes that women might “not only find themselves released from the linear time that governs the development of subjects in keeping with gender norms, but equally inflect their historical association with monumental and cyclical temporalities” (95).

Judith Butler, the groundbreaking philosopher and theorist, is best known for her work on gender theory and her book *Gender Trouble*. In this book, she asserts, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 43-44). Burchill was, no doubt, tapping into Butler’s theory as she engaged Kristeva, and Deleuze and Guattari. Butler further breaks down the issue of representation into its baser parts, stating, “the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended” (*Gender Trouble* 4). This idea is both reassuring, as ‘woman’ as subject must exist since we actively represent it, and problematic, as we are still not sure of what that subject consists. Butler further complicates the matter by remarking,

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (“Performative” 272)

Therefore, Butler seems to suggest that ‘woman’ as a subject is incomplete, that it requires an actor to carry out the part, and yet that those performances are not rooted in a truthful expression of woman-as-subject, but are instead a facsimile of what we believe the performance to be.

Constantly questioning what is being performed, and for what motivation, Butler's theories root themselves in the essence of subject and identity. Butler allows for a wide expression of identity, since any performance of gender, "is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" ("Performative" 270). In this way, Butler touches on Kristeva's view of cyclical time through the lens of representation. If 'woman' itself is reified through the daily acts of being, then it can be said that woman is cyclically performed, and the performance must return to itself each day, each moment. Kristeva, Burchill, and Butler all find the inherent meaning in repetitive acts to be both automatic and malleable. The ability to expand, break out, or reform the patterns of gendered behavior is the political access point to meaning-making and revolution. After all, as Butler points out,

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds. ("Performative" 282)

Kelly Oliver looks specifically at the implications of cyclical time on the new wave of feminism that developed in the mid-90s, or the 'third wave,' in her article "Motherhood, Sexuality, And Pregnant Embodiment: Twenty-Five Years Of Gestation." She questions the efficacy of the goals and methods of the second wave and looks at the evolution of the meaning of 'femininity' to chart a growth model of the feminist movements in a study of monumental 'femininity'. By focusing her query on one aspect of 'femininity'—the pregnant body and the position of maternity in the latter waves of feminism—Oliver looks concretely at the impact of

cyclical time as an indicator of monumental temporality. Oliver notes that second wave feminism seemed to assume limitations to independence and that liberty meant forfeiting motherhood (761). Through this assumption, Oliver questions Woman's relationship to reproduction and the relationship between reproduction and sexuality. Oliver notes that, "Many North American feminists objected that these French thinkers [Kristeva] perpetuated patriarchal stereotypes by identifying the essence of womanhood or femininity with maternity" (762). Oliver charts the evolution of these relationships throughout the second wave and into the third. She notes that Kristeva assumes a "species-desire" on the part of women to give birth, which, "makes pregnancy and motherhood the telos of all women's lives" (762). This idea is hotly contested by other second wave theorists¹³, however it seems to hold a key position in the principles of the third wave. Indeed, many third wave theorists¹⁴ attempt to reframe motherhood outside of the patriarchy and relieve its oppressive status. Focusing on the work of Iris Young, Oliver charts the attempts to resexualize the pregnant body throughout the third wave, an interesting monumental reclamation project. Attention to the pop culture images of the time serves as both a strong support for this new view of pregnancy and a return to the patriarchal ideals the second wave struggled against. Oliver champions the appearance of nude, pregnant bodies on magazine covers, while at the same time bemoaning the articles accompanying them, which assert a form of completion these celebrities only found through motherhood:

Although the terms of the debates over motherhood and feminism have changed, the culture that inspires them has not changed as dramatically as we might think. Sacrifices are made and women are still expected to bear primary responsibility for them. Although the myth of "having it all" is still alive and well—as evidenced by some of these Hollywood

¹³ Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer, to name a few.

¹⁴ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, Elizabeth Wurtzel to name a few more.

films in which career women get babies and families and apparently live happily ever after—real women continue to grapple with how to juggle career and family in the face of ever shrinking social services and support. (769)

It is on this struggle that Oliver focuses, along with how that struggle is problematized by depictions of motherhood in the media; in effect, she performed a study of how the third wave's attempts at revision of the monumental being are stymied by a stubborn patriarchy. Oliver notices the changing dynamics between society and reproduction, noting that the appearance of the pregnant body in public being championed as desirable allows the pregnant woman more autonomy as a desiring object as well as a desirable one (766). Though Oliver acknowledges these strides in the way society views women and reproduction, Oliver's message seems to be one of 'two steps forward, one step back.' Taking a look at the depictions of pregnancy in pop culture, Oliver notes the many depictions of the 'woman running out of time' scenario (770). Oliver feels that the connection between femininity and maternity is still strong: "Despite the dangers of essentializing the menstruating, child-bearing maternal body that Kristeva's theory evokes, her reminder that bodily time cannot be reduced to clock time may help to ... take us back to what Kristeva describes as the abjection of the female body, particularly insofar as it is (or is not, as the case may be) a maternal body" (773). Oliver finds that the new ideal monument of the third wave is a woman who can 'have it all' and that 'all' specifically includes children. While many third wave feminists may feel release in the existence of a choice between motherhood and not-a-mother-hood, Oliver questions if this is a continuation of the second wave's goals for a definitive difference between the sexes or a return to the patriarchal system of woman as Other. While feminist theorists spend their time turning over the myth of 'having it all,' Oliver urges caution and vigilance: "For, although the border between motherhood and sexuality is breaking

down, and this may signal advances for women, it may also reinforce stereotypes of women and pregnancy that are restrictive for women” (776), or that a linear change in the necessity of maternity actually reinforces the monumental understanding of woman-as-mother.

What Oliver sees in her analysis that Burchill does not is a sense of entrapment for women in terms of reproduction. Even Kristeva remarks that, “the refusal of maternity cannot be a mass policy and that the majority of women today see the possibility for fulfillment ... in bringing a child into the world” (206). Burchill suggests that maternity can be incorporated into the new ‘becoming-woman’ and can be used to help recode femininity in society, but Oliver points out the reification of patriarchal themes in pop culture stories of motherhood. Restoring Freud to the conversation, Oliver enumerates the stories of women trying to ‘have it all’ by adding a child to the equation as a contemporary example of ‘penis envy’ (766). The fictional depictions of successful women not *feeling* fulfilled until they can produce a child, and their comical anxiety about being unable to do so, reinforces the patriarchal position of women as child-bearing, cyclical beings disenfranchised in a linear world. As Burchill states, “Time here is a constant fragmentation of all linearity ... such that elements selected or repeated from the past, and those affirmed of the future, shift, kaleidoscope-like, into new configurations” (94-5). And yet Burchill does not see the great challenge inherent in such a statement. She poses the solution for liberating becoming-woman from the cyclical modality of motherhood by reframing the monumental role of reproduction in the female experience, and yet the fictionalizations of reproduction in Oliver’s article continue to the cyclical temporality of women from the linear past.

It appears then that the hindering factor in liberating becoming-women is the very linear system that Kristeva, Burchill, Butler, and Oliver seek to reform. As Burchill notes, civilization has been built upon a linear understanding of time (84). The reframing of monumental time has no practical effect on the social understanding of time. Since repetitions of behavior accumulate to form gender norms, Burchill calls for an assumption of gestures and affects that take their bearing not from the past, but allow for new coordinates of understanding in terms of gender (94); yet the linearity of time does not permit a gesture to divorce itself from its past meanings. In a way, becoming-woman, under Burchill's proposal, turns itself into performing-woman, and that performance has a long heritage. In looking at a behavioral gesture, like choosing to become a mother, it seems that this choice will always be deeply connected to the biological imperative of the sexes. The alternative is to produce a counter-society that purges itself of the oppressive other. Could it be that the only way to achieve value in the cyclical time of femininity is to become terrorists against the linear model? Perhaps not, but the idea of reclaiming not the past or even the present, but the future, has interesting possibilities. If women were to establish a position of power, able to effect change in the future, then these women could direct the future in a more egalitarian direction. Rather than broadening the gap between the genders, or embracing past gestures and ascribing new meaning to them, perhaps it would be most effective to create and promote a social system that does not hold sacred linear time, but that acknowledges and supports the cyclical temporality as a living, thriving modality. This is problematic, as monumental time is most easily understood through anthropological methods, but if those studies are conducted with an appreciation of the cyclical rather than the linear, then that social thought-process might be persuaded to adjust. In a way, this is a reclamation of the future through a

change in interpretation of the past, and it allows for a liberation of not only the becoming-woman schema but the very construction of gender differences. This conceit proposes the possibility of building gender not in contrast to each other, but in complement. If becoming-woman is viewed not in terms of unbecoming-man, but in terms of a choice between possibilities, then perhaps gender inequities will diminish, which is, in actuality, the goal of each wave of feminism.

Kristeva challenged the manner in which meaning is made—linear temporality—and posited an alternative method that does not negate, but rather refocuses, past methods of meaning-making to establish a more inclusive, or at least supplemental, model of meaning-making and interpretation—monumental temporality. Diana Taylor introduces a similar method in her work *The Archive and The Repertoire*, where she views historical elements from both the recorded history, or archive, but also the social impact of that event, or repertoire: “‘Archival’ memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, [...], all those items supposedly resistant to change” (19) whereas “the repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (20). In this manner, Taylor distills more information about a text through looking at not only the de facto artifacts, but also at the cultural impact(s) of that event. In this study, I will examine depictions of mother characters and childless characters through traditional script analysis methods, while positioning them in relation to the feminist theories and cultural stereotypes often applied to such characters in order to examine the possibilities of meaning-making in contemporary dramaturgies.

Deconstructionism

Deconstructionism emerged in the mid-twentieth century amidst the post-modern era and finds its roots in New Criticism, structuralism, and Jacques Derrida. Deconstructionism looks to the text critically and minutely, creating a “reading strategy that carefully follows both the meanings and the suspensions and displacements of meaning in a text” (Johnson 397). Deconstructionism is based on the premise that a text signifies in more than one way, and therefore any analytical process must look not only from the outside of a text, but also at how the text signifies and critiques concepts within itself. Theorist Mark Fortier remarks that deconstruction is, “a process whereby the obfuscated and unacknowledged metaphysical assumptions (of truth, presence, identity, essence and so forth) and complicities of any particular text are unraveled from within and in the text’s own terms” (38).

Deconstructionism is a useful tool in that it allows the text to work on many levels at once, whereas close reading and other methods of script analysis may not allow for such flexibility and multiplicity in meaning-making. Close reading tends to view a text in isolation, ignoring (at least partially) the greater social and historical motivations at work within its creation. Deconstruction allows a text to be viewed at once isolated from history and specifically positioned amidst history. Indeed, as Henry Sussman notes, “deconstruction tends to translate phenomena into signifiers or semiological signs and allegorical events” (147). A crude example would be *The Crucible*, which, in close reading would look at the effect of social pressure and fear at work within the Salem witch trials, while a deconstructed reading of *The Crucible* would also make note of the fear-mongering in House Un-American Activities Committee at work during the play’s composition. Deconstructionism provides an opportunity to look at a text, specifically a

postmodern text, against itself and against its own cultural temporality, which can be particularly useful in an analysis. Art is a response to the human condition and rarely exists in a vacuum of expression and meaning. Allowing for criticism that recognizes but does not rely on historical context can be a great asset to all forms of analysis.

In further support of this argument, I turn to Katie King and the theory of pastpresents. Pastpresents is based on the idea that, “Objects and theory co-constitute each other” (King, “Pastpresents”). King goes on to describe the theory as a ‘cat’s cradle game’ where, “the past and present continually converge, collapse and co-invent each other” (“Pastpresents”); this means that pastpresents are, “quite palpable evidences that the past and the present cannot be purified each from the other” (“Historiography” 459). King further sets her theory against the study of khipu, or Andean knotted-string records, artifacts from a culture that require decoding and speculation of meaning, stating, “Any ‘pasts,’ now necessarily rethought among and with contemporary transmedia, are inevitably always also located in our ‘presents’” (*Networked Reenactments* 289). The process of taking an artifact that has intended meaning, but relying only on one’s own skills and tools to decipher that meaning, resounds with any artist who approaches a script. Rarely are a text’s symbols and themes explained by the creating artist. Rather, the interpreting artist must embark on a journey to seek out the intended meaning and, in some cases, move past that intended meaning to find generative symbolism for her own purposes. Pastpresents deals specifically with “distributed agencies of knowledge” and the implications of “production-delivery-consumption” functions of art (King “Pastpresents”). In the theatrical sphere, this system is constantly present: what does this artifact mean, and how does it communicate that meaning? In the same way that Katie King uses ‘pastpresents’ as symbols for

intertwining discourses that are “place makers, emphases, or tool kits—knots if you will—in a constitutively interactive, collaborative process of trying to make sense of the natural worlds we inhabit and that inhabit us” (Haraway 66), so too can the dramatic text be seen as a congruence of theoretical influences and as its own independent artistic endeavor.

Methods

Script Analysis

To give a comprehensive understanding of the predominant form of formalist script analysis utilized at this moment in academic and theatrical practice, I will rely on James Thomas’ *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers*. Thomas’ method is rooted in the history of script analysis practice and is designed to “teach the serious theatre student the skills of script analysis using a formalist approach...[using] a standard system of classifications to study the written part of a play” (xi). Thomas focuses primarily on an analysis of the plot events of a play¹⁵, allowing those events to illuminate the meaning-making in the other aspects of inquiry his method engages. He engages these aspects through methods of action analysis and formalist analysis.

Action analysis serves as a framework for the formalist analysis to follow. Thomas notes that while formalist analysis is a long, thorough process, the analyst can become lost in the sea of details being collected. Action Analysis is a map of the play’s plot events, designed to keep the analyst on track without restricting creativity and interpretation (Thomas 2). The process of Action Analysis focuses on the chain of plot events to expose the basic structure of action in the

¹⁵ “The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy” (Aristotle 28).

play, and then uses that structure to determine the signposts of theme working throughout the script. Action analysis begins on the supposition that meaningful plot events are “breaks with the status quo” (Thomas 2) and that these events “bring about new ideals and feelings in the characters, force characters to see life in a new and different way, and consequently change the direction of their lives” (Thomas 3). It further uses an understanding of these major events to begin to interpret the thematic content of the play through the selection of the play’s seed. The ‘seed’ in action analysis is the metaphoric term for the play’s central thematic concept. It is the “essence of the author’s play” (Thomas 9) and the reason for which the play was written. It is at this juncture that an analyst understands the merits of a seemingly generic seed like ‘idealism’ as each plot event is reinterpreted in terms of the characters’ internal actions as reflections of the seed.

Once the chain of events, seed, and chain of internal events are identified and verified, the overall motion of the play is debated in the selection of its three major climaxes. By establishing which three external (plot) events are the greatest sources of dramatic tension, the play’s development of its theme is revealed. Thomas suggests that the three climaxes reveal the main goal of the protagonist, the hardships encountered in pursuit of that goal, and the protagonist’s resolution of the play’s reality, respectively (16). In this way, the theme of the play, or “the play’s response to the seed” (Thomas 22) is revealed. At this point, the super-objective, through-action, and counter through-action are all understood, and a basic interpretation of the script has been achieved. Thomas greatly emphasizes that action analysis is not a comprehensive analysis of the play, but a foundation upon which more detailed analysis can take place, without losing a sense of the play as a whole, noting, “the reduced, concentrated nature of action analysis

leads to an appreciation of how plays are written, how they work in terms of practical theatre, and how much special ability it takes to write even a modestly successful play” (38), but does not serve as a finished product of analysis. For that, one must employ a formalist analysis.

Formalist analysis “uses a traditional system of classifications to break up a play into its parts to understand their purpose and relationship” (Thomas xviii). These classifications include: given circumstances, background story, external and internal action, progressions and structure, character, idea, dialogue, tempo, rhythm, mood, and style. Thomas’ method employs an extensive cataloguing of elements within the play, followed by interpretive questions. The questions that follow help directors, designers and actors identify patterns that reflect purpose and relationship within the script, which can then be used to make production choices that are rooted not in arbitrary concept, but in a thorough understanding of the script and its inner-workings. If “formalism exists whenever form is totally separate from social function” (Pavis 154), then formalist analysis can be considered a reflection on the script, and only the script, disregarding any social consciousness that may have played a part in said script’s development. Thomas concurs, noting, “the plays themselves ought to be studied instead of the abstract theories or external circumstances under which they were written” (xix).

Additional Terms and Theories

In addition to the major methodological influence of formalist script analysis, this study will also be informed by two other key tactical influences. These tactical influences – Robert Scanlan’s Bead Diagram process as outlined by Shelley Orr and Elinor Fuch’s “Visit to a Small Planet” – are described below. These sources provide additional views and approaches Aristotelian-based script analysis, but they approach the study in uniquely theatrical ways.

The Bead Diagram

Robert Scanlan is credited with creating the bead diagram as a more flexible method of script analysis, which can be used holistically or episodically to interpret scripts. Shelley Orr writes that the bead diagram is a fluid method that “can focus on a discrete section of a script (one act or scene) and select small icons—the ‘beads’—that stand in for elements that recur, such as plot events, themes, blocking, bits of dialogue, or sound cues” (427). The bead diagram is a method that can be utilized as a purely analytical tool or as a rehearsal room technique. The method begins with the selection of the major elements the analyst wants to track throughout a section or script. As is suggested in the name, this method creates a diagram to help visualize the play or scene so that patterns can be deduced. Orr suggests a primary selection of no more than six elements to track. This selection should be consciously done and continually questioned for the most appropriate choices. Then, a symbol is selected for each element that will be tracked. These need only make sense to the analyst(s): a heart for all professions of love, a crown for expressions of power, etc. This will make referencing the diagram much easier when finished. When ready to diagram the play or scene (i.e. draw the flow of symbols), Orr suggests limiting oneself to a single page, orienting the diagram in whichever direction makes the most sense for the script at hand. Completed diagrams serve as a flow chart for the chosen elements of the script, creating an analytical reference to determine patterns of events or content that may not be apparent when only reading the text, and can be modified as needed.

Visit to a Small Planet

Elinor Fuchs’ dramaturgical template “Visit to a Small Planet” was created as a teaching tool for dramatic structure. Fuchs, like Orr, identified a tendency in her students to prefer, if not

focus on, an analysis of characters when approaching a dramatic script. “Visit to a Small Planet” is her attempt at forestalling such behaviors, stating, “To look at dramatic structures narrowly in terms of characters risks unproblematically collapsing this strange world into our own world” (404). Fuchs suggests many lenses through which to analyze the play, striving to build up a holistic view of the play’s world rather than breaking it down. She asks the reader to envision the play as an entire world and to create that visual metaphor in systematic pieces. In this manner, the analyst can see the entire “world of the play” and can begin to understand all its parts in relation to each other.

In creating the vision of the world of the play, Fuchs tasks readers to “mold the play into a medium-sized ball” (404) to better examine it in the middle distance. Attention must be paid to the setting, the climate, and how time operates on this planet. These aspects will help explain the mood and tone of said planet. Fuchs also gives a nod to the hidden spaces on this planet, as well as the ‘music’ of the world, the pattern of sound and silence, human and landscape, that fill this world.

Next, Fuchs asks who populates the world. Without getting into the motivations of the characters, Fuchs focuses on the social aspects of the play. She looks at class, levels and types of interaction, social position, and modes of expression apparent on this world. Then, she moves on to the dynamic changes in the play. She suggests looking at the first image of the play, the last, and a striking image near the center of the play to give an account of the destiny on this planet. Fuchs maintains that the play must move from the first image through the central image in order to achieve the final image. She also addresses the things that do not change in order to put together the ‘myth’ of the play.

At this point in the analysis, she asks the analyst to check in with herself. Fuchs asks her to determine how she is changed by the play, whether through an invitation to participate in action or to leave the theatre and take political action in the outside world, and how these calls to action are made known through the world of the play.

Only at this point does Fuchs recommend looking at the characters of this world. She reminds the analyst, “every assumption you make about a character must reflect the conditions of its world, including the way psychology functions in that world” (406) but does not omit ‘singularities’, those puzzling events that do not fit. The puzzles, she reminds us, may hold the key.

Close Reading

The analytical tool of ‘close reading’ is a useful skill that can be applied to any of the dramaturgical methods mentioned here. The process is, at its basis, a careful and considered reading of a text for any and all aspects of meaning. Sophia McClennen refers to close reading as a “means [of] developing a deep understanding and a precise interpretation of a literary passage that is based first and foremost on the words themselves.” Its usefulness in the dramatic sphere is extensive, as theatre, a symbolic art, often utilizes many layers of meaning within a play script. The process of detailed analysis is crucial to unpacking the symbolism and metaphor in a script so that those levels of meaning can be utilized in the construction of the performance dialectic that will be presented to the audience.

Close reading stems from liberal humanism and New Criticism. Pioneered by scholars at Cambridge, New Criticism came about as a result of the implementation of the new English department (Barry 13). In the 1920s, a separation was made between literature and language

(Barry 15). I. A. Richards' 'Practical Criticism' is the first formal method of critiquing the words on the page, rather than simply offering, "a vague, flowery, metaphorical effusion and call it criticism" (Barry 15). William Empson furthered the depths to which such rigorous analysis as Richards suggested could be employed with his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Barry 15). While literary criticism dates back to Aristotle¹⁶, the efforts of these scholars helped pave the way for the trend of script analysis and close reading by validating the wild notion that a text by itself is worthy of study. The roots of close reading, structuralism, post-structuralism, and critical theory can all be found in the efforts of these early scholars.

Close reading "emphasizes differences between literary language and that of the general speech community; it tends to isolate literary text and see it as a purely aesthetic art object, or 'verbal icon', whose language operates according to rules of its own" (Barry 207). This differs from other analytical methods, such as new historicism, which tend to give the historical context of a text equal weight to the text itself. However, contemporary close reading practitioners find a happy balance between ignoring the historical context and focusing solely upon it. English Professor Jack Lynch espouses "attention to the history of words and the meanings lurking in their etymologies and connotations" as a crucial part of close reading.

Close reading relies on a systematic annotation of a particular section or selection of text. The method relies on the breaking down and investigation of specific aspects of the work at a time, similar to the formalist script analysis method described earlier, but with a greater focus on diction and layers of meaning rather than action. This is not surprising given that close reading

¹⁶ "The earliest work of theory" (Barry 21).

was developed as an analytical tool for all literature, whereas script analysis is derived for theatrical works only. Their similarities, however, lie within the analyst: each method of interpretation is affected by the individual performing the analysis. Patricia Kain notes that close reading can be selective, “Your aim may be to notice all striking features of the text, including rhetorical features, structural elements, cultural references; or, your aim may be to notice only *selected* features of the text.” This implies that some of the text may be set aside in preference to other aspects. Peter Barry also notes that close reading can be considered as “impressionistic, intuitive, and randomized” (207). Ultimately, close reading is a process of intense textual scrutiny in which interpretation that cannot be divorced from the individual performing the analysis. That said, the process is ultimately seen as a crucial step to any textual analysis, as it is considered to be a metaphorical gold pan that assists the interpreter in carefully separating the most important elements of a text from those elements that may otherwise be viewed as inconsequential.

In this study, both a close reading will be done of the scripts on their own (script analysis) and also in consideration of the voices of feminist theory at work within these scripts (deconstructive reading). By considering the feminist philosophies on motherhood, mothering, and childlessness present within these plays, a dialogue emerges between the scripts, the theories, and the audience. These discussions, actively engaging theory, provide the substance of this study and speak to the greater question of how motherhood and non-motherhood are presented in these plays, how the accepted ideas of motherhood and non-motherhood are challenged by these plays, and how presenting these plays can challenge not only theoretical beliefs, but performance methods as well.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter of this dissertation will introduce the project and the playwrights; provide an overview of current trends in script analysis, as well as establish the complicated expectations of motherhood and the troubling treatment of non-motherhood in feminist and mother theory; and discuss the exciting possibilities provided by these selected scripts in their depictions of mother characters.

Chapters two, three, and four of this dissertation will provide practical applications of text analysis while engaging key pieces of feminist theory. The second chapter will focus on the mother characters presented in these plays. Each character interacts with the inherited expectations of ideal motherhood and is found wanting. This chapter will unpack those expectations and present the ways in which the characters actively subvert those legacies. The third chapter will turn its focus to the non-mother characters and establish their treatment within the broader confines of 'the Woman Question' at work in these plays, both structurally and theoretically. The fourth chapter in this dissertation will synthesize the previous two, scrutinizing the ways in which these character types interact with the plays, and chart the flow of oppression extant between these two archetypes.

The fifth chapter will draw conclusions based on the practical applications from previous chapters and invite readers to consider how characterizations can affect thematic content. By engaging feminist theory and script analysis, each script will become a battleground of theory and narrative. As theory is engaged with the content of these scripts, these characters will be shown to represent complex and multifaceted depictions of motherhood and childlessness. It is my hope that these analytical studies will not only bring attention to diverse script analysis

practices, but also support the importance of a broader theoretical understanding of the workings of each script. By studying the interplay of these characters and finding them constantly in opposition to each other, a fascinating conflict of archetype and theory emerges, calling into question how 'contemporary' these depictions truly are.

MOTHERS, MOTHERHOOD, AND MAYHEM

“God could not be everywhere and therefore he made mothers”¹⁷

“Motherhood is a universal construct,” Lynda Ross states in her work *Interrogating Motherhood* (1). It is a statement that is both profound and obvious: be we mothers or not, we all came from mothers, and we continually interact with mothers and the act of mothering. Ann Crittenden writes, “In the United States, motherhood is as American as apple pie. No institution is more sacrosanct; no figure is praised more fulsomely. Maternal selflessness has endowed mothers with a unique moral authority” (1-2). Motherhood is a term that was and remains imbued with a sense of goodness, “something regarded as so unquestionably good as to be beyond criticism [and a state of being] representing irrefutable and unquestionable goodness and integrity, something exemplifying traditionally wholesome American values” (Oxford English Dictionary). With such an auspicious definition in mind, it is clear why the proverb in the epigraph above has remained in the social lexicon. The comparison of a mother to a god-like figure sets a tone that is both empowering and reductive: mothers are omniscient and omnipotent like a god, but as with all proverbs, the saying offers no opportunities for variation, and therefore limits the ways in which ‘mother’ can be performed and identified. Indeed, motherhood and mothering, are at the very heart of culture, if not human nature, yet they are generally uninterrogated topics. Adrienne Rich observes in her work *Of Woman Born* that, “We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood” (11). It is this very lack of understanding that has spawned the field of mother studies.

¹⁷ Jewish proverb, however often attributed to Rudyard Kipling and others.

Mother studies, or mother theory, is an interdisciplinary and multi-perspective branch of feminist theory that seeks to better understand what noted mother-theorist Andrea O'Reilly refers to as the "oppressive and empowering dimensions of maternity, as well as the complex relationship between the two" (*From Motherhood* 2). As Irene Oh notes, "mothers are defined not primarily by biological function but by their culturally encoded lived realities" (5). Mother theory is a complex and evolving field of inquiry that is improved by the myriad voices contributing to its basic understandings, as well as the critical study of the representations of motherhood, which "reverberate with the complexities of our own maternal bonds" and "tap and shape our complex feelings about motherhood" (Bassin et al, 2). In order to make better sense of this continually evolving and shifting field, I will provide in this chapter a brief survey of the principle thoughts and theorists identified in mother studies, as well as a description of mother theory's main tenets and areas of inquiry. I will then conduct a close reading of the mother characters in *Birth and After Birth* by Tina Howe and *Crumble (Lay Me Down, Justin Timberlake)* by Sheila Callaghan, utilizing the lenses of mother and feminist theories to inform my readings of these representations.

In *Of Woman Born*, recognized as one of the most important feminist works on motherhood and mothering as it "influenced the way a whole generation of scholars thinks about motherhood" (O'Reilly, *From Motherhood* 1), Adrienne Rich makes the distinction between two meanings of motherhood: "the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (original emphasis, Rich 13). In discussing the construct of motherhood and mothering in Western society, it is the second meaning articulated

by Rich that serves as the primary analytical meat of the field of mother theory. Ann Oakley, an early second-wave British feminist writer, supports Rich's distinction in her postulation that motherhood, as it is socially understood, is a myth based on the threefold belief that "all women need to be mothers", "all mothers need their children", and that "all children need their mothers" (187; 199; 203). Andrea O'Reilly notes,

Feminist historians agree that motherhood [in the institutional sense] is *not* a natural or biological function; rather it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. As a cultural construction, its meaning varies with time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood." (original emphasis, *From Motherhood*, 4-5)

O'Reilly's comment reflects the main issue with which mother theory grapples: mothers (and non-mothers) still feel pressure to conform to a certain societal expectation, and, despite the fact that that expectation is not based in a universal experience, the construction of that expectation has become culturally coded. "Mothering, in its current ideological manifestation," Andrea O'Reilly clarifies, "regards maternity as natural to women and essential to their beings" (*From Motherhood* 5). This assumption contradicts the feminist-historical understanding of motherhood and instead suggests that motherhood is essential to women's lived experiences under patriarchal control. O'Reilly points out, however, that "This ideology, however, was race and class-specific; only white, middle-class women could wear the halo of the Madonna and transform the world through their moral influence and social housekeeping" (*From Motherhood* 5). Mother theory interrogates the manifest discourse of motherhood and mothering in an attempt to better understand the positioning of motherhood in society and the ways in which motherhood is controlled by, and at times oppressed by, predominant culture. The term

‘motherhood’ is generally accepted as the social system in which mothering is performed, whereas ‘mothering’ refers to the praxis of motherhood.

Feminism in America can be loosely charted by its ‘waves’ which began with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. While the beliefs and goals of these waves have varied, one aspect of feminism has remained primarily unchallenged: the assumption¹⁸ that “motherhood, as wish or reality, is [women’s] essential and defining characteristic or condition” (Morell 3). Carolyn Morell, a scholar who focuses on women without children, offers here a critique of both pronatalism¹⁹ and maternalism²⁰ in this brief comment. In order to better understand the social structure of motherhood, it is important to understand the history and evolution of motherhood as a social construct. Lynda Ross notes in her sociological survey of contemporary motherhood *Interrogating Motherhood*, “the critical study of motherhood involves an understanding of the complex realities defining contemporary women’s lives and the consequences of those realities for women’s, children’s, and society’s well-being” (2). A notable application of such research is Sara Ruddick’s provocative work *Maternal Thinking*. Published in 1989, Ruddick utilizes a study of maternal philosophies based on the daily practice of child-rearing to develop a “feminist maternal politics of peace” (Ruddick 244). While motherhood has only emerged as a significant subject for scholarly inquiry within the last 25 years (Ross 4), motherhood as a subject has been

¹⁸ The assumption Morell is referring to the dominant societal belief that motherhood is an essential female experience, an assumption that she criticizes mainstream feminists of not being able to overcome: “during the past two decades feminists have been oddly silent about childlessness as a vital possibility” (2).

¹⁹ Pronatalism is “a view, shaped by political, social, economic, and medical narratives that motherhood is *naturally* synonymous with womanhood, and that female identity cannot be (and ought not to be) extricated from its motherhood role” (Gotlib 330).

²⁰ Maternalism is “the notion that femaleness is rooted in motherly qualities so that women must become mothers in order to realize themselves” (Morell 2).

a topic of academic and scientific exploration for some time. It is worth noting that when motherhood was studied scientifically, the focus was almost exclusively on ‘problem mothers,’ or other areas of aberrant mothering and did not serve as foundational research for mother theory (Ross 3). Coined by Andrea O’Reilly in 2006²¹ after 15 years of teaching and studying motherhood²², motherhood studies takes as its main sources of inspiration the “theoretical tradition of maternal scholars dating back to the early 1970s” (Ross 4), such as Adrienne Rich and Sara Ruddick. Motherhood studies is divided by O’Reilly into three main categories of inquiry: “motherhood as institution, motherhood as experience, and motherhood as identity or subjectivity” (*Twenty-first-century Motherhood* 2). While no survey of motherhood studies would be complete without an acknowledgement of all three categories, it is the first, motherhood as institution, that speaks most directly to the evolution of mother theory as it is understood today.

Motherhood as an institution fundamentally deals with maternalism and pronatalism, two terms that speak of the societal preferencing of motherhood, i.e. the belief that women should enthusiastically embrace motherhood. These ideas express a “motherhood mandate” that,

Favours and encourages childbearing, as well as supports policies and practices that construe and venerate motherhood as the *sine qua non* of womanhood. Women, it insists, must be implicitly and explicitly led, motivated, or, if necessary, compelled towards the realization of motherhood as not only a social good, but, importantly, as something that is essentially in their own best interests as women. (Gotlib 331)

²¹ “I coined the term *motherhood studies* to acknowledge and demarcate this new scholarship on motherhood as a legitimate and distinctive discipline” (O’Reilly, *Twenty-first-century Motherhood*, 1).

²² In 1991, she developed Canada’s first university-level course on motherhood.

While pronatalism puts pressure on women to reproduce, maternalism infuses the performance of femininity with not just the mandate to reproduce, but with a code of expected behaviors. Betty Friedan makes note of this perplexity in her divisive work *The Feminine Mystique*, an early second-wave work that taps into the frustrating realities of maternalism, remarking, “over and over again, stories in women’s magazines insist that woman can know fulfillment only at the moment of giving birth to a child. They deny the years when she can no longer look forward to giving birth, even if she repeats that act over and over again. In the feminine mystique, there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future” (115). However, as Freidan and others point out, that trope is reductive and simplistic. The actuality of motherhood is far more varied and complex.

Both Sharon Hays and Patrice DiQuinzio offer more contemporary theories that investigate the inter-workings of pronatalism and maternalism on the greater understanding and construction of motherhood in American culture. Hays, developing her theory in the ‘90s, when third-wave feminism was in full-swing, offers a critique of socially acceptable motherhood with her analysis of the ideology of ‘intensive mothering:’ “intensive mothering is a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children” (x). Hays elaborates, “There is an underlying assumption that the child absolutely requires consistent nurture by a single primary caretaker and that the mother is the best person for the job,” and that, “since the [assumed] essential foundation for proper child development is love and affection...the methods of appropriate child rearing are construed as *child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive*” (emphasis in

original, 8). In these excerpts, Hays is pointing to an idealized notion of mothering that consumes the mother's identity, time, and resources.

Of course, Hays' theory of intensive mothering, and all of the following theories, rely on a predominantly white, middle-class, American understanding of motherhood. Intensive mothering, with its focus on time and resources, assumes that the mother will have a surplus of both to provide for her children. However, the lived experience of mothers in American culture varies dramatically from that perception. Annette Lareau conducted a critical study of childhoods and child-rearing across cultural racial lines, as well as across family unit structures, to better understand the differences class has on the child in *Unequal Childhoods*. In the study, she found that the greatest indicator for difference in child-rearing methods was social class, not race, and that those differences had a profound impact on the way the children developed. The findings indicated that middle-class families focused on preparing the child for success in future professional settings, 'concerted cultivation'²³, while working-class families set clear boundaries for children so as to facilitate an 'accomplishment of natural growth'²⁴. Despite these differences, Lareau notes the coalescence of dominant cultural repertoires, devised by 'experts,' that dictate child-rearing expectations: "These standards include the importance of talking with children, developing their educational interests, and playing an active role in their schooling. Similarly, parenting guidelines typically stress the importance of reasoning with children and teaching them to solve problems through negotiation rather than with physical force" (Lareau 4). Despite the

²³ 'Concerted cultivation' describes the parental practice of deliberately cultivating within a child the skills and entitlement which will benefit the child in future institutional settings (Lareau 2).

²⁴ The 'accomplishment of natural growth' refers to the practice of child-rearing that ascribes clear boundaries between adults and children, but allows for more autonomy for the child to dictate their own activities and free time (Lareau 3).

knowledge that “inequality permeates the fabric of the culture” (Lareau 3), it is clear that a middle-class perspective is seen as the predominate cultural paradigm in both Lareau’s findings and in the work of the mother theorists mentioned here. This does not negate the theorists, but it is important to understand that while they may be responding to what is deemed the predominant cultural repertoire of child-rearing, that repertoire is limited to a specific cultural experience.

Hays’ intensive mothering connects neatly with Patrice DiQuinzio’s theory of ‘essential motherhood’ and brings to the conversation an analysis of the conflicted relationship between feminism and individualism. Coined only a few years after Hays’ work, DiQuinzio suggests a pattern of maternalism and pronatalism that heightens the implications of intensive mothering, suggesting that not only should mothering be so all-consuming, but that a woman’s purpose is in fact to mother:

Essential motherhood is an ideological formation that specifies the essential attributes of motherhood and articulates femininity in terms of motherhood so understood. According to essential motherhood, mothering is a function of women’s essentially female nature, women’s biological reproductive capacities, and/or human evolutionary development ... Essential motherhood dictates that all women want to be and should be mothers and clearly implies that women who do not manifest the qualities required by mothering and/or refuse mothering are deviant or deficient as women. Essential motherhood is not only an account of mothering, but also an account of femininity. (xiii)

Essential motherhood encapsulates the prevailing attitude of motherhood, and by extension, womanhood. In this way, pronatalism, maternalism, intensive mothering, and essential motherhood all hold at their base “the now almost commonplace view that good mothering involves selfless, consistent, and continuous care” (Ross 18) and support the middle-class-based repertoire of concerted cultivation Lareau charts.

Taken as foundational inspiration for mother studies, the works of Rich, Ruddick, O'Reilly, Hays, and DiQuinzio are focused on untangling and better understanding the ways in which social attitudes about motherhood are formed in the hopes of one day dismantling the systems of oppression that confine motherhood, and therefore women, to a restricted corner of society at large. Responding to the societal pressure to be not only a mother but a 'good' mother, mother theorists have worked to unpack the tropes of maternalism and pronatalism in the hopes of expanding the understanding of what motherhood is and could be. Judith Warner notes, "the ideal of motherhood we carry in our heads is so compelling that even though we can't fulfil it and know that we probably shouldn't even try, we berate ourselves for falling short of succeeding" (721). Elisabeth Badinter writes, "For a majority of women it remains difficult to reconcile increasingly burdensome maternal responsibilities with personal fulfillment" (2). Carolyn Morell states, "There are women, and there are ideas about women. While women themselves vary considerably, one idea about them seems stable: motherhood, as wish or reality, is their essential and defining characteristic or condition" (3). Warner, Badinter, and Morell are attempting to pinpoint the multiplicity of experience that Lareau's research affirms: the cultural repertoire of childrearing supported by institutions is limited to a specific experience and does not acknowledge difference. These theorists, each pinpointing, and at times branding, their own view of the source of maternal oppression fall into the same reductive complication in which the cultural repertoire of child-rearing finds itself. While they are attempting to expand the inclusivity of institutional motherhood, they fail to meaningfully acknowledge differences outside of their personal experiences. However, they do successfully address the incredible scale and deep

entanglement of maternalism and pronatalism within patriarchal social structures within their experiences.

Surveying the ways in which these theorists have engaged pronatalism and maternalism, as well as incorporating a media studies analysis of the depictions of mothers in popular cultural representations in the early 2000s, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels have offered up their own evaluation of what they call 'new momism' in *The Mommy Myth*. The 'Mommy myth' falsely claims that "motherhood is eternally fulfilling and rewarding, that it is *always* the best and most important thing you do, that there is only a narrowly prescribed way to do it right, and that if you don't love each and every second of it there's something really wrong with you" (Douglas and Michaels 3-4). Douglas and Michaels chart the rise of new momism in media that works insidiously to maintain the patriarchal systems that diminish the value of traditionally women's work, while still requiring women to do such work: "The ethos of intensive mothering has lower status in our culture, but occupies a higher moral ground" (12). New momism reflects the hegemonic expectations of motherhood that are problematic in their contradictions and reductiveness. Similar to the idea of essential motherhood, new momism is:

The insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. The new momism is a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet." (Douglas and Michaels 4)

The complicated nature of new momism speaks to a problematic entwining of feminism and motherhood that has shadowed the development of mother theory. As Ann Snitow remarks, "modern U.S. feminists have felt deeply ambivalent about just how far from 'mother' women might want to go. How can the desire for liberation and the experience of motherhood

combine?” (145), a poignant question she utilizes to guide her survey, “Feminist Analyses of Motherhood,” before concluding, “feminists continue to debate the fundamental question of whether they want the identity ‘mother’ to expand or contract” (147). While feminism has sought to liberate the social, cultural, and legal standing of women at large, motherhood has in equal measure been seen as the source of such liberation and the source of its oppression. Adrienne Rich’s separation of motherhood as institution and motherhood as experience also supports the dichotomy motherhood represents. Feminists and mother theorists alike have yet to be able to agree on the point in which motherhood moves from being a source of restriction to empowerment. Many voices from the second wave of feminism were criticized for being overly dismissive of the maternal experience, to the point of wishing it to be eliminated from society (Tong 84). Others have embraced motherhood as an act of rebellion, consistently subverting patriarchal norms (Green 126).

To better parse out the ways in which motherhood can be understood to be both liberating and oppressive, one can look to the ways in which motherhood is represented in media, legal, and medical matters. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels conduct a media survey of representations of motherhood in *The Mommy Myth*; Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* utilizes a political study of the practice of motherhood; Lynda Ross undertakes a sociological survey in *Interrogating Motherhood*. These works, studying representation, have illuminated and helped to define the active and passive roles of motherhood in Western society. Taking inspiration from the multitude of feminist and mother theory texts, it is my intention to add to the study of the representations of motherhood by conducting a close reading of mothers presented on the theatrical stage. Elaine Aston notes, “image-based methodologies have evolved

into more sophisticated structuralist and semiotic lines of enquiry generated through the understanding of theatre as a sign-system” (16), and the application of a close reading to such a sign-system will serve as a valuable means of studying the representations of motherhood presented in these plays.

It is valuable to look at depictions of social codes as an exercise in studying the way in which these codes act upon, and are informed by, society. By studying depictions of motherhood in the context of feminist criticisms of motherhood-as-institution, a greater understanding and appreciation for the machinations of the playwrights will emerge. Any cultural system of power would benefit from such an inquiry, as “uncritical acceptance allows power relations to devolve into static states of domination, where only a very limited range of thought and behaviour is deemed valid or acceptable, with the result that many more modes of existence are considered invalid, immoral, or deviant and thereby deserving of social sanction, legal punishment, or eradication” (Taylor 4). By investigating the line between representation and social critique that is posed within depictions of social institutions, the intent of the author can be understood, and provocative questions will emerge about the nature of the object, metaphoric or literal, being depicted. Before conducting such research, it becomes of paramount importance to understand the general, socially-agreed-upon, understanding of the object in question, because a critical understanding of the object is an understanding of the cultural codes that created it:

These codes, by a swivel characteristic of bourgeois ideology, which turns culture in nature, appear to establish reality, “Life.” “Life” then, in the classic text, becomes a nauseating mixture of common opinions, a smothering layer of received ideas...What is

outmoded, of course, is not a defect in performance...but rather a fatal condition of Replete Literature²⁵, mortally stalked by the army of stereotypes it contains. (Barthes 206)

In this way, socially constructed concepts, such as motherhood, reflect dominant social hierarchies and also express “prevailing power relations; through constant repetition, it makes those relations seem normal, eternal, objective, self-evident expressions of ‘the way things are’” (Buchanan 5).

If we view the stage as a “vast symbolic order that is comprised of discursive formations, loosely organized bodies of knowledge that...encode power relations, and produce speaking subjects” (Buchanan 6), then we can assume that the images presented on it are not only representations of their real-world counterparts, but also critiques of those subjects and their societal positioning. Feminism is built on the acknowledgement of women, and by extension mothers, as a subject worthy of critical study and also holds that such a study is “critical to fighting against the dread and devaluation of women” (Bassin et al 2). Therefore, it is important to continue to study depictions of such subjects, as not only an artistic exercise, but as a feminist one. Through the employment of close reading and script analysis, I will investigate the ways the playwrights present, and comment on, motherhood. Looking at these depictions in isolation and across both plays will allow a broader analysis of how motherhood is viewed contemporarily and how successfully these playwrights have staged their depictions. It should be noted that this chapter will only engage the mother characters from Howe and Callaghan’s plays. While Treem’s play engages the mother/non-mother dyad, Treem inverts the dynamic in such a way that

²⁵ “Barthes’ nemesis is “Replete Literature,” the monster of totality, which makes the reader submissive to its meanings and freezes desire” (Goodheart 88).

complicates the depiction of the mother character. Therefore, Treem's characters will be investigated in detail in the subsequent chapters.

Birth and After Birth

On the surface, no character could be better crafted to match the essentialized depiction of motherhood quite as well as 'Sandy' in Tina Howe's *Birth and After Birth*. Sandy Apple is, above all things, devoted to her child and her role as a mother. Described in the dramatis personae as simply "the mommy," Sandy is the primary source of order, decorum, love, and self-sacrifice in this play. She presents the familiar trappings of polite femininity and essentialized motherhood: concern about her appearance and devotion to her child at the expense of interest in the outside world. Her family poignantly reflects Leslie Bennetts' description of "the conventional nuclear family built on traditional gender stereotypes—the breadwinner husband, the stay-at-home wife, and children who receive round-the-clock attention from a mother who runs the entire domestic operation" (2-3), despite being written in a "surreal, operatic style" (Howe ix) that is typical of Howe's oeuvre. Little is known about Sandy's life outside the scope of this play: she once worked for an insurance company, and she sucked her thumb up until the moment her son was born (Howe 10); she has a cousin, Jeffrey; she was close with her father and hated her mother (Howe 37). It is presumed that she does not work outside the home now that she has a child. She does not mention any friends outside her familial relations and only refers to other adults who are connected to her son, Nicky- his preschool teacher, his cello instructor, and the pitiable Diane Oak (the parent of a fellow preschooler), who waited so long to have children that her cervix was so shriveled up that she had to be induced in the fifteenth month of pregnancy (Howe 32).

Despite the idyllic appearance of Sandy's life as a mother, the audience is quickly presented with the idea that all is not as it seems and that Sandy is not as happy in the role as she may appear. As the play begins, Bill and Sandy are elaborately decorating the house for Nicky's birthday; after all, Sandy constantly intones, "How many times does your only child turn four?" (Howe 5). Sandy frets over the work yet to do; Bill entertains himself with some of Nicky's new toys. Sandy chides Bill that his playing will wake Nicky, while lamenting her lack of sleep and unending tasks. Howe utilizes the stereotype of the nagging housewife to establish in the play's first few pages that Sandy is over-stressed, and her husband is more of a hindrance than a relief. However, Bill's imagination takes hold of him, and Sandy too gets caught up in the fantasy, envisioning herself as a carefree flamenco dancer, exclaiming, "I am so tired I am not myself, but a wild thing" (Howe 6). In this opening scene, we see Sandy perform both her maternal self: the worrying, self-sacrificing, nurturer; and her self-professed 'non-self,' that charismatic, impulsive 'wild thing' that gets caught up in Bill's fantasy and spawns a new fantasy of her own, stating "What if I want to dance *alone*? What if I want to turn a few heads of my *own*?" (original emphasis, Howe 6).

By asserting that the flamenco dancer is 'not herself,' Sandy implies that her 'true self' is the other one presented on stage, one of maternal responsibility. In Sandy's fantasy, she is the center of attention, the star that is adored for her skills. Casting this fantasy as 'not herself,' it can be read that this flight of fancy is the antithesis of her current life and supports the implication that a maternal identity is an identity that operates among the positive associations Lindal

Buchanan ascribes to 'Mother'²⁶: "children, love, protection, home, nourishment, altruism, morality, religion, self-sacrifice, strength, the reproductive body, the private sphere, and the nation" (8). As the play progresses through its first act, Sandy's flamenco fantasy is not revisited, but her pattern of asserting who and what she is continues. Interestingly, what emerges are two main categories of how Sandy describes herself: She is a mommy, but she is also a ruin. This presentation of Sandy's two states allows for a unique way of understanding her mental state. By describing herself separately as 'a ruin' and 'a mommy,' a question forms in the mind of the audience: how different are these two states? Is Sandy voicing a dichotomy of idealism versus reality? Or is Howe crafting Sandy in such a way that presents her mommy-hood as a form of ruination? To further examine this, Sandy's presentation of 'mommy' must be more closely examined.

After the aforementioned opening scene, Nicky bursts on stage. Nicky is presented in absurd literality, as the four-year-old is depicted by "a large, hairy man" (Howe ix). The size of Nicky and the corresponding space he takes up serve as a visual symbol of the space he takes up in his parents' lives, the challenge he represents to his parents, and as a nod toward a potential Oedipal relationship, one that subtly presents itself throughout the play. Nicky's first foray onto the stage finds him tearing about the room, looking for his presents, so lovingly wrapped by Sandy. "PRESENTS, PRESENTS, WHERE'S MY PRESENTS?" (Howe 6) Nicky exclaims, as he explodes onto the stage. As Sandy reveals the decorations to him, he stops to quickly admire the scene

²⁶ Buchanan is invoking the duality of Richard Weaver's god and devil terms. A god term is the, "expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers" (Weaver 212). In opposition to these god terms stand the devil terms, which are, "Perhaps...but a version of the tribal need for a scapegoat, or for something which will personify 'the adversary'" (Weaver 222).

with a “Wow!” before returning to search for his presents and, upon finding them, “dives in head first” (Howe 7). As Nicky rips open and plays with his presents, Sandy attempts to enforce order and decorum to no avail— “We open cards first, that way we avoid all this mess at the beginning” (Howe 7)—while Bill encourages Nicky’s behavior for the benefit of his home movie. Bill even places a protesting Sandy in Nicky’s new wagon, encouraging Nicky to wheel her around the room. Despite her physical acquiescence to the shenanigans—Sandy allows herself to be put in the wagon and remains in the wagon for some time—she does not give up her reprimands of Nicky’s behavior, nor her lamentations for all her ruined work. It is comical to observe Sandy fruitlessly bemoaning the scene about her, but as with the ‘nagging wife’ scene at the top of the play, upon closer scrutiny, we see the depressing state in which Sandy lives. Her efforts are not appreciated, nor especially asked for, by her family. Though the decorations are applauded later by party guests, Jeffrey and Mia, the scope and quality of the decorations remain generally ignored by Bill and Nicky. Sandy seems to be enacting a performance of ideal motherhood that is divorced from her lived reality.

Sandy’s abilities as a homemaker are not questioned, nor does she express any doubt or insecurities about her ability to perform such ‘motherly duties,’ but her motivations for performing these duties and the value placed on them by the family are open sources of insecurity for Sandy. As Fiona Joy Green comments, the perception of the perfect mother is a strong one: “The perfect mother always has a connection with her children, never has an ill feeling toward them, and is completely responsible for caring for and nurturing all of her family members” (128), and Sandy is clearly invested in these culturally encoded realities of motherhood: “I stay up all night decorating the room, wrapping the presents, blowing up the

balloons, making a really nice party, and what does he do? Just tears into everything. Rips it all up! Ruins the whole thing! ... And not one thank you. I never heard one thank you for anything” (Howe 9). Sandy’s frustrations with Nicky expose her own inefficacy in the house, her failure to assert decorum and order. Though Sandy has participated in the performance of ideal motherhood, the response to her efforts has not lived up to her ideals. Sandy is left in a cycle of domestic servitude that she cannot break from, nor about which is she entirely comfortable complaining, couching her complaints in asides rather than directing them to a specific family member. These insecurities, particularly around moments of training and discipline, speak to a very common reality for mothers. Sara Ruddick discusses these difficulties, commenting that “many mothers find that the central challenge of mothering lies in training a child to be the kind of person whom others accept and whom the mothers themselves can actively appreciate” (104). Mothers, Ruddick continues, “find the demands of training personally unsettling. A mother may be prompted to self-doubt even by her daydreams about her children’s future lives,” and that “inevitable conflicts with her children as well as competing demands for time of her own and ‘peace at home’ soon lead a mother to question her own values” (105). In this scene, Howe presents Sandy at the crux of just such a conflict: her child is resisting the behavioral training that would organize the present-opening experience, and his behavior is not reflecting her own values, as he ‘ruins’ the decorations. Sandy is left unsupported in her efforts to train Nicky, whose actions resemble more closely Bill’s.

However, Sandy does not parent alone. Though this analysis focuses primarily on Sandy’s performance of motherhood, a thorough analysis could not exist without considering the parenting executed by her husband and the parenting they do together. Sandy’s frustration with

Nicky's behavior and her hesitance to take action to redirect it is mirrored, if not enabled, by Bill's parenting. In the aforementioned scene, Bill has been attempting to direct Nicky in a homemade movie so that he can show it off later. Bill is significantly more overt in this early scene in stating his desire to impress, and even one-up, the impending visitors Jeffrey and Mia. Both Bill and Sandy require Nicky to behave in an advantageous way to achieve their goals; however, they both seem unable to follow through with any proffered disciplinary actions. After Nicky refuses to obey either of his parents, Sandy and Bill have this exchange:

SANDY: He shouldn't be up this early.

BILL: He got up too early.

SANDY: I have a good mind to take you back to your room!

BILL: If you ask me, he should be sent up to his room!

SANDY: Do you want Daddy to take you back to your room?

BILL: You'd better watch it, young man, or it's up to your room.

SANDY: How would you like to be sent back to your room on your birthday?

NICKY: My room?

(Silence.)

BILL: He got up too early.

SANDY: Come on, Bill, take him on up.

(Silence.)

BILL: The kid gets away with murder.

(Sandy sighs.)

Absolute murder...

(Sandy sighs. Silence.) (Howe 9-10).

Unsurprisingly, Nicky is not sent to his room. The reluctance of both Sandy and Bill to carry out any discipline is comical, to be sure, but also indicative of the family dynamic at hand. Sandy introduces the idea of sending Nicky to his room and Bill agrees, but Sandy quickly hands off the act to Bill, who refuses to take responsibility, instead complaining that 'the kid gets away with murder,' ignoring the irony that it is Bill himself who lets him. The language is interesting to note, as Sandy first states: "I have a good mind to take you back to your room!" followed by Bill's "he should be sent up to his room," an agreement that moves the discipline act to a passive sense.

Sandy's "Do you want Daddy to take you back to your room?" is answered with "You'd better watch out...or it's up to your room," again, passively threatening but taking no responsibility for the threat. Their authority rings hollow in this exchange, as clearly neither is willing to dole out repercussions to Nicky, posing a question as to where the authority truly lies. Sandy and Bill are childlike in their game of disciplinarian hot-potato, hoping the potato doesn't land in her or his respective laps.

However, the mantle of parental authority cannot remain unclaimed forever. Soon, Sandy is pushed to enact discipline. With both Bill and Nicky vying for her attention, Sandy acquiesces to Nicky's desire to play a game. Bill, feeling ignored, storms out of the room in a tantrum that rivals Nicky's, and Sandy vents her frustrations at Nicky, telling him, "God, Nicky, you have to destroy everything you touch!" (Howe 15), implying strongly that her marital problems are due to Nicky's presence and influence. She continues, "I don't understand you. One minute you're the sweet baby Mommy brought home from the hospital and the next, you're a savage! ... You don't care if Jeffrey and Mia walk into a shit-house!" (Howe 15) and begins to shake Nicky as he has a tantrum about grape juice. Nicky faints from the shaking, and Sandy and Bill frantically struggle to bring Nicky back to consciousness. This scene presents, in heightened form, the risks associated with disciplining a child: you risk harming your child by disciplining too much or in the wrong way. The validity of this fear stems from the myriad prescriptive tomes and omnipresent 'expert advice' that deluge mothers: "Developmental theories tell us that infants, children, and indeed adults develop and prosper in environments that are emotionally warm, nurturing, and stimulating and that all individuals will benefit from caregivers who are sensitive, accepting, cooperative, and always available to meet their needs" (Ross 11), a belief that reinforces the

idealistic maternity to which Sandy is aspiring. Perhaps Sandy's reticence to discipline Nicky earlier was the result of such a nurturant principle. However, as Sally Mennill points out, such texts actually are "structured to inspire fear in [their] readers by promoting a version of normalcy that favours medical imperatives and, most importantly, advocates a passive role²⁷ for [mothers]" (303). In considering the effect of this type of insidious regulation of maternal behavior, it is not surprising that Sandy is consumed by her efforts to be an ideal mother or that she snaps when her failings are too great. In the moment she shakes Nicky, her frustrations are manifold: her husband is feeling neglected and stormed out of the room, her child is not adhering to her behavioral training, and her physical settings do not reflect her values of order and decorum. Sandy explodes and shakes Nicky in a desperate grasp for control of the situation, but the result of her outburst is the very materialization of her deepest fear: damaging her child.

This fear takes on a palpable and present reality in parents' minds. The formation of motherhood as a 'profession,' rather than a pedestrian act, elevated the work of mothers, but at the same time opened motherhood up for critical scrutiny. As medical and psychological 'experts' began to develop 'methods' of parenting, these figures became the new patriarchal authority. Figures like Drs. Benjamin Spock and John Bowlby, both medical doctors and child analysts, began to place the responsibility of a child's mental soundness on the mother's attachment and quality of care, including methods of discipline²⁸. These modern experts recommend that mothers ought to "avoid the type of discipline that involves demands for absolute obedience and the threat of

²⁷ In this case, Mennill refers to 'a passive role' not as the de-emphasis of maternal instinct and choice, but instead the promotion of adherence to prescriptive parenting literature.

²⁸ In this context, discipline refers to specific corrective action, whereas 'training,' used throughout this chapter, refers to the redirection of behavior toward a desired result.

physical punishment” (Hays 116) for fear of not only harming the child physically, but of causing psychic wounds that will affect the child permanently. With such a perceived attitude toward physical discipline, it’s no wonder that Sandy and Bill, whom I argue have embodied societal attitudes of parenting, respond with such hesitance to the idea of disciplining their child. In this moment, Nicky fainting is the actualization of Sandy’s fear of irreparably harming her child through her own actions.

Howe provides one more disciplinary scene in Act One for our consideration. After Nicky has recovered from his fainting spell, Nicky begins to demand to make his birthday wish now, rather than wait until the party later that day. Sandy and Bill are having a separate conversation as this demand is being made, and Nicky runs out of the room in his anger that he is not being attended to. Without Nicky there, Sandy and Bill begin to reminisce about their own childhoods, an act that quickly turns to a renewal of their amorous attentions to each other. Nicky bursts in, interrupting their moment, and while clad in Sandy’s undergarments, once again demands grape juice, this time with ice. Bill, angry that he has been interrupted in the act of lovemaking—“You owe me, big time. BIG TIME” (Howe 26)—refuses Nicky’s demand for ice. Sandy, worried about the state of her underwear—“That’s a seventy-five-dollar bra you’ve got wrapped around your ears!”—enforces Bill’s punishment: “Here’s your damned grape juice. Without ice. Nice and *warm*” (original emphasis, Howe 26). Nicky hurls the glass of warm grape juice at her feet in retribution. Sandy immediately recognizes the danger of broken glass and jumps to clean the mess, warning her family not to go near the danger. Bill, however, focuses on Nicky’s action. He moves Nicky out of the way of the glass as Sandy cleans, an act that Nicky interprets as physical punishment: “(starting to cry) Daddy hurt me, Daddy hurt me” (Howe 26). The two proceed to

engage in physical violence with each other. Nicky kicks Bill in the shin and Bill shakes Nicky with each word: “Don’t. You. Ever. Hit. Your. Father!” (Howe 26). Nicky wails, Bill inspects his wound, and Sandy finishes cleaning up broken glass. At this point, Howe repeats the failed disciplinary scene of the beginning:

SANDY: Come on, Bill, take him up to his room. We’re calling the party off.

NICKY: But what about my cake?

SANDY: No birthday party for Nicky this year.

NICKY: And the candles?

BILL: You can spend the rest of the day up in your room.

NICKY: What about my wish?

SANDY: The child has to be punished.

BILL: It’s your own fault.

SANDY: We warned you.

NICKY: You mean, I won’t have any party at all?

BILL: We tried.

SANDY: We gave you every chance.

BILL: Maybe next time you’ll listen.

SANDY: It hurts us more than it hurts you.

BILL: Maybe next year you’ll be a better boy.

SANDY: I asked you to open your presents after the cards!

NICKY: No party? No wish?

BILL: We certainly don’t enjoy doing this, Nicky.

SANDY: No party, and that’s that.

(Nicky runs out of the room crying. Silence.) (Howe 27)

It is worth noting the similarities and differences between this scene and the first. The obvious difference in this scene is that Nicky is actually punished, the result of his combined behaviors of breaking the glass and kicking Bill. However, both Sandy and Bill again quickly place the responsibility of the punishment on Nicky himself, rather than on their own authority. Indeed, their dialogue focuses on how they tried to avoid punishment and how hard the punishment is on them, rather than on Nicky. While this excerpt does reflect psychologically-driven methods of negotiating and disciplining children which focus on the development of empathy, this scene, taken in context with the rest of the act, serves instead to establish the parents’ immature

response to this disciplinary act. Even Sandy's reminder that Nicky has misbehaved all day serves as a supporting argument to the claim that "we gave you every chance," rather than an admonishment of his behavior. It seems that even when Nicky's behavior is so egregious that they cannot justify *not* disciplining him, Sandy and Bill still attempt to preserve their idealized view of themselves as parents, evoking a greater sense of the parents' own immaturity and possible lack of readiness for their role as caregivers.

This scene also provides an interesting parallel in terms of physical punishment. Earlier, Sandy shakes Nicky with calamitous results. In this scene, Bill shakes Nicky with identical stage directions: "Shaking him with each word" and "Shaking Nicky with each word" (Howe 15; 26). But Bill's violence toward Nicky prompts only a verbal response, not a physiological one. Is the audience to believe that Sandy is more physically strong than Bill, thus resulting in a more traumatic shaking episode? Or is Howe positing that the trauma of a mother's punishment is more psychologically damaging?

Sandy frequently finds herself at odds with her parental and wifely duties. Up until now, much focus has been given in this analysis to the tactics and reactions of both Sandy and Bill, as they are both engaged in the act of parenting in the first act of *Birth and After Birth*. However, the moments when they find themselves out of sync are perhaps more telling of Sandy's predicament as a wife and mother. The very first scene of the play, already referenced as the scene Sandy declares herself 'not [herself], but a wild thing' (Howe 6), begins with Bill engaging in a flight of fancy. Bill imagines himself a world-renowned tambourine virtuoso, being worshipped and ravaged by his adoring fans; but, as Sandy notes, his fantasy does not make room for her. Sandy in turn devises a fantasy where she is adored without Bill. The scene is playful and

results in a romantic moment between the two, but the play contains other scenes that do not end so amicably. This is the first of many scenes in which Bill is focused on his own desires, rather than considering Sandy. He consistently follows Nicky around with his video camera, espousing how grateful Nicky will be to have these videos as an adult, while also complimenting himself on his videographer skills and applauding himself for holding a superior skill to Jeffrey. When Bill cannot comfort himself through an assertion of his skill, he seeks emotional support from Sandy. We see this type of attention-seeking when Nicky breaks the glass. After Nicky kicks Bill, Bill is shocked that his son would attack him and inspects his own wound, noting that Nicky broke skin and informing Sandy that she better get the peroxide to sterilize it. Sandy, meanwhile, is still trying to clean up the broken glass, and Nicky is wailing on the floor. Bill's disregard for anything other than his own desire to be cared for comically echoes Nicky's own behavior. In a more serious moment, Bill asks Sandy to take a look at a letter he received from work. This letter speaks of 'professional inconsistencies' and it is implied that Bill's job is at risk. Bill complains that he is not respected for the work he does, and fantasizes about creating an alter-ego, "Charley EZ" (Howe 14), who will get the better of those at work. But as Bill expounds on this fantasy, Nicky approaches Sandy with a 'mommy' and 'baby' mask and asks to play 'babies,' a game that involves Sandy retelling the story of Nicky's birth. When Bill realizes that Sandy is not listening to him, he explodes at her, "You're not even listening to me! You don't give a good shit if I'm fired! All you care about is playing your moronic baby games with Nicky! I don't get it! I just don't get it!" (Howe 14-15). He then proceeds to storm from the room, leaving Sandy and Nicky at a loss. Howe's intentional mirroring of Nicky's outbursts in Bill's actions forcibly elide the child and the

husband's demands on Sandy's attention and care, a predicament that she regularly faces throughout the play.

The conflict between Bill and Sandy, based on Sandy's attention to Nicky, smacks of the Oedipal complex Howe has been suggesting up until this point. The Oedipus complex has "never been simply to do with sex and rivalry, as 'pop' psychology may have it" (Balfour 50) and is actually central to Freud's development of his theory of the mind. Rather, the Oedipal situation²⁹ concerns "relations between objects, as they are coloured by unconscious phantasy³⁰" (Balfour 50). In the case of Sandy, Bill, and Nicky, the primary concern is a conflict over Sandy's attention and the value Bill and Nicky are placing on themselves via that litmus. Bill, in a moment of vulnerability, is racked with jealousy and disappointment that he does not have Sandy's full attention. Nicky simultaneously asks to play a game that asserts his importance in Sandy's life and experience. In this instance, the Oedipal situation displayed is archetypal. Describing the initial Oedipal myth, Francis Grier writes of king and queen of Thebes:

They are immediately presented to us as a couple who cannot cope with a threesome relationship. As soon as their first child is born they feel under deadly threat; their equilibrium is fatally undermined. A catastrophe is foreseen. The myth does not tell us whether they had been content as a twosome, but they certainly feel they do not have the resources to cope with the far more complicated emotional situation when two becomes three. (1-2)

Howe's construction of the Apples as a family unit reflects the Oedipal situation perfectly, and it is how they navigate that conflict that is of primary concern in the first act of the play.

²⁹ The Oedipal situation is an extension of Freud's Oedipal complex, developed by Melanie Klein. Of key difference is Klein's belief that the unconscious phantasy presents much earlier in life than Freud believed, and that the situation extends to the parental couple, as well as the infant (Klein Trust).

³⁰ The unconscious phantasy, referred to here in short form, is the mental expression of both libidinal and aggressive impulses, as well as the defense against those impulses (Klein Trust).

Interestingly, the Oedipal situation brings Bill and Nicky into similar relation to Sandy, whose focus and love is at the heart of the conflict. In this way, Bill is cast as just as infantile as his four-year-old son. Unsurprisingly, this is a common psychoanalytic reading of couple dynamics: “Many couple relationships contain aspects of a regressive wish to be the infant with a mother who can provide everything; emotional, physical, and mental” (Morgan 11). Sandy’s placement at the apex of this triangle has dire repercussions for marriage, her motherhood, and herself.

The stress of juggling these conflicting demands for her attention is already taking its toll on Sandy. This conflict often presents itself in the alternative assertion of what Sandy is: a ruin. We first get a glimpse of this when Nicky bursts on stage. As he careens throughout the room, enjoying his presents, and Bill focuses on his own desires, Sandy despairs to herself, “When I looked in the mirror this morning, I saw an old woman. Not old, old, just used up” (Howe 11). Apropos to her name, Sandy psychosomatically expresses the stresses of her life as a mother and wife by regularly scratching her head, spilling piles of sand onto the floor: “It’s strange because I’ve never had dandruff” she states, examining the phenomenon, “It’s the weirdest thing, it doesn’t look like dandruff or eczema, but more like...I don’t know...my brains are drying up and leaking. I’m like some punctured sandbag...” (Howe 18-19). Sandy’s hair and front tooth also fall out during the course of the play. Sandy regularly refers to herself in such self-deprecating ways: “Look at me...I’m a ruin...This is starting to get scary...I’m like some rotting carcass that’s been washed up on the beach...some squid or octopus that’s missing half its suckers, or whatever you call those creepy suction thingies...” (Howe 28). Howe provides a combination of real-world symptoms of aging, as well as physicalized symbols of the aging process in the treatment of Sandy. Hair and teeth falling out are real concerns that nearly all adults encounter eventually,

but the sand coming from her scalp is a side-effect of the absurdist landscape in which Sandy resides. Her brains are 'drying up and leaking', she says, physicalizing the feeling of 'losing your marbles' or experiencing a lack of mental capacity.

In this way, Howe is crafting Sandy to represent a second-wave feminist view of motherhood, that "Motherhood is looked upon and looked over as a problem that will not go away, as an embarrassment. An embarrassment is something that impedes, confuses, deranges, and complicates" (Liss xvi). Indeed, Sandy seems perfectly crafted to represent Andrea Liss' assessment of even feminist motherhood: "To be a feminist mother continues to mean temporarily losing one's soul connection to one's work and one's self in order to give love and care to the new other" (xvii). For Sandy, it can be understood that she is losing her connection to the outside world and the terms by which she identifies herself. Sandy often hears and smells the ocean, a sensation no one else shares. This experience is connected to her sense of being a ruin in its manner of introduction, the repeated "It's the strangest thing, but ever since I got up this morning," which Sandy often uses to discuss her physical or mental state. She continues, "Ever since I got up this morning, I've been smelling the sea. Its scent is all around me. (*She inhales deeply*) It's as if I set sail in a little dinghy and am becalmed in the middle of the ocean, bobbing up and down in my housedress. Maybe I'll catch a fish, and maybe I won't...(*calling*) Here, fishy, fishy, fishy...Here, fishy, fishy, fishy..." (Howe 40). Sandy's descriptions of herself as a ruin are often metaphorically connected to the sea in some way (a rotting carcass on the beach, a squid without its suckers, etc.). This image of the sea, with its combination of beauty and decay, is deeply tied to Sandy's mental state, as well as to her character in general, and is an interesting choice on Howe's part to include. The sea represents something that is constantly churning but

remains the same, something containing untold life but also death, a truly contradictory force. Aligning motherhood with the sea in this way, Howe is foregrounding the difficulties of motherhood while also taking comfort in its permanence, its eternity. In this sense, Sandy's digression about the sea is a reference to her status, frozen in the midst of a vast maternity; perhaps she'll move forward, perhaps she won't, but either way, she is adrift on a sea over which she has little control. "It is the feminist mother's admission," Andrea Liss tells us, "that ambiguity is often the norm, an ambiguity that constantly tears and heals between the mother self and her professional self, between the mother self and her sexual self, between the mother self and her own child self" (xvii). Sandy is similarly torn between the idyllic life she wants to lead and the messy truth of her life in reality: "For a majority of women it remains difficult to reconcile increasingly burdensome maternal responsibilities with personal fulfillment," (2) Elisabeth Badinter remarks, giving specificity to the struggles Sandy seems to be grappling with.

Sandy faces conflict on many fronts: she wants to be the ideal mother, but she finds the realities of mothering to be far messier than she expected; she wants to be the ideal wife, but cannot mother and wife at the same time; she wants to love her life, but finds it hard to feel fulfilled when she feels she is failing on multiple fronts. Karen Rinaldi puts a finer point on the dilemma: "The assertion of motherhood as sacrifice comes with a perceived glorification. A woman is expected to sacrifice her time, ambition and sense of self to a higher purpose, one more worthy than her own individual identity. This leaves a vacuum in the place of her value" ("Motherhood"). Sandy's physical symptoms are a result of her inability to rectify her expectations for herself with her actual embodied sense of self. This internal conflict, it is revealed, is connected to the realization that she is no longer able to bear children. When Nicky

is finally able to make his birthday wish, he wishes for brothers and sisters. Sandy and Bill are stunned. "I'd like to have more babies, but I can't...We've been trying...There's nothing Mommy loves more than having babies, you know that...They can't seem to find any reason why we can't conceive again, it's just one of those things" (Howe 61-62). This revelation is painful to Sandy, who is deeply invested in her identity as a mother. Sandy regularly chastises herself with variations on the theme, "When I looked in the mirror this morning, I saw an old woman," but in the second act, she finishes the line, "When I looked in the mirror this morning, I saw an old woman who could only conceive once" (Howe 19; 86). It is worth noting that it is unclear if Sandy's deterioration is a result of her infertility or if her infertility is another physical side effect of the burden of motherhood. Early on, after calling herself a "rotting carcass," Sandy suddenly asks her husband, "Remember when I used to talk?... I mean, really say something?... I'm going to try and talk: I'm a mommy" (Howe 42). Is Howe suggesting that "I'm a mommy" is a substantive piece of dialogue, or is Howe commenting on the how subsumed Sandy is in her maternity that she cannot produce meaningful speech? Bill patronizes her after this declaration, and Sandy suddenly gets wistful, retelling her birth story in fantastic detail, remembering Nicky as a trapeze artist, swinging his way into life. Sandy tears up, as Bill gives up his last effort to seduce his wife—even in this moment of Sandy celebrating the birth of their child, Bill is still focused on his own needs.

With such an importance placed on being a mother, it is no wonder that Sandy focuses on convincing Mia and Jeffrey to change their minds and have a child as well. It could be interpreted that Sandy's determination to convince Mia may be rooted in her own inability to have a child: if she can't have a child herself, she'll create a child in someone else. As Jeffrey

notes, “When a civilized woman has a baby...she’s possessive of her birth experience and delights in retelling it” (Howe 74). His words are potent, as Sandy refers to her own childbirth experience multiple times throughout the play. Jeffrey’s emphasis on ‘civilized’ women here will offer a counterpoint to the primitive women he studies with his wife, but Howe is making a connection between the two. Just as Jeffrey reveals that both primitive and civilized women partake in similar maternal rituals, Howe emphasizes the primal role motherhood has on the human experience. Sandy’s experience with motherhood may not always be pleasant, and it may take its toll physically and spiritually on Sandy, but Sandy never questions if it was worth it. Throughout her difficulties with infertility, disciplining her child, and balancing her maternal and romantic relationships, Sandy never questions the validity of her decision to be a mother, even if Howe does her best to force that question into the audience’s mind.

CRUMBLE (LAY ME DOWN, JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE)

Sheila Callaghan uses and critiques maternal archetypes to craft Mother in *Crumble (Lay Me Down, Justin Timberlake)*. When we first meet her in the play’s overture, Mother is presented in a chef’s apron, cutting vegetables, isolated from the other characters. This image, though accurately reflecting Mother’s character—she is an accomplished chef, after all—serves to reinforce the mother-as-provider symbol that has become all too familiar. The image of an aproned mother invokes a cultural code that, in equal parts, supports traditional cultural expectations of mothers and reduces her to her subservient position within the family dynamic.

There is much evidence in her characterization of Mother to support the claim that Callaghan is intentionally attacking the archetype of ‘the perfect mother.’ In an interview in 2013, Callaghan speaks of her desire as a playwright to “keep planting these little detonations and

triggers” (Goff 169) in her work, an impulse that sets her pieces up handily for social critique. In *Crumble*, these detonations are best noted in the moments when Mother expresses insecurity or concerns about her mothering. Having lost her husband at the Christmas prior to the time of the play, Mother frets over how her daughter, Janice, only eleven, is handling the loss while approaching the anniversary. Mother frequently hyperventilates when faced with Janice’s odd behavior, a subtle indication that, despite her other concerns, Mother’s true work is the appropriate rearing of Janice, and her success in that endeavor colors her overall self-worth. After all, “[A mother] has to be perfect, because so much is at stake—the physical and mental health of her children, for which she is assumed to be totally responsible” (Caplan 69).

Callaghan establishes Mother’s motherhood through a complex and detailed depiction of tropes of motherhood, while equally illuminating how those depictions are often hollow and confining. To illustrate this claim, I will focus on three principle aspects of Mother’s characterization. First, her name: Mother is referred to as such in the *dramatis personae*, despite being named ‘Clara’ in the dialogue, in effect stripping her of her name and personhood in service to her motherhood. This lack of individuality reflects the perceived and expected selflessness of motherhood by literally removing Mother’s private self, including her professional, and romantic self. She is not Clara; she is Mother. Despite the fact that we see indications that she is a sister and a romantic being, she is identified for the audience solely by her maternal status, making it clear that this is her primary identification and function. Her name is no longer important; she is simply her role, which reflects the dire warning of Ann Crittenden: “The very definition of a mother is selfless service to another. We don’t owe Mother for her gifts; *she owes us*” (original emphasis, 1).

The second way in which Callaghan engages maternal tropes in her characterization of Mother is through her occupation. Despite her impressive culinary skills³¹, her angsty, preteen daughter does not eat the food prepared for her. Mother's talents and effort are at best taken for granted by her daughter, if not being actively ignored, and yet Mother persists in concocting more and more elaborate meals. Again, I turn to Crittenden for her analysis on the value of mother's work: "All of the lip service to motherhood still floats in the air, as insubstantial as clouds of angel dust. On the ground, where mothers live, the lack of respect and tangible recognition is still part of every mother's experience" (2).

Callaghan's choice of occupation for Mother, while conveniently providing an excuse for Mother's elaborate meals, also supports the real-world pattern that women are more apt to work in certain fields: "There is evidence of this assumption not only in women's prescribed roles as mother and homemaker but also in the employment arena, where we still see far more women than men working in the traditional caring professions and, conversely, fewer women than men employed in the more traditionally masculine areas like computing sciences, engineering, and firefighting" (Ross 13). Seeing and expecting women to be in service-driven industries supports the interpretation that "people believe not only that women are caring and nurturing but that women should be" (Cole et al., p. 212). The gourmet-cooking, Pilates-taking, nameless Mother feeds into contemporary understandings of motherhood and those mothers who try to 'have it all.' "Emboldened by the radical idea that they would combine work and family rather than being

³¹ "Are you eating tonight, I'm making something light. Ah, starting with bruschetta and an olive tapenade, and then pork tenderloin glazed with a brown sugar and bourbon sauce topped with a honey Dijon, and a roma tomato salad with fresh basil and garlic on the side. And peach bread pudding for dessert. And I made some mint lemonade spritzers" (Callaghan 60).

forced to choose one or the other,” Leslie Bennetts writes, “women embraced [‘having it all’] with enthusiasm, pursuing challenging careers even as they married and raised their children” (3), which is a worthy, if sometimes impractical ideal for women. The change in expectation that mothers be solely satisfied by the domestic sphere to the new expectation that women be masters of both the domestic and professional realms represents how “paradigms supporting notions of the good mother are continually shaped and reshaped by gendered assumptions, culture, and the context of the historical moment in which motherhood is being examined” (Ross 4).

Mother’s attempts to be juggle expectations of perfection are the root of her anxiety and attacks of hyperventilation, as she feels she is failing in the goal of ‘having it all.’ For example, in the opening exchange between Mother and Janice, Mother spews forth a monologue of maternal badgering, and Janice, in a fit of preteen snark, responds with exaggerated literality:

MOTHER: Janice, it’s frigid in here, you’ll catch pneumonia or strep, we really don’t need that this year, and put some socks on, your toes will fall off...and don’t spend all night on your computer. You’ll, your eyes will. You’ll go blind, or. Stop looking at me like that.

JANICE: MY TOES ARE FALLING OFF. HOLY CRAP. SOMEONE CALL AN AMBULANCE. (*JANICE exits into her room...MOTHER begins to hyperventilate*).

MOTHER: ... oh dear Lord... (*To calm herself MOTHER does Pilates*). (60-61).

Mother hyperventilates again when she cannot stop the radiator from banging (Callaghan 75), and after Janice eerily informs her that, upon experiencing her first period, she is not bleeding her own blood, but her dead father’s (Callaghan 83). These moments represent things which Mother cannot control, and her hyperventilation is a result of her belief that she *should* be able to fix them, that she is somehow failing in her duties. Mother berates herself that she cannot handle things in the way that her deceased husband could:

MOTHER: I'm a mess. I'm an enormous unavailing glut of nerves...I'm supposed to be a rock for her...And I'm doing Pilates and they aren't working...*And I don't know how to fix anything around here, HE always fixed everything...*I want to be that but my tongue is a brick and my arms are wrecking balls and my heart is a monkey thrashing in its cage and I don't know how to make it stop. (emphasis added, Callaghan 76)

In this monologue, Mother equates her inability to fix the radiator with her failings as a parent. Her Pilates hobby is indicative of her attempt to manage her anxiety when she cannot 'fix' a situation, but as she states, it is not providing the clarity and tranquility she is seeking. In this poignant confession to the fantasy Harrison Ford, Mother lets loose the concerns and judgments she has been holding onto. Just like her clanging radiator that needs the pressure released, Mother is wound so tight, she cannot move without exploding forth. She is overwhelmed with insecurity and, therefore turns not to her own judgment or her own abilities, but instead to the judgment and advice of others.

This is the third way in which Callaghan is critiquing tropes of motherhood. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English note in their survey *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of Expert Advice to Women* "The breakdown of maternal integrity was complete: the mother...is expected to turn an obedient and worshipful ear to the father figures who will coach her in her new role. Accordingly, the voice of the professional becomes insidiously paternalistic" (246). Callaghan presents Mother as a character lacking a way forward and desperately feeling the absence of that path. Absent her husband, Mother turns instead to her sister, Barbara, and to her fantasy male, Harrison Ford. Played by the same actor who appears as the ghostly refraction of Father³², Harrison Ford appears to Mother at the climax of her own inner conflict. Throughout the scene,

³² It is interesting to note that Father too is named in the script. His name is Gary, but he retains his paternal title in the *dramatis personae*.

Mother expresses her fears and concerns, and Harrison reassures her: “She’s your daughter, of course you’re worried...You’re doing super...It’s only been a year...Perfectly understandable” (Callaghan 76). His statements lack specificity, implying that what Mother needs is not guidance, but validation. The specific reasons for such validation become clear in this exchange:

MOTHER: ...sometimes...this is terrifying...she looks at me...and her eyes are filled with bile...and the bile has a bubbling voice of its own...

HARRISON FORD: What does it say?

MOTHER: Your fault. Your fault.

HARRISON FORD: Now Clara. You’re just projecting your own fears onto her.

MOTHER: Am I

HARRISON FORD: You know it’s a lie

MOTHER: Tell me

HARRISON FORD: There is no fault. The moment has a life of its own.

MOTHER: Oh Harrison

HARRISON FORD: You’re a good mother

MOTHER: I want to be

HARRISON FORD: You’re doing everything right

MOTHER: You really think so

HARRISON FORD: I really do. Now relax. (Callaghan 76-77)

In this moment, we learn that Mother is carrying not only grief, but guilt for her husband’s death. She feels she set the events in motion that killed Father. It is perhaps because of this guilt that Mother no longer trusts her instincts as a parent. Again, despite Mother’s confession and anxiety, Harrison Ford does little but reassure her that she is right, that she is not at fault, and that she is doing her best. We see this in her prompt “Tell me” and his reply “There is no fault.” Callaghan acknowledges and subverts female submission to a patriarchal expert in her construction of Harrison Ford. Mother’s fantasy is not one of a superior male or even a guiding force that relieves her responsibilities, but one that listens to her, comforts her, and supports her to follow her own instincts. Interestingly, this scene shows Harrison Ford deliver a line that was earlier attributed to Father—“You’re so tense. Your back is so taut If I had fifty of you I could make a fence”

(Callaghan 77)—indicating that Mother is using the fantasy not to replace her missing partner with an illusion, but to simply fill the hole his absence left.

Callaghan uses these fantasy scenes to aid both Mother and Janice in finding the confidence to rely on their own instincts. Where Mother has Harrison Ford, Janice has Justin Timberlake, who also speaks with Father’s words and offers support for her ideas. Callaghan employs triple-casting for Father, Harrison Ford, and Justin Timberlake, aligning these characters together and bringing the celebrities into tangible importance by connecting them to Father. The choice to break these fantasies up is an intriguing one. Janice’s fantasy is one rooted in sexual attraction³³, so it is understandable that she does not imagine her literal father, but rather a man who can emulate but be separate from him. With Mother, however, that choice is more complicated. Mother chooses a celebrity fantasy as a husband-surrogate born out of necessity due to her intense grief over Father’s death, rather than from a lack of affection or loyalty to Father. However, it also implies that Mother does not *need* Father, specifically, to survive. Both Justin Timberlake and Harrison Ford are clearly aligned with Father’s presence and his relationship to his wife and daughter, but neither female character strictly relies on his memory for the comfort and support they seek. Father is gone, and they struggle without him, but they find with these surrogate-fantasies the support and strength to define themselves and their own actions. They use these surrogate-Fathers to help them learn how to continue without him, how to continue on without a patriarchal figure.

³³ At one point, Justin Timberlake and Janice “screw” (Callaghan 81).

For Mother, she finds through her exchange with Harrison Ford the courage to fix the apartment and reconnect with Janice, but more importantly, she gains the assurance to trust her own instincts in such matters. As previously mentioned, after Janice starts her period and tells Mother that she believes it is her father's blood she's bleeding, Mother tailspins into hyperventilation and seeks out Barbara. She states her fears that Father's death was her fault, providing in poetic detail the events of that tragedy. She plaintively asks Barbara, "How can this body/ This perverse apparatus of bones and muscles and other wet things/ How can this little body wrap itself around such a moment/ Without falling apart" (Callaghan 85). In this moment, Callaghan is relying on dramatic framing: the play opens with, and utilizes throughout, a tableau of Father frozen in the tragic moment of his death. Only when Mother spews forth the facts of what happened to Father does the audience finally learn how he died³⁴, and only after this moment is Mother able to break from her petrifying grief. Harrison Ford allows Mother to express her fears without judgment and therefore begin to process her trauma in a productive way.

While Callaghan uses grief to frame the insecurities Mother feels, it is important to note that she also locates insecurity in the role of motherhood in general. Mother's circumstances place grief at the forefront of her journey, but Callaghan does not imply that grief is the only cause for Mother's concerns. Indeed, Callaghan aligns the moment of motherhood with a type of grief and source of concern. In retelling her birth story, Mother pronounces:

MOTHER: A thousand years ago
Her sweet weight new to our arms
Two adults were struck witless

³⁴ Father was adjusting the angel at the top of the Christmas tree because Mother was concerned it would catch fire. As he was doing so, a floorboard broke, knocking his ladder off balance, and sending him through a picture window. Mother blames herself because she asked him to fix the angel.

At the fruit we had rendered
 And our throats gnarled in terrible love-agony,
 The heaviest of all hanging things
 Her eyes crunched like two anguished caterpillars
 Her mouth a hot blossom, lips shivering
 Impossibly tiny pieces of body tensing and releasing
 To a tune played in infant-time
 For a thousand years we stood
 Choking on our warm blood orange without the peel, our daughter,
 And somehow we could not swallow
 Her shadow grew and tossed its round mountain on the wall
 We shrank and shrank
 Until we were lima beans slipping on the tile floor
 And from within the center of our salty flood
 The words we found, the only words,
 Gaping-eyed and hollow
 Were these:
 "Please let no harm come to this child" (Callaghan 75).

Mother's eloquent reminiscence of the moment she became a mother speaks to the beautiful incoherency of motherhood. The imagery in her speech evokes the pain, fear, and joy of the moment, and her description of herself and her husband, tiny and incapable, indicates not a passing phase, but the eternal state of being a parent. In this monologue, Callaghan crafts a vision of beautiful, joyful pain, of ecstasy born out of discomfort: an illustration of motherhood.

Conclusion

Both Tina Howe and Sheila Callaghan utilize clever and complicated depictions of motherhood to offer their own criticisms about how motherhood and mothering are treated. Interestingly, they both restrict their depictions of motherhood to the private realm, focusing on mothers in action rather than on how society values mothers outside of the domestic sphere. While they do so in very different ways, both playwrights utilize their depictions of mothering to comment on the institution of motherhood. Both playwrights tap into similar pronatalist and maternalistic attitudes to describe the presumed view of motherhood and to show how

problematic and unattainable such ideals can be. While both mother characters hold themselves to idealized standards, each in turn betrays insecurity and anxiety about their abilities to perform mothering 'correctly.'

These expressions of insecurity can most easily be seen in the ways in which both characters refer to the experience of mothering in terms of size. Mother has a beautifully poetic monologue about the shrinking effect of becoming a mother, which reflects the daunting undertaking she has before her in being a parent. As she feels herself reduced to a lima bean, her only thought is of protection for her child. Sandy, too, refers to the absurd size of her child, asking "He's getting so big? Or maybe we're starting to shrink?" (Howe 28), implying that her role as a mother has somehow diminished her in relation to her son. These moments can be read as not only commentary on the sheer scale of the life of parenthood, of how enormous the responsibility of the prospect is, but also as a reflection of the joy and all-encompassing experience that feeds, and is fed by, essential motherhood.

In focusing on the cost of motherhood, it is interesting to note the expressions of grief that are made in these two depictions. Sandy is actively grieving the loss of her fertility, which directly affects the way she mothers. It is unsurprising, when her grief is considered, that Sandy chooses to recount her birthing story over and over, at times choosing this retelling over attending to her husband's needs. This revelation also informs Sandy's strict adherence to performing an idealized form of motherhood: if this is her only chance, she wants it to be perfect. Mother, grieving her husband, is also experiencing a situational infertility: she can no longer conceive a child with her deceased husband, but more specifically, she can no longer enact the model of motherhood she had built for herself, since that vision of motherhood included her

husband. The grieving inherent in infertility provides a poignant context to the mothers' comments about size and motherhood: they are made small in relation to the size of what they are grieving. Though Sandy may not acknowledge her grief as directly as Mother does, both are battling this process of loss.

Through this process of loss, another interesting dimension presents itself in both depictions: surrogacy. Sandy takes on the idea early in the play that the perfection of her family will spark the desire to start a family of their own in Jeffrey and Mia: "What if they changed their minds tonight? With us!...Because of what a great family we are" (Howe 22). This wish stems not just from Sandy's desire to confirm her family's idyllic state, but to also, in some way, perpetuate fertility. Sandy is projecting her desire for another child onto Mia and looking at Mia's resulting obstinance as a surrogate for her own fertility; if she can conquer one, perhaps she can conquer the other? Mother processes her grief through a fantastic surrogate husband, Harrison Ford, who speaks in her husband's words and supports her in moments of uncertainty. The use of a surrogate in Mother's case is directly tied to her grief, as it is too painful and unhealthy to imagine her deceased husband. Instead, she creates a fantasy that provides her with the comfort and relationship she craves. The way these characters handled the loss of their 'object,' Sandy's fertility and Mother's husband respectively, suggests a psychoanalytical model for primitive loss which inspires denial: denial about the loss and denial that the object would transplant itself to someone else. Sandy's obsession with inspiring Mia to conceive and Mother's fantastic creation of Harrison Ford support a reading of acts of denial, the inability to process the events which have occurred. Their denial can be tied back to an overwhelming attachment to their idealized self: mother.

In these depictions, we see the joy and obsession these characters find in their maternity, as well as the pain and loss that result from deviations from that ideal. In this way, these characters are perfect avatars for essentialized motherhood. They hold at their core the tenets of pronatalism and maternalism, and their character conflicts arise from an inability to pair that ideal with their given circumstances. Howe and Callaghan are questioning the ways in which motherhood is perceived and enacted societally by selecting such philosophically-rooted conflicts for their characters. In providing a critical view of motherhood, the playwrights are subverting common maternal narratives that suggest a liberating and eternally-fulfilling understanding of motherhood. By questioning the cultural codes of motherhood, they are in fact, questioning motherhood as an institution.

NOT MOTHERS, CHILDLESS WOMEN, AND UNWOMEN

“The barren woman...is considered a witch”³⁵

The ‘Woman Question,’ or ‘what should society do with women,’ presents a conflict between society’s proscribed role for women and women’s own senses of self. An integral part of the challenges to the woman question is the position of motherhood in society. But alternately, the woman question does not address women who are not mothers. Rather than providing a solution to the woman question, the childless woman remains a further complication to the social order. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English muse, “The Woman Question was a matter of immediate personal experience: the consciousness of possibilities counterpoised against prohibitions, opportunities against ancient obligations, instincts against external necessities. The Woman Question was nothing less than the question of how women would survive and what would become of them, in the modern world” (17). The previous chapter focuses on the feminist interrogation of maternalism and pronatalism, which aims to determine, and then to dismantle, their hold on social order. Taking as its central assumption that motherhood is the dominant social expectation for women, this chapter will continue that discussion by focusing on the particular experiential burden of women who do not adhere to the approved social narrative of childbearing, through choice and/or circumstance, as well as taking a critical look at how feminist scholarship addresses these populations.

³⁵ Jeffrey, in Tina Howe’s *Birth and After Birth*, page 86.

The feminist movement, specifically during its second wave, unsuccessfully grappled with how motherhood would fit into their reframing of the female position in society. Ann Snitow remarks:

From the beginning, feminists set out to break two taboos: The taboo on describing the complex and mixed experiences of actual mothers and the taboo on the celebration of a childfree life... [but] feminists were better able in the long run to attend to mother's voices than they were able to imagine a full and deeply meaningful life without motherhood, without children. ("Analyses" 145)

Indeed, the many waves of feminism have seemingly supported the assumptions about women and motherhood that they are purportedly trying to break. Ann Snitow, in analyzing the position of motherhood within feminist thought, further breaks down the evolution of that position throughout the second wave. From 1963-1974, she identifies a period of 'demon texts' that served as the overly critical entrée of this thought and for which she feels feminism has been apologizing ever since (Snitow, "Motherhood" 35). From 1976-1980, she notes the development of a more stringent critique of motherhood and the validation of motherhood as a subject worthy of theoretical inquiry (Snitow, *Uncertainty* 104). After 1980, Snitow observes that the conversation switched from mothers to families, a shift that she feels is a return to pronatalist thought: "In this period, feminists speak of 'different voices' and 'single mothers by choice'; the feminist hope of breaking the iron bond between mother and child seems gone, except in rhetorical flourishes, perhaps gone for good in this wave" ("Motherhood" 34). Motherhood has remained a complicated subject in the feminist movement, as feminists have tried to revalue women's work while reconciling themselves with the disparity of desire for motherhood. Jocelyn Stitt describes the issue as a "forty-year evolution and debate about the values and dangers of motherhood within feminism and the culture at large" and Elisabeth Badinter notes, "Once

women had gained access to birth control, they turned their energies to achieving essential rights, of freedom and equality with men, which they hoped to reconcile with motherhood” (3; 1). The problem became and remains: how can motherhood be repositioned within a feminist landscape in a way that meaningfully liberates motherhood from its historical restrictions while also revaluing not just ‘women’s work,’ but the work that women are allowed to do? This effort, while perhaps the most noble of all the aims of feminism, has ultimately become the most difficult to accomplish. Ann Crittenden comments that “changing the status of mothers, by gaining real recognition for their work, is the great unfinished business of the women’s movement” (7).

Much study has gone into how women actually mother and how those who study motherhood engage in those studies³⁶, but scholars are still not able to agree on the appropriate position of motherhood in relation to feminism, society, or the female experience. Adrienne Rich remarks, “A woman’s status as childbearer [is] the test of her womanhood...motherhood [is] the enforced identity for woman” (“Motherhood” 261). However, as researchers have noted, the percentage of women who choose to remain childless has increased since the 1970s, with nearly 20% of women remaining childless at the end of their childbearing years (Gillespie, “Childfree” 123; Kelly 157)³⁷. As voluntary childlessness has increased, so too has its scholarly attention.

³⁶ “When motherhood has been studied, the focus has almost always been exclusively on topics that could be associated with “problem mothers,” such as teen pregnancy, unwanted pregnancy, and drug use during pregnancy” (Ross 3).

³⁷ At this point, I find it imperative to mention that these findings and the subsequent discussion of voluntarily childless women refer predominantly to affluent, Western, white women. This chapter will focus on the real-world counterparts of the childless women represented in the dramatic texts of this study. I do not suggest that the populations outside of this limited demographic do not face their own stigmas surrounding childlessness or that they are less worthy of such a study.

Research on voluntarily childless (VC) women has gained prominence since the early 1990s, as theorists suggest social and economic factors to justify the change, but this literature has largely been restricted to heteronormative couples (Gillespie, "Childfree" 124). Increasing attention on the childless woman seems to be the next necessary step in the conversation started by mother theorists. As Carolyn Morell points out, "[the] absence of attention to women who do not mother reinforces the notion that motherhood is *the* critical experience which both actualizes and symbolizes normality and maturity for women" (original emphasis, *Conduct* 12). In liberating motherhood from its historically restrictive social definitions, so too must the childless woman be released from the burden of pronatalism. Only when motherhood can be understood as a true choice can women be free to make a socially unmotivated choice to become mothers.

One of the earliest critical works to engage voluntary childlessness as a valid choice is Carolyn Morell's *Unwomanly Conduct: The Challenges of Intentional Childlessness*. Morell's work came about through a need to fill a void in theory³⁸ and to legitimize her own experiences: "As I experience the status, being childless means simultaneously to be reminded of your second-rate life and to be ignored" (*Conduct* xiv). Morell reflects upon the ways in which maternalism and pronatalism have defined societal attitudes that link womanhood with motherhood and judge those women who do not adhere enthusiastically to that proscription. As she poignantly quips: "There are women, and there are ideas about women. While women themselves vary considerably, one idea about them seems stable: motherhood, as wish or reality, is their essential and defining characteristic or condition" (Morell, *Conduct* 3). Morell continues her analysis of

³⁸ The majority of the mother theory texts utilized in the previous chapter do not address voluntary childlessness.

motherhood in the social milieu before embarking on her analysis of the ways in which childless women are treated by that same society. Like Snitow, Morell notes that,

What is often referred to as the “first wave” of the women’s movement in the United States, which followed the rise of industrialization, extended the notion that women were inherently nurturant and morally superior to men. It was not until the early ages of the late 1960s and into the mid 1970s, that there was a collective rebellion against the ideas that motherhood best defined women’s place and that the cluster of associations surrounding the role best defined women’s nature. (*Conduct* 5)

However, Morell supports Snitow’s claim that the women’s movement saw a return to maternalism toward the end of the 1970s. She warns, “Regardless of their actual maternal status, all women are adversely affected by aspects of the resurgence of maternalism. Most real mothers fall short of the idealized supermother, while childless women who cannot or who will not ‘have’ children are judged defective or deviant,” before continuing, “piercing this ideology which links women’s ultimate social and psychic fulfillment to mothering requires a direct challenge to the apparent inevitability of motherhood” (Morell, *Conduct* 11).

In an attempt to deconstruct these prevailing ideologies of maternalism and pronatalism, Morell supplies her three dubious discourses about childless women so as to demystify the ways in which language is used to support or dismantle such assumptions. Morell explains her discursive analysis as a strategic one: “Hegemonic discourse or ideologies have strong institutional bases within the society. The plurality of experience ensures that powerful interest groups put a great deal of energy, time, and money into promoting certain views of the world” (*Conduct* 15). Morell’s three dubious discourses about childless women are the discourses of derogation, compensation, and regret. Derogation refers to the morally flawed nature of these women. Compensation speaks to the activities and attachments these women engage in as a replacement for having children of their own. Regret is the only possible future these discourses

allow for women without children. These discourses work together, Morell posits, as a means of supporting the patriarchal construction of maternalism and pronatalism, and such a relationship should not be allowed to exist uninterrogated: “The fact that this thought pattern is actively generated by the dominant cultural group *because it is consistent with the dominant group’s interests* is forgotten. Maternalism is part of the dominant belief system and is comprised of myths that do not offer an accurate description of women’s lives” (original emphasis, *Conduct* 110).

Maura Kelly, in her survey of voluntary childlessness, identifies four main responses to voluntary childlessness: disbelief, regret, selfishness, and lack of femininity. These responses echo Morell’s discourses and support the existence of pronatalist social attitudes. As Kelly notes, voluntarily childless women are often not believed or are faced with the assertion that they will change their mind, reinforcing the maternalistic attitude that women are inherently nurturing and desiring of children. This attitude has been noted by other theorists as well. As one woman remarked to Rosemary Gillespie, “I am too young to know what I want, if what I want is not to be a mother. It would be different if I wanted to be a mother. I would not be too young then” (“When No Means No” 228).

Kelly also notes the response to voluntary childlessness that assumes a woman’s regret. In line with Morell’s discourse of regret, Kelly notes that women often are charged with this inevitability, despite their own lack of the feeling. Indeed, Kelly notes that voluntarily childless women scored their life satisfaction more strongly than involuntarily childless women and mothers. This finding supports Morell’s claim that, “the designation [regret] seemed too pervasive, deep, and enduring to describe their experiences. Instead, women tended to relate

specific occasions when they experienced ‘wistful’ feelings...or ‘passing thoughts’ about the road not taken” (*Conduct* 100). The reported responses that childlessness is seen as selfishness and the lack of femininity also echo Morell’s discourse of derogation, assuming some moral flaw on the part of the VC woman. Indeed, Marsha Somers found that VC women perceived themselves as being more negatively stereotyped for their choices than mothers (647). While the reasons and circumstances that result in a woman’s childlessness may vary, it seems that the ways in which these women are treated and talked about varies little.

One of the main ways in which VC women have been stigmatized and othered is the dismissive manner in which they are spoken of and grouped together. In an effort to dismantle this stereotyping, one of the main objectives of theorists has been to reclaim the way in which these women are addressed. The debate over what to name these women is rooted in the problematic way they are generally treated socially. As Anna Gotlib notes,

As much as broad pronatalist narratives tend to offer the mother as an image of female self-actualization and the fulfillment of [her] essential, natural role, they also paint the woman without children as either a menacing presence, portrayed as an outcast, and her freedom and vitality are branded wicked, or else as the pitiable spinster...a failure. The result is often a lack of non-liminal spaces for the VC woman who has simply chosen not to mother. (330)

Attending to the plurality of women’s lived experiences, that worthy goal remarked upon by Ann Snitow, is a key component of the deconstruction of maternalist ideologies. However, it also becomes a site of division, as indicated by the discourse surrounding the naming of the population of women without children. Primarily, there is the division of women who are childless voluntarily and involuntarily. Women who are involuntarily childless tend to evoke pity and are often, though not always, spoken of in sympathetic terms. Voluntarily childless women are hard to group together, as their motives differ, and are therefore also hard to name. Perhaps

the debate about what to name these women also resides in the observation that, “Far from simply reflecting an already given social reality, language actually constructs social reality” (Morell, “Saying No” 314). Many terms have been suggested for this population of women—childless women, voluntarily childless (VC for short), childfree, non-mothers, and not mothers to name a few—but the population itself cannot seem to agree on one preferred term. Rosemary Gillespie remarks, “Language used to define the state of not giving birth to children has previously existed only in terms of an absence or deficiency of motherhood, as in ‘infertility’ or ‘childlessness’” (“Childfree” 123). Gillespie utilizes ‘childfree’ to emphasize that childlessness “can be an active and fulfilling choice” (“Childfree” 123), but many in the VC community dislike the term. Enza Gandolfo feels that ‘childfree’ “implies a desire to be rid of children” (113). She finds the alternatives ‘childless’ and ‘non-mother’ equally problematic, continuing, “non-mother perpetuates the articulation of womanhood with motherhood and implies a failure to *become*,” while childless is “weighed down by implications of lack, and it too illustrates the negative nature of the discourses surrounding childlessness” (Gandolfo 113). Gandolfo ultimately chose ‘non-mother’ as her preferred term. Morell calls for the creation of a new term that categorizes the state of voluntary childlessness in a manner that does not inadvertently reinforce the dominant ideology (e.g. lesbian rather than ‘manless’ or ‘manfree’). Morell uses ‘not-mothers’ because she feels it “seems more descriptive and less encompassing than ‘non-mothers’” (*Conduct* 21). The trouble can be summarized thusly: “Words not only name objects, they convey attitudes” (Morell, *Conduct* 21). In this study, I will designate a unique term for each character discussed, as each character represents a different circumstance and attitude toward her childlessness. Through close reading, I will look at the circumstances of each of these childless characters and

the ways in which they are stigmatized within these texts. I will look for trends across the treatment of these three characters, as well as at the unique ways in which they are presented. Though I will be drawing comparisons across the three characters, as well as across their mother counterparts, focus will be given to how the characters present and treat themselves, rather than how others treat them.

Mia as Not Mother

Birth and After Birth's Mia Freed appears on stage at the top of act two, in a flurry of welcoming dialogue. She is capable, respected, and loved by her family. A revered child anthropologist, Mia spends her life studying unique children throughout the world. However, she also makes time for family, making sure not to miss her nephew's birthday. She and her husband, Jeffrey, lead distinctly different lives than their relatives, Sandy and Bill Apple. Mia and Jeffrey work together, yet when they arrive, Jeffrey states that "Mia was delivering a paper at an anthropology convention and got tied up with a lot of questions at the end" (Howe 34). The implication is that Mia is the one who is considered the expert, or at least that Jeffrey is comfortable allowing Mia a professional identity of her own. Already, the dynamic between Jeffrey and Mia seems in stark contrast to the one between Bill and Sandy.

Throughout the second act, Mia and Jeffrey regale the Apples with tales from their travels, tales of flying children, incredible feats of strength by children, and the mystical wonders of these other children. Despite, or perhaps because of, her interest in these other cultures and children, Mia does not engage with Nicky in the same way as she does with the idea of them. As Nicky tries to impress her with his accomplishments, such as "I can write my name!" and "I pulled Mommy in my wagon!" (Howe 36), Mia is kind, but unimpressed. She does not interrogate him further,

but nor does she belittle his abilities. She patiently endures his inappropriate questions—“Do you have a baby hole?” (Howe 36)—and applauds his cello playing—“He’s really remarkable” (Howe 50)—yet for every brag his parents offer, Mia and Jeffrey can name a group of children that are far more impressive in their eyes.

The discussion and comparisons of Nicky with the other children Mia and Jeffrey study remains a constant undertone throughout the act, as Mia and Jeffrey refuse to demure to Sandy and Bill’s desire for praise and approval of Nicky and, by extension, the latter pair’s own parenting. The most impactful anecdote of Mia’s is the tale of the Whan See people, an arboreal tribe of people, part-simian, part-sapien. With soft fur, a tail, and delicate features, they were enticing subjects for Mia and Jeffrey. The Whan See create beautiful art out of leaves, dance acrobatically, and have “no words in their vocabulary for hate, anger or war” (Howe 51). Understandably, Jeffrey and Mia were drawn to this idyllic people, and they admit that they considered staying with them: “Neither of us wanted to leave. We’d have given up everything to stay with them. / Our careers, our fieldwork, our publications...” (Howe 52). However, the Whan See had a flaw with which the anthropologists couldn’t rectify themselves.

Mia and Jeffrey begin to recount their last night with the Whan See: A young girl went into labor, and they were exposed to the Whan See’s birthing ritual. Traditionally, all of the women in the tribe participate in the ritual, and the women invited Mia to join them. The mother birthed her baby, but immediately the women raised the child back up to the mother’s womb, which opened to receive the child. Mia understood that the mother had to withstand a certain number of fetal reinsertions. As Jeffrey explains:

You have to remember, these were a highly primitive people who took things literally. When a civilized woman has a baby, she too is possessive, only in more subtle ways. She’s

possessive of her birth experience and delights in retelling it. She's possessive of her baby and tries to keep him helpless for as long as possible. Well, these Stone Age women were just acting out those same impulses by forcing the baby back into the womb. Through fetal reinsertion, you see, the primitive mother could experience her moment of motherhood again and again and again. (Howe 53-54)

At this point, Jeffrey notably removes himself from the recitation of this tale, and eventually the room, warning Mia not to continue either, as she 'gets upset.' Mia, however, continues, as if she cannot stop herself. Mia was encouraged by the women to participate, and they gave her the baby, guiding her hands toward the mother and through the process. Eventually, Mia was doing this on her own. However, the mother and baby began to go into shock, and the child died. When she realized what had happened, Mia gave the child to the mother, who clawed at the child, trying to revive it, before flinging herself and the child to the ground, effectively committing suicide. Mia, traumatized by the experience, decided to leave the Whan See.

Mia's trauma is interpreted by Sandy as a fear of childbirth, and she immediately insists that the fear is natural, but childbirth isn't like that, that in fact, motherhood is magical. However, Sandy does not restrict herself to a discursive propagation of maternalism. Instead, she physically forces a traumatized Mia into a Western birthing ritual, creating a cold, clinical, and dictatorial hospital setting in their living room. Sandy, Bill, and Nicky coach Mia to breathe in and out, to lie down on the floor, and then Nicky begins taking her vitals, as he produces medical equipment from nowhere. Mia frantically tries to escape, but they hold her down, warning her ominously, "You don't want to miss everything, do you?" (Howe 57). As Mia becomes more and more hysterical, she cries out: "Something's happening!...I don't want this!...Stop it!" (Howe 57) before passing out. As she does so, Jeffrey rushes into the room and rescues Mia from Sandy and Bill's clutches. They carry on with the birthday party, attempting to ignore the unconscious Mia, with

only Nicky acknowledging the horror of what has just happened—“How could you *kill* someone on my birthday? Even I wasn’t that bad!” (Howe 59).

When Mia finally wakes up, she informs the room that she had ‘the strangest dream.’ In it, Nicky was her child, but he was a tiny ivory carving. She lost him and desperately searched for him throughout a forest. Then she found a large cake that turned into an ark. On the ark, she resumed her search, leading her to the very top, in the crow’s nest. Looking down, she realized that the ark had become a perfect miniature, made out of ivory. She realized that the ship was her child, that she hadn’t lost him. In fact, he was always with her, “my talisman, my magic charm...my boy” (Howe 64). With that realization, Mia and Jeffrey leave to pack for their next adventure, much to the frustration of the Apples.

Mia’s journey through memory, trauma, and dream are interestingly symbolic of the journey a childless woman takes in a pronatalist society. Mia, an anthropologist, expresses early on her interest in masks, in taking on new identities that seem to take you over. In this manner, Mia seems taken in by the Whan See, an enticing tribe that captivates her imagination and her idealism. They are artistic, peaceful, and communal people, and she seriously considers giving up her career to join them. However, the Whan See are not perfect, and Mia cannot justify the price of admission, as it were. To join the Whan See means to sacrifice yourself to the childbearing process, to relive the joy and trauma of that moment, and to give over to this all-consuming identity. It is a cost that Mia cannot afford, and yet it is one that she is tempted by. Despite her initial confusion and hesitance, she agrees to join in the birthing ritual and eventually participates enthusiastically. It is not until the ritual ends tragically that Mia is shaken back into reality and herself. By walking away from the Whan See, Mia is rejecting strict adherence to a culture of

maternalism and pronatalism. It is an educated confirmation of her voluntary childlessness. Symbolically, the Whan See is a tribe of reproducing couples that Mia and Jeffrey immerse themselves in to study. They almost get caught up in this lifestyle but are repelled by the horrific barbarity the tribe displays.

As Mia finishes telling the harrowing tale of how she made the decision to remain childless, Sandy and Bill immediately and aggressively begin to coerce her to rethink that decision, assuring her that “it isn’t like that” and “*you* should have a baby” (Howe 55; 56). The pressure they exert on her is, once again, highly compelling. Taking advantage of her fragile state, they force her into the Western birthing ritual, which is cold, clinical, and judgmental. As Sandy, Bill, and Nicky assume the roles and procedure of medical staff, taking Mia’s vitals and ordering her to remain still and breathe, Mia’s pleas for release become desperate. Their threats that she will ‘miss everything’ reinforce the pronatalist mantra that motherhood is the ultimate female experience, and the medical detachment with which they order her about speaks to the institutionalized manner in which motherhood is treated in Western society. Mia’s childlessness is treated as a flaw that the Apples must overcome, by force if necessary, and their treatment of her supports Rosemary Gillespie’s remarks that, “choosing to be childfree...is often seen as deviant, unfeminine, and an unhealthy choice for women; one that transgresses traditional constructions of femininity” (“Childfree” 124). Mia’s choice is being denied, overwritten by the Apples’ pronatalist ideology. Mia is left with no recourse but to remove herself entirely from the situation, in this case by fainting. It falls to her husband to defend her while Mia cannot participate in the continuing attacks on her childlessness. Interestingly, Jeffrey defends Mia through exceptionalism, rather than attacking the societal norms being used to control her-

“Afraid to have children’? My dear Sandy, you don’t have a clue about that woman and her feelings for children. Not. One. Fucking. Clue!” (Howe 58).

Mia eventually regains consciousness, after the party is comically continued around her lifeless body. Mia awakens with a new perspective as she recounts the happenings of her dream. The symbolism here is clear: Mia feels unqualified, daunted by the prospect of having a child, and feels that the dangers associated with reproducing outweigh the benefits. However, when Mia discovers the cake—quickly identified by Sandy as Nicky’s real birthday cake, which was wheeled out while Mia was unconscious—her symbolic landscape begins to transition. As the cake becomes a ship, and all the scary animals from the forest board it in an orderly fashion, Howe indicates that this birthday party has been a transformative experience for Mia. As Mia continues her dream’s search, she gains perspective over the situation and realizes that the thing she is searching for has been with her all along, that she carries it with her. Howe is alluding to the myriad ways in which mothering can be performed, as she allows Mia a way forward that does not involve biological children. Rather than submitting to a dubious discourse of compensation, Mia is empowered by her revelation that she carries within her an alternative to procreation. She can study and care for and have relations with non-biological children that will satisfy her, without sacrificing her career or submitting to pronatalist pressure.

Mia’s journey from accomplished scholar to stigmatized other and into empowered woman is a fascinating one. Howe does not submit to the maternalist narrative that childless women are inherently lesser, that, “the *childless woman* is seen as ‘not a whole person’...the *childless woman* is the *other* of the *other*” (Gandolfo 113). The depiction is a progressive one, as the social narrative of childless women so often falls into the dubious discourses Morell

enumerates, but it is not liberated from those ideologies. Though it is not spoken, Mia seems to have seriously considered having children, and her studies of the accomplishments of children promotes a pronatalist attitude. Mia is not characterized as having what Helen Peterson and Kristina Engwall call a 'silent body,' an embodied knowledge produced by 'reading' her body, but rather she can be interpreted as having those maternal urges but choosing not to indulge them. In this manner, Mia is truly *voluntarily* childless. She is simply not a mother. While Howe's other characters treat Mia with these dubious discursive lenses, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, the construction of Mia herself does not fall prey to these attitudes. Mia is allowed to traverse maternalistic landscapes and test the waters of pronatalism. She is given, at times forcibly, the chance to explore her desires and impulses and is permitted to make her own decision, with the help and support of her husband. Howe's construction of Mia is progressive, realistic, and anything but absurd.

The Childless Woman, Barbara

Where Tina Howe acknowledged social attitudes while avoiding stereotypes in her characterization of Mia, Shelia Callaghan seemingly leans in to such generalizations with her depiction of Barbara. Barbara is introduced as self-important but disengaged. She is first mentioned in passing, as Mother tells Janice to put on the hideous, childish sweater her aunt, Barbara, bought her because the apartment is cold: "Yes it's hideous but it's wool" (Callaghan 60). Barbara first appears on stage in a phone conversation with Mother, and Barbara quickly turns the conversation away from Mother's grief and onto her disgust at the price of tuna: "MOTHER: You aren't listening. BARBARA: Oh. I thought you were done" (Callaghan 62). Barbara quickly positions herself as the expert, asserting her own instincts over Mother's: "I intuit like no

other” (Callaghan 63). Additionally, Barbara is revealed to be the caretaker to fifty-seven cats. Callaghan’s initial introductions of Barbara seem crafted directly from stereotypes of childless women. Helen Peterson and Kristin Engwall note that, “childfree women are negatively stereotyped as selfish, abnormal, immature, bitter, and [childhaters]” (377), and Callaghan seems to have had these very stereotypes in mind as she crafted Barbara. Interestingly, Barbara is not childless voluntarily. Mother comments, “You would have been a wonderful mother. If things had...you know...worked out. If nature had been kinder to you” (Callaghan 72), and Barbara herself admits, “People don’t choose some things, you know. Things like a defective womb. A defective husband” (Callaghan 86). Yet, her childlessness is not a source of pity in Barbara’s characterization, but a confirmation that she is inherently unfit: “In popular consciousness, childlessness is regarded as an affliction” (Morell, *Conduct* 71)

Barbara’s characterization is intrinsically antagonistic, as she inserts herself between Mother and Janice. While many childless women experience derogation at the hands of others, in Barbara’s case, it is not her fellow characters but her playwright that is the source of such treatment. Barbara is disconnected from the family with which she is overly involved. She does not treat Janice in an age-appropriate manner and does not display genuine concern for her well-being. When Mother seeks guidance about Janice’s odd behavior, Barbara insists on talking with Janice herself, declaring that she will be able to determine what is wrong. Barbara’s attempt to talk to Janice serves as evidence of just how clueless Barbara is about Janice and children in general. Barbara leaves this conversation—one that was, by all rights, a disaster—filled with self-satisfaction and falsely assures Mother that Janice is perfectly normal and merely going through the pangs of first love. Barbara’s advice to Mother is to indulge Janice’s odd Christmas gift

requests and to relax, establishing the deficiency of her instincts—the items Janice has requested are bomb components. When Mother questions why a love-sick eleven-year-old would need coffee filters, a prayer candle, and scientific equipment, Barbara comforts her, insisting that Janice’s behavior is normal.

This exchange between Barbara and Janice is an interesting addition to the plot. Throughout the play, Janice is seemingly the most antagonistic character, as she is an odd, moody preteen. But this scene between Barbara and Janice justifies Janice’s cold behavior toward Barbara, who is laughably patronizing and clueless. Picking up a doll and using a childish voice, Barbara overtly attempts to coax Janice’s troubles out of her. Janice, not falling for it, refuses to answer any of Barbara’s doll’s questions. When she does talk, she pokes fun at Barbara before returning to her stoic silence. In this scene, Barbara is presented as someone outside the family, as someone who is a hindrance. Coupled with her dubious introductions, this scene, which occurs early in the show, solidifies Barbara as, if not a bad guy, someone who is an outsider. The ways in which Callaghan crafts this depiction rely on Barbara’s inherent character flaws, flaws that, when viewed together, suggest the same stereotyping Morell and others note plague childless women: “The woman who does not have children is believed to be abnormal; she is the damaged woman—infertile, barren and *childless*...The *childless woman* is the *other* of the *other*, doubly lacking first as a woman (not a man) and then as a non-mother (not fully woman)” (Gandolfo 113-4). In Barbara’s case, her poor instincts and disconnect with Janice support this notion that she is unworthy of being a mother.

However, Barbara does have maternal instincts that need an outlet. To compensate for her lack of child, Barbara takes care of her 57 cats, each of whom has a name and a personality

Barbara monitors. She cares for her cats as if they are children, has conversations with them, and paints their portraits as a hobby. She chides and corrects them as if they are people, and attempts to instill etiquette in them:

Persephone, don't hog the dish. I don't care if Melvin says you're too skinny. A lady never scarfs her Gourmet Beef-and-Liver...What Garrison? I'm a better mother [than Mother]? It's not a competition...Well, thank you...What's that? I have a sexy voice? Stop it Leon, you're flattering me. Well, meow to you too. You're the meowiest...All of you are the meowiest. You're the meowiest children a mommy could have. (Callaghan 78)

Barbara's relationship to her cats is a comical example of compensation that is cast in greater relief after Mother accuses Barbara of not having experience raising children:

She can have her Christmas morning with her delicate progeny. I won't be bitter. I have my own beautiful ones, fifty-seven of them, all devoted, all content. You'd never drink bleach, would you? That's right. You'd never talk back to me or wear my curtains in a school play or wet your bed in your sleep or draw on my kitchen table with permanent marker. And you won't break my. (*sic*) Heart. (Callaghan 87)

The compensation Barbara willingly takes part in is shown in this line to be a clear replacement for biological children. Callaghan is using this device as a means of extending maternalistic ideologies. Carolyn Morell comments, "The idea that childless women form attachments to pets because children are absent legitimates children as the proper target of women's caring and reinforces the belief that women need to be mothers," before continuing, "Women's real and direct interspecies bonds are not taken on their own terms but become symbols of deprivation and the unfulfilled need to mother" (*Conduct* 94). Barbara's compensatory behavior has become so extreme that she thinks she prefers her feline children to the prospect of a biological one. This assertion, steeped in denial, works to prove Barbara's deficiencies. Her childlessness has driven her to this extreme state, and she is not willing or equipped to handle her circumstances. In Callaghan's characterization, Barbara's maternalistic desires have become pathological to the

point of preferring her replacements to her niece, Janice, a real child. This depiction is in sharp contrast with Mia, who accepts her childlessness and is satisfied with her relationship with her nephew, Nicky.

The most damning element of the characterization of Barbara is that she does not grow. At the play's climax, Mother accuses Barbara of not understanding what it is like to care for a child, an interaction that will be explored in more detail in the next chapter. Barbara insists that caring for her cats is an equivalent experience, "You are not the only woman on the planet responsible for the lives of others" (Callaghan 85). After this confrontation and Janet's injury—the bomb blew off her right hand—Barbara is invited back into the family unit to join Mother and Janice in the hospital. Barbara attempts to return to her position of authority, but Mother's demeanor has changed, and she does not allow Barbara to take control of the situation. Rather than being supportive, Barbara is antagonistic of Mother's new-found control: "You do not sound fine. Your breathing is normal, your voice isn't shaking, you have no..." (Callaghan 92). As the family attempts to recover from their figurative and literal explosions, Barbara tries again to reinsert herself into a position of control. Asking Mother about her intentions to move, she suggests moving in with Mother and Janice, "Well. You could probably use some help now that you're at the restaurant full-time, and I'd like to be closer, so...And. I thought. You and I could. Maybe look at places. I mean, places for us. All of us" (Callaghan 94). Barbara's request here is cast as an intrusion, and her manner of asking supports that feeling. Her entreaty begins with an assumption that Mother cannot maintain her home along with her job, as well as an assertion of her own desires. She makes an offer rather than a request. She submits the terms that she would keep her cats 'out of the way,' perhaps in an attic. It is understood that Barbara has come to

regret her lonely life, but instead of learning from her mistakes of intrusion and controlling behavior, she repeats them. Indeed, when Mother equivocates, and Janice catches Mother's eye to mouth 'NO WAY,' it is a heartwarming moment as these two characters come together to work against Barbara. The audience understands that Barbara has been solidified as an outsider; she cannot meaningfully integrate back into this family, because she is inherently flawed. Denied her innate position as a mother, Barbara has become the monstrous incarnation of childlessness.

Zelda, the Unwoman

Sarah Treem weaves a decidedly fraught depiction of motherhood, feminism, and womanhood in *The How and the Why*. The play tells not only the story of a daughter confronting her biological mother for the first time, but it also tells the story of a revolutionary young scientist confronting the mastermind behind the current theoretical understanding with her new, bold theory. It tells the story of two women in conflict, both personally and professionally, struggling to find a place on which they both can stand. In this way, Treem is presenting personhood as a philosophical theory that can be interrogated, refuted, and revolutionized.

Both Zelda and Rachel are evolutionary biologists who study the female reproductive cycle. Zelda is acclaimed for her 'Grandmother theory,' which recognizes menopause as an evolutionary mutation that allows women to care for their offspring and biological descendants longer. Rachel's theory, however, views the menstrual cycle as an evolutionary defense mechanism to protect the uterus from the toxicity of sperm, monthly shedding uterine tissue that has been infected by the toxins carried on sperm during sexual activity. Though the theories in the play are fictional, they are indicative of Treem's perspective on feminism and the role of women in society. Both theories are rooted in the dislocation of reproduction as "the telos of all

women's lives" (Oliver 762). This step away from the essentialist view of reproduction sets the tone of the play and is at the root of the play's central conflict. Treem sets up, with these two fictional theories, a content-rich field from which to harvest meaning. These two theories conflict in ways that are personal, sociological, and temporal, and represent not only divergent theories of women and reproduction, but also the two characters presenting these theories.

Treem's script intentionally inverts the mother/non-mother interaction that exists in the other plays in this study. Zelda, the mother character, has actively rejected her maternal status, giving up her daughter, Rachel, for adoption and focusing on her career. In this way, Zelda often takes the position held by the non-mother characters in other plays and is exposed to the same type of ridicule and dubious discourse as the other non-mother characters. Interestingly, Rachel, though not yet a mother, embodies the attitudes most commonly held by the other plays' mother characters. Though an accurate analysis of this play must acknowledge the complicated interlacing of representation and choice, I will present in this chapter an analysis of Zelda and the ways in which she is characterized as a childless woman, and as I will assert, an "Unwoman."

Treem uses this inversion to interrogate the ways in which her characters are presented and present themselves, in full awareness of social attitudes. Treem establishes Zelda's character through a series of rejections of Zelda's womanhood entirely. Zelda's office is "dark, auspicious, and very masculine" (Treem 5), a choice that Zelda takes great pride in:

(They sit in silence. Staring at each other.)

RACHEL: I like your office.

ZELDA: Thank you.

RACHEL: It feels very...masculine.

ZELDA: You mean it feels significant.

RACHEL: No, I don't. *(More silence.)* (Treem 6)

The attempt at creating significance by emulating masculinity is an early sign of Zelda's efforts to break beyond her female label and recalls Elizabeth Badinter's words, "In the struggle to be the equals of men, women had denied their very nature, succeeding only in becoming pale imitations of their masters" (57). Indeed, Zelda seems painfully aware of the ways in which her femaleness affects her reception, making deliberate references to how her womanhood has affected her career. Early on in the play, Zelda refers to Rachel as a 'terror'³⁹. Rachel, in turn, states that her advisor calls her 'difficult.' Zelda is quick to separate those two terms:

ZELDA: He sounds a bit patronizing.

RACHEL: Not at all.

ZELDA: He called you difficult.

RACHEL: You called me a terror.

ZELDA: But the word "terror" suggests a certain ferocity, someone to be contended with. I myself acquired a reputation for being difficult in my youth. Though, back then I think the clinical term was "bitch."

RACHEL: If you were a man, you would have been celebrated for it.

ZELDA: But I'm not a man. Neither are you. (Treem 14)

Zelda's ability to parse out the difference between 'terror'—something to be respected, reckoned with—and being 'difficult'—something to avoid—speaks to her awareness of gendered, pejorative terms. Zelda's heightened awareness also appears as she warns Rachel against allowing Dean, Rachel's boyfriend, to share credit for her research: "People will think Dean created your hypothesis" (Treem 19). It appears again when she advises Rachel against playing the 'woman card,' as it is the quickest way to be discredited: "If you'll allow me to give you a piece of advice—do not turn the reaction to your hypothesis into an issue of sexism, not in your own mind, and certainly not in public. It will do nothing for you. You're worried about being

³⁹ ZELDA: You're really something of a terror, aren't you? RACHEL: Charles says I'm difficult. (Treem 13).

discredited? That will discredit you” (Treem 30). In these brief exchanges, Zelda is displaying the ways in which derogation has been used against her, but she also uses it against herself in a preemptory manner. Zelda judges herself and adjusts accordingly, before anyone else has the opportunity to judge her. The result is a constant vigilance against her own womanhood. Patricia Amigot and Margot Pujal remind us that “although ‘power is everywhere’ and in all relationships, the dispositif⁴⁰ of gender specifically functions to subordinate women” (647). It is not surprising that Zelda would assume behaviors that diminish her womanhood, when she is so aware of the ways in which her womanhood acts against her.

Zelda’s attentiveness to the ways in which femaleness is treated differently also reaches beyond her own identity and into, or perhaps because of, her work. Her award-winning research, which applauds menopause as an evolutionary adaptation responsible for the development of the human race, contradicted the predominant menopause-centric theory of the time, Hormone Replacement Therapy: “Doesn’t it bother you that the very existence of HRT implies that a woman’s body doesn’t know what it’s doing? That it needs to be supplemented with hormones it has naturally elected to stop producing? Just look at the word [chosen] to name it. Therapy. As if menopause was some sort of deficiency” (Treem 40). In this speech, Zelda is responding with an Engelian reading of history which finds as false the assumption that the natural path can and should be improved artificially: “Patriarchal authority seeks to justify itself in the minds of each of its children, and thus justification takes the form of a father-centered religion. Religion projects the rule of the father into the firmament where it becomes the supreme law of nature—and then

⁴⁰ “Whereas dispositif can be translated as dispositivo in Spanish, there is no such corresponding term in English. In English it has been translated as ‘technology,’ ‘device,’ ‘deployment,’ and ‘apparatus’” (Amigot and Pujal 665).

reflects this majesty back on each earthly father in his household” (Ehrenreich and English 10), or in this case, in each earthly school of thought. Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English chart the pathological treatment of mothering through medical evolution in their work *For Her Own Good*, asserting that the mother, and by extension the woman, is regularly expected to turn away from her own instincts and turn instead to the expert male opinion upheld by the patriarchy. By denying this patriarchal assumption of power over women’s biological functions, Zelda, and by proxy Treem, is calling on women to embrace their own agency, power, and expertise.

Indeed, Zelda’s own theory is a radical subversion of patriarchal thought. Zelda suggests that prehistoric women were constantly pregnant and spent their energies on their newest, most defenseless child, but their older children were still not able to fully care for themselves. They needed another guardian to nurture them through their development. Because the grandmother was there to forage and provide food, the children were able to develop their minds and intellect. In effect, the existence of the post-menopausal grandmother created a communal social order that permitted childhood, which in consequence created humanity (Treem 24). Zelda’s theory recalls Carolyn Morell’s assessment that, “The new and dominant feminist scholarship on motherhood emphasizes a particularly female quality of caring and relatedness” (*Conduct* 6). It is important to note here that such a ‘female quality’ is socially coded, and Morell continues, “Most feminists reject the notion that these personality characteristics are biologically determined. Rather, they are understood as being deeply rooted psychologically because of female mothering and as a result of the social practices of mothers” (*Conduct* 6), however, Treem’s fictional theory takes a decidedly biological view of this type of female caretaking. This issue recalls the works of Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* and Mardy Ireland’s

Reconceiving Women, both of which assert that the idea of mothering as a specifically female activity is a common assumption that is perpetuated by psychoanalytic object-relations theory: “Unlike the male, who must reject his early identification with mother and shift his identification to father, the daughter’s identity evolves through a path of continual relatedness; she will never have to completely relinquish her earliest maternal identification” (Ireland 101). In Zelda’s theory, women evolved to care for their offspring and future generations, providing a space for childhood development, but a space that was also exclusively for uniquely female care. The grandmothers offered the same care a mother would, were she not focused on the care of younger offspring, but without the driving hormonal factors. Zelda’s theory contains a biological contradiction—why expend the effort to care for generational offspring?—that in turn roots the care of children in female characteristics, not in biological imperatives. Zelda’s theory⁴¹ focuses on a chicken-or-egg understanding of the evolution of the woman’s role, not just on the biology of it.

Zelda’s theory, when considered against Zelda’s choices, offers a deeper understanding of her character. Zelda was in a loving relationship at the time of her pregnancy. She also had an idea, an idea that would refute the life’s work⁴² of Rachel’s father. Life presented Zelda with a choice: nurture the child growing within her, with the man she loved, forsaking that idea; or nurture the idea within her, sacrificing her relationship with Rachel’s father and with Rachel. Zelda’s choice, to follow the research, speaks to her belief that she cannot be both a mother and

⁴¹ It is not my intent to discuss the merits of this theory, nor to break it down and evaluate it through a feminist reading, beyond the extent to which it is useful to an understanding of Zelda’s character.

⁴² The fictional creator of Hormone Replacement Therapy.

a scientist, as no reasons are offered for leaving Henry, Rachel's father, or for putting Rachel up for adoption. It is implied that Henry would not have supported her research, and it is postulated that Zelda believed she would not have been accepted by the scientific community with a radical theory on the benevolence of menopause with a fatherless child on her hip, but these ideas are not confirmed (Treem 45). It is clear, however, that Zelda based her choices on these assumptions. Zelda rooted her decisions in her understanding of the "cultural codes that both reflect and sustain the dominant systems of knowledge, power, and discourse that comprise the symbolic order" (Buchanan 6), codes that would not allow Zelda to nurture both her idea and her child equally. Zelda's understanding of those codes adheres to the "now almost commonplace view that good mothering involves selfless, consistent, and continuous care" (Ross 18). For Zelda to nurture either her research or her child, she must focus on one alone. In effect, Zelda chose to be a scientist at the cost of being a mother, and, in essence, a woman. As Mardy Ireland reminds us, "There is no normative female identity for the woman who is not a mother" (104). Like the 'Unwomen' of Margaret Atwood's misogynistic dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Zelda has shirked her societal duties to be wife and mother in favor of "doing something useful" (Atwood 118). Unwomen rejected the things that made them women, in a maternalist, pronatalist social sense. By choosing her career over her ability to become a mother, Zelda began a journey to undo her own womanhood in the hopes of becoming a person whose ideas could be respected.

Zelda had to choose not to conform to the prevailing identity of 'woman,' and the implication of that choice is that she has had to undo her womanness. Unlike the 'silent bodies' of women who have no desire for children which Helen Peterson and Kristina Engwall write about, Zelda was at one point willing to have and care for her child: "I had an idea, Rachel. A good

one. But its implications meant the refutation of everything my lover believed. The principles on which he had built his entire career. I could publish my hypothesis. Or I could bury it. And go on with Henry. Probably grow old with him. I chose to publish it anyway” (Treem 47). Every subsequent choice Zelda has made has been in support of that initial choice. Her singleness, her bravado, even her office design support an attempt at breaking away from her femaleness in order to be treated fairly as a scientist. In this way, Treem is using Zelda’s character as a commentary on the primacy of maternalism. Zelda is a character who actively shirks her femaleness, and yet she is tied to it. The fact that she has borne a child is not the reason for this inescapable femaleness, but yet another proof of its power over her.

Conclusion

It was my intent in this chapter to discuss the ways in which these childless characters are depicted, as with mother characters in the chapter previous. Therefore, I needed to engage a close study of the ways in which the characters are constructed and in the actions they take. James Thomas defines character as “a habitual pattern of action identifying a figure in a play” (173), and that definition is supported by Francis Hodge’s definition, “character can be defined as a summary statement of specific actions” (39). This type of character study is often the first step in an analysis of dramatic characters, preceding an interpretation of character’s motivations and then an interpretation of the ways other characters discuss the character in question. That part of the character analysis will take place in the next chapter, but before I begin that analysis, it is important to review the findings made thus far.

In the study of mother characters, connections were made on many points between the two characters surveyed. Those points of connection—the position of motherhood as an

imposing identity, the existence of an unattainable model of maternal perfection, and the 'shrinking effect' of mothering—all speak to the difficulties of performing mothering in a pronatalist and maternalist society. The non-mother characters share connections of derogation, both from others and self-inflicted, as well as the pressure to defend their choices or circumstances that have rendered them childless. It is interesting to note that all three non-mother characters represent a different type of childless woman, with different motivations and circumstances that have resulted in their respective childlessness, and yet they are still connected by the stigma of childlessness. In Mia's case, she must defend her childlessness on the personal front, facing off against her relatives. Barbara is defined by her childlessness, which is both the motivation for and result of her own insufficiencies. Zelda actively created her childlessness, an act that set her on a symbolic path to undo her own femininity as well. Additionally, in all three cases, these characters suffer from their childlessness, but in very different ways. Mia is tortured by her family, Barbara suffers under the unending burden of her involuntary childlessness, and Zelda suffers for being a woman, her chosen childlessness a constant reminder that she is permanently entrenched in this identity. The mother characters also suffer, but their suffering is much more similar, as they both suffer to perform their motherhood perfectly, an unattainable ideal, and they suffer the pains of infertility, a literal state for Sandy and a figurative one for Mother.

The fact that both character types are defined by, and suffer from, their reproductive status is a chilling one, albeit a realistic one. When these depictions are read with an understanding of the feminist and mother theory summarized at the fore of both these chapters, it becomes apparent that the maternalist and pronatalist ideologies on which Western society is

based are oppressive to not only the subjects who deviate from them, but also to those who conform. With such unattainable ideals at play, it begs the question why women continue to perpetuate this social order which actively works against them. The next chapter will offer an analysis of the discourse between these two character types in an effort to better understand the social dynamics at play within these texts and how the dramatic structure interrogates, but also perpetuates, this oppression.

DISCOURSE, OR “DISS” COURSE?

“I don’t want to Lean In. I want to Lie Down!”⁴³

Comedian Ali Wong, her seven-months-pregnant baby bump on full display in a striped bodycon dress, exclaims these words after forty-five minutes of entertaining a crowd with her adventures and pitfalls establishing a career, landing a husband, and getting pregnant. Wong, who chose to and successfully became a mother, bases her comedy on the pressure surrounding that decision and living up to the societal expectations for women. Referencing Sheryl Sandberg’s critically divisive work of female self-empowerment, Wong’s quip manages to both identify and criticize the prevailing societal attitude for women: it’s up to the individual to do the work to succeed, putting the pressure on the individual to meet the expectations of the group. This chapter will examine the discourse between mother and non-mother characters in the hopes of gaining a clearer view of how motherhood operates in the world of these plays and perhaps society at large.

The implication of Sandberg’s work, and Wong’s joke, reflects a systemic approach to the construction of womanhood that is both prescriptive and restrictive. Judith Butler remarks that, “to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (273). She continues by reflecting on the consequences of such conformity: “performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well

⁴³ Ali Wong. *Baby Cobra*. Netflix, 2016.

provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (Butler 297). It is in this precarious balancing act of gender performance that each play finds itself, as the mother and non-mother characters conflict over the importance of motherhood in their lives. While this is a seemingly intellectual debate, as the conflict builds between each pair, the debate becomes intensely delicate, calling into question how personal this debate is for each playwright as well. The depictions of these characters, studied in-depth in the previous chapters, synthesize themselves into a debate which fuels the climax of each play, providing unique opportunities to study the importance of motherhood to womanhood in a maternalistic society. This recalls Susan Rubin Suleiman’s observation that, “playful inventions of avant-garde writing, starting with surrealism and continuing to present work, can provide an impetus, perhaps even a metaphor or model, for reimagining the mother in her social and child-rearing role” (273). This chapter is devoted to the interactions and discourse between these mother and non-mother characters, in the hopes that this study will provide a clearer understanding of the playwrights’ thematic intentions in these plays and the position of motherhood in the worldview from which they are writing.

In directing this study toward the interactions between characters, it is important to review how dramatic characters are traditionally evaluated and interpreted, so as to better understand the ways in which their interactions are used to create debate. The process begins with the identification of the major characters and discerns which character is the protagonist. This study assumes, across all plays engaged, that the mother character is the protagonist, and the non-mother character serves as her direct antagonist, if not the play’s main antagonist, but these terms in and of themselves could benefit from exploration. A traditional, superficial

definition of protagonist is, simply, the main character. The Oxford English dictionary offers little more insight: “the chief character in a dramatic work. Hence, in extended use; the leading character, or one of the main characters, in any narrative work, as a poem, novel, film, etc.” (OED Online). In a nineteenth century theoretical work, Karl Muller takes this stance on the protagonist: “The person, then, whose fate excites [the sympathy of the audience], whose outward or inward wars and conflicts are exhibited, is the protagonist” (306). James Thomas builds upon these definitions by adding that the protagonist is the character in favor of the play’s central argument and goes on to note that “the focal point of dramatic interest in a play is the conflict between the main character and his/her chief opponent” (195). It is in this definition that is found an interesting position from which to base this study. If the mother characters are indeed the protagonists of their respective plays, as I assert, then the plays themselves can be understood to side with the plight of the mother and ultimately support her worldview; a worldview that is seemingly maternalist, if not pronatalist. This is particularly worthy of note due to the implied positioning of the non-mother character as the antagonist, the character ‘against’ the argument of the play, and because of whom the protagonist gains audience sympathy (Thomas 195).

Taking these basic definitions and appellations into account, we can begin to broaden our understanding of the function of dramatic characters. Francis Hodge defines character as “a summary statement of specific actions... [a character] exists in what his actions, particularly those under pressing circumstances, tell us he is” (39). He continues, engaging the dyad of protagonist and antagonist in relation to the action of the play:

Thus, the actual progression for the audience, what interests each spectator in the play, is the progressive unfolding of character traits in the protagonist and the antagonists,

traits that finally accumulate with clarity and force at the major climax when all the previous character revelations come together. The major clash is of such force that the principal character stands fully revealed, and the audience can see what really makes him work. (Hodge 41-2)

It can therefore be understood that the action of the play, the play's structure, co-constitutes itself and its protagonist; as the action of the play unfolds, so too does the audience's understanding of the protagonist. Within that logic is the understanding that the play itself selects and promotes the protagonist and that another arrangement could possibly create a different protagonist. This creates an interesting avenue, when considering Thomas' alignment of the protagonist with the central argument of the play: how intentional were the selections of these non-mother antagonists? Are these characters just on the opposite sides of the play's argument, or do they represent two sides of a larger thematic paradigm?

It was Friedrich Nietzsche who, in his work *The Birth of Tragedy*, most notably identified and embraced the artistic values of Apollo and Dionysus, invoking a balanced dichotomy which fuses together to form perfect art. Nietzsche posited that the Greeks used these competing drives to not only form art, but to also build their worldviews. Nietzsche identified the Apollonian ideal as the human drive to form, clarity, delineation and semblance. As Paul Raimond Daniels notes, Apollo is the patron of the plastic arts of sculpture, architecture, and epic poetry: "[Apollo's] art is calming and soothing in its beauty and it makes us regard its representation *as* reality, cleverly shielding us from the true nature of the world" (42). Daniels continues:

The Dionysiac drive to intoxication, chaos and excess, on the other hand, is the motivator behind music, dance, and choral song. The rapturous spirit of Dionysos encompasses terror at beholding the pessimism of the world, but also ecstasy in its essential freedom from individuation and its union with nature and humankind. (42)

Ultimately, Nietzsche's purpose in identifying the two sides of both the artistic and, ergo, human experience, is to better understand the drives by which man creates art and then to understand that art. Marvin Carlson observes within Nietzsche's study of art and culture that, "Nietzsche sees the Apollonian spirit not as a means of avoiding or denying the Dionysian, but as a necessary complement to it. The denial of either involves a denial of both" and he continues, "this was the great insight of classic Greece; having looked into the horror of the Dionysian world of existence, it created the Apollonian dream-world of Olympus. Each new emergence of the former strengthened and enriched the latter" (262). Carlson's alignment of the Apollonian and Dionysian worldviews as a spectrum, not a binary, is a useful means of entry to Nietzsche's framework, one that is supported by many other theorists—as Daniels remarks, "Nietzsche asserts his key claim regarding Greek tragic culture: that through tragedy the Greeks were exposed to the pessimistic truth of existence but were simultaneously seduced to keep on living" (43)—and is a generative tool for applying Nietzsche's theory to modern works.

Nietzsche's idea that the art one makes reflects the artist's worldview is perhaps not an innovative one, but it is of particular interest to this study, as he notes two elements, seemingly opposed, that must exist together to create a balanced, holistic view of the world. As the dramatic scholars referenced above believe that the protagonist is linked to a play's central idea, so too is the antagonist connected to both the protagonist and the central thought of the play. Following Nietzsche's theory, the protagonist and antagonist can be seen as two sides of a theoretical argument, and the articulation of which depends solely upon the play's position. In borrowing from Hegelian dialectics, the protagonist can be considered the thesis, the antagonist the antithesis, and the articulation of the play's theme the synthesis. Therefore, the playwright

must take responsibility for the thematic argument of the play and take ownership of the synthesis she presents. In suggesting that the antagonists in these plays represent that thematic other side and therefore a worldview the playwright acknowledges, but ultimately disagrees. Placing the antagonist not just in opposition of the protagonist's personal aims, but to the play's central theme, invokes a popular tradition of binary thinking, but also risks reductiveness when binary thinking is overly simplified into generalizations. While the non-mother characters may represent a mindset that is contrary to the aims of the protagonist and the play, the playwright must be careful in the construction of such a character so as not to tacitly make the claim that *all* childless women are contrary to those same aims.

As James Thomas reminds us, "plays express idea both directly and indirectly" (205). While each play engages a particular argument directly, the indirect commentary on that idea and the playwright's surrounding worldview are also communicated. The direct and indirect ideas communicated by a play can be seen as a refraction of Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian worldview, that each subject/theme/argument is an ordered attempt at demystifying the chaotic nature of the world. Tina Howe, in the introduction to her *Marriage Cycle* collection, of which *Birth and After Birth* is the first offering, remarks on this link: when women write about women "we tend to see conflicting aspects of a situation at the same time, blending the tragic with the comic, and the noble with the absurd..." (xi). As with the feminist theory engaged in the previous chapters, dramatic and literary theories of text analysis have an effect on the creation of the art that is the study of this work. Katie King reminds us that "theory is not optional or a deflection from working with these objects of analysis...objects and theory co-constitute each other" (6). Taking these scripts as examples of King's 'pastpresents'—contemporary objects of study that

cannot be separated from their historic significance—they become inextricably linked to their theoretical influences and are most certainly artistic expressions of the playwrights' attempts to rectify themselves with these concepts.

In looking at the discourse between the protagonist and the antagonist, what is really being studied is the playwright's own reckoning with an idea. However, in the case of these plays, the playwright's chosen avatars come to embody more than just the opposing sides of an argument. The formation of these antagonistic characters and the treatment they receive from the protagonists create a bleak and exclusionary worldview of the population those characters represent, because, as Donna Haraway notes, "these discourses do not exist entirely outside each other. They are not preconstituted, nicely bound scholarly practices or doctrines that confront each other in debate or exchange...rather, [they] are place markers, emphases, or tool kits [...] in a constitutively interactive, collaborative process of trying to make sense of the natural worlds we inhabit and that inhabit us" (66). In this study, an analysis of the scripts' inner workings only offers a partial picture of what the plays are communicating. To better understand the inspirations for these plays and the commentary these plays are making, one must look beyond the pages of the script to the world on which these plays are responding.

Sandy and Mia

Sandy and Mia are friends, they are family, and yet, they are removed from each other, standing on either side of a crevasse over which no bridge has been built. Sandy's sympathetic introduction pits her as the immediate protagonist, a character searching to please others and control her own world. Though Mia does not appear on stage until the second act, she is mentioned early on in and throughout the first act. Sandy refers to Mia as a force to be

impressed, to be manipulated, and to be conquered. At first, Mia's introduction is one of pleasant expectation and friendly competition. Bill is the first to mention Mia and Jeffrey's impending arrival: "When they see this [video], they will eat their hearts out" (Howe 11). Sandy reminds Nicky and, by extension, the audience who Mia and Jeffrey are and promises him an exotic present that they have picked up on their travels. After this quick introduction, Sandy remarks on their childless state with the morally superior tone with which she will continue throughout the rest of the play:

SANDY: I feel so sorry for them. I wish there was something we could do.
 BILL: It's none of our business.
 SANDY: But not to have children...
 BILL: You can't run other people's lives.
 SANDY: Neither of them wants children!
 BILL: Their careers are very important to them.
 SANDY: But they're missing so much. (Howe 12).

This quick exchange serves as a template for the relationship between Sandy and Mia. Sandy asserts, and never questions, Mia's pitiable state of childlessness as something that needs to be 'helped,' implying that her childlessness is inappropriate. When Sandy states, "Neither of them wants children!" (Howe 12), it is not a question, but an indictment. It is the base assertion that something is wrong. Sandy does not contemplate an existence where Mia's choice could be a valid one, and these statements continue and develop throughout the play. In a mirror of the above passage, Sandy again reiterates her concern with Mia's childlessness, before developing what will be her main objective throughout the play: to convince Mia to have a child.

SANDY: Jeffrey and Mia are missing so much. I feel sorry for them.
 BILL: It's their choice.
 SANDY: But *never* to have children...
 BILL: Their careers are very important to them...
 SANDY: What if they changed their minds tonight? With us!
 BILL: Jeffrey and Mia have been married for twelve years. I don't think they're suddenly

going to change their minds at Nicky's party.

SANDY: But what if they did? [...] Because of what a great family we are [...] Imagine being a woman and not wanting to experience childbirth.

BILL: People have different needs.

SANDY: But never to have your own baby [...] It would be so good for them.

BILL: As anthropologists studying children of primitive cultures, they see a lot of suffering [...] Once you've seen babies dying of starvation, I'm sure you think twice before bringing more children into the world.

SANDY: But their baby wouldn't starve [...] They'd have a beautiful baby.

BILL: They're not interested in having a beautiful baby, they're interested in studying primitive children! [...]

SANDY: But how can they understand primitive children if they don't have children of their own?

BILL: Just because I can articulate their reasons for not having children doesn't mean I agree with them. [...]

SANDY: Well, you don't have to be so pompous about it. People do change!

BILL: It's very unlikely.

SANDY: But it could happen.

BILL: Well, anything *could* happen. (Howe 21-23).

In this passage, Sandy once again asserts that Mia's childlessness is inappropriate and speaks of her childless state with judgement. Her desire to convince Mia is rooted in her own sense of superiority. Despite the fact that Mia studies children throughout the world, Sandy hopes that her exceptional family will be the one example of domestic bliss that will convince Mia to convert. In this discussion, we see the presence of Morell's dubious discourses. As Sandy questions the validity of living without children, of being a woman and not wanting to experience childbirth, she is engaging in a discourse of derogation by questioning Mia's womanhood. She continues this thought by calling into question Mia's ability to study the children she studies without having children of her own, assuming a superiority of understanding and comprehension that is reserved for those who have experienced biological maternity. This assumption not only regurgitates the derogation and compensation Morell notes, but also supports Kristina Engwall and Helen Peterson's criticism of restrictive and biologically determined social categorization of gender:

“The biologically deterministic definition of the category woman not only sets her apart from the category man but also produces exclusions and leads to divisions among women. When motherhood is defined as ‘natural,’ non-motherhood becomes considered ‘unnatural’ and ‘unwomanly’” (378). In these few exchanges about Mia, the audience begins to see the barrier built between Mia and Sandy, a barrier perhaps not originated by Sandy, but certainly fortified by her.

As the second act opens, Howe provides one more conversation that similarly mirrors the previous and completes Morell’s trifecta of discourses by introducing regret. After a joyful game with the family, Bill predicts that the party will be a great success, but Sandy offers a qualification:

The whole day would be perfect if only Jeffrey and Mia would change their minds about having children. Tonight, with us [...] And it’s going to happen, you’ll see [...] They may have exciting careers now, but what about when they’re retired and all alone in the world. If she waits much longer, it will be too late. Remember Diane Oak? Diane Oak waited until she was forty-five before she had Johnathan. Her cervix had shriveled up to the size of a lima bean and wouldn’t even open for the birth [...] She passed the ninth month, tenth, eleventh, twelfth...nothing happened. They finally had to induce her in the fifteenth [...] When that poor baby was finally pulled out by cesarean section, he weighed thirty-six pounds and had a full set of teeth. (Howe 32)

In this exchange, Sandy introduces the cautionary tale of Diane Oak, who waited too long to have children and therefore became her own kind of horror. Sandy’s message in this anecdote is clear: if Mia does not have a baby soon, she will not be able to have one without great pain and suffering when she inevitably realizes her mistake and relents. This passage reinforces Sandy’s assurance that she is in fact being kind to Mia by forcing her into a choice she is not ready to make, out of fear that she may make that choice later. Engaging in discourses of regret and derogation, Sandy continues to parrot the pronatalist party line: all women want to have children and will regret not having children when they are older. Rosemary Gillespie articulates this mindset, noting,

“pronatalist cultural discourses establish a template of femininity, whereby motherhood is perceived to be the cornerstone of adult femininity and the desire for motherhood and the role of mothering central to what it means to be a woman” (124). Extending this thought, Peterson and Engwall comment, “Thus, while woman has been defined as the ‘other’ in relation to the male norm, the non-mother is ‘other’ to the feminine ideal” (377). The irony in Sandy’s actions, forcing Mia to conform to the ideal that she herself struggles to uphold, speaks to the systemic and overpoweringly habitual presence of pronatalism and maternalism in the zeitgeist. Sandy’s inability to consider childlessness as a viable option helps to cement her position on the side of maternalism and forces Mia onto the antagonistic ‘other’ side.

The social divide between mothers and non-mothers was discussed at length in the previous chapters and is therefore not the focus of this section, which will instead focus on the ways in which Sandy and Mia distinguish themselves from each other in relation to their maternal status. Mia’s arrival comes amidst a flurry of greetings and a series of subtle flexings as Sandy, Bill, and Nicky try to impress them with their own domestic perfection; but, Mia and Jeffrey counter with tales of the impressive specimens of their research:

NICKY: I got a wagon and masks.

JEFFREY: When the Tunisian hill child turns four, he’s blindfolded and led into a swamp to bring back the body of a mud turtle for a tribal feast.

SANDY: No!

MIA: If he fails, he’s expelled from the tribe.

JEFFREY: And left on the plains to be picked apart by giant cawcaws.

SANDY: How horrifying!

(Silence)

MIA: In the Tabu culture, four is believed to be a magical age. I once saw a four-year-old Tabu girl skin a sixteen-hundred-pound zebra and then eat the pelt!

BILL: Son of a bitch!

NICKY: I can write my name.

MIA: Good for you! (Howe 36)

This exchange sets the tone between the two families for the remainder of the act, as each statement by the Apples is discounted by the impressive subjects of Jeffrey and Mia Freed's studies. The exchanges continue as Sandy offers, "Bill and Nicky are very close. Ever since he was born, they were close...It's unusual to find a father and son as close as Bill and Nicky" (Howe 36-7), attempting to exceptionalize their relationship. She further brags about her son's popularity amongst other adults, touting how many birthday cards he received and unveiling the prized 'get,' a card from the preschool teacher. Cards from teachers, Sandy explains, are prohibited: "They have a strict policy of not sending individual cards on the children's birthdays. You know, they might forget somebody. So naturally Nicky was thrilled to be singled out like that" (Howe 37). Nicky, of course, has no interest in the card.

Sandy's attempts to position Nicky as at the same level of interest and accomplishment as the children Mia mentions seems to serve two purposes; to validate her competency as a mother and to entice Mia into an interest in Nicky. By positioning Nicky as a subject worth studying, Sandy is attempting to draw Mia toward an interest in 'normal' children, rather than in the exotic subjects to which she is accustomed. When Mia sees through Sandy's fabrication (the handwriting on the card is clearly Sandy's and not the teacher's), Sandy rebuffs Mia, exclaiming, "People will start thinking you don't like American children, the way you're always running off to interview toddlers in Iceland and Nigeria" (Howe 38). This rebuke carries with it the implication that it is not normal to not 'like' American children and that Mia should be wary of such a tendency, reflecting Peterson and Engwall's observation that "motherhood is crucial for [a woman's] gender identity, self-esteem, well-being, social and economic position and others'

judgement about her” (376-7). The implicit threat in Sandy’s line is that Mia will be at the mercy of other’s judgment if she does not conform to ‘normal’ behavior.

Despite Sandy’s threat, or perhaps because of it, the dynamic between the couples becomes more contentious:

NICKY: I pulled Mommy in my wagon.

BILL: He’s very strong for his age.

JEFFREY: One of the fascinating things about the Berbers is that parents regard spiritual strength more highly than physical strength.

NICKY: I pulled Mommy and all my presents too!

BILL: He also pulled a rabbit out of a flaming pan!

MIA: Almost any Berber child can converse with desert vegetation.

SANDY: No!

JEFFREY: To my mind, there are no children the equal of Berber children! (Howe 38).

Sandy’s attempts to validate her child in the eyes of Mia and Jeffrey are tactics she engages to achieve her objective of convincing Mia to decide to have a child, but they are also the ways in which Sandy attempts to validate herself and quell her insecurities as a mother. Mia’s behavior is rooted in a firm disinterest not just in Nicky, but in Sandy’s maternal experience. Though Mia offers polite compliments about the room décor—“Sandy, this room is a work of art! I’ve never seen anything like it! [...] You must have been up all night” (Howe 37)—her attention is not truly engaged until the conversation moves closer to her work and her intellectual interests. The Freeds are intrigued by Nicky’s interest in masks, but unimpressed by his series of presidential recitations. They are shocked by Bill’s tale of frisky coworkers on a corporate camping trip, but would rather give Nicky his present than hear him finish the story once it becomes uncomfortably immoral. Indeed, even when Sandy turns to Mia for guidance as her physical deterioration worsens, Mia can only respond with the story of an only tangentially-related tribe. In this way, Mia only offers Sandy a stalwart resistance to her attempts to connect on any level. This refusal

no doubt spurs Sandy to resort to more extreme tactics in her quest to convert Mia to a maternal figure. Rather than simply being on the other side of the divide, Mia becomes the crevasse Sandy must venture over.

Mia's refusal to engage positions her clearly as Sandy's antagonist and helps to make Sandy's increasingly forceful tactics more palatable to an audience. As a character, Mia does not have a clear objective or goal, but rather acts only in defense of herself to Sandy's tactics. Her obstinance becomes the justification for Sandy's aggressive actions, as Mia is literally held down and forced to endure a Western birthing ritual, all the while being taunted and threatened: "You don't want to miss everything, do you?" (Howe 57). Mia is coached through the birthing ritual as her autonomy is stripped away from her, all in the name of 'normalcy,' in a disturbing scene:

MIA (*Screaming in pain*): Oh!...Oh! What's happening to me? I don't want this...please...I...Oh!

SANDY (*Holding her hand*): You're doing beautifully. The first is always the hardest.

MIA: In and...Oh!...Oh! Help me!

BILL: The first is always the hardest.

NICKY: The first is always the hardest.

SANDY: But the most rewarding.

BILL: Certainly the most rewarding.

NICKY: Absolutely the most rewarding.

MIA: Can't you do something? Can't you stop it? God!...Oh! Stop it!

BILL (*Struggling to hold her down*): You'd better give me a hand, she's fighting.

NICKY: If you don't cooperate with us, you'll have to be put to sleep and miss everything.

SANDY: That's right, you'll miss everything.

SANDY, BILL AND NICKY: You don't want to miss everything, do you? (Howe 57)

Mia, in this moment, is not the obstructive force between Sandy and her goals, but the victim of a woman bent on enforcing her choices onto another. Mia's lines reinforce the persuasiveness of the pronatalist argument, as Mia is herself confused about what is happening and possibly believes that she is actually going into labor. Though Howe does not clarify this point one way or

the other, Mia's physical reaction in the scene is perhaps Howe's way of depicting the extreme coercive force maternalism has on an unwilling, but not immune, objector.

As Mia faints in her anguish, Jeffrey comes to her rescue, fending off the Apples, who retreat while maintaining their verbal attack on Mia.

SANDY: Well...

BILL: Well...

SANDY: I guess some women just can't have children.

BILL: You can't pass a camel through the eye of a needle.

NICKY: One man's meat is another man's poison.

SANDY: A rolling stone gathers no moss.

BILL: All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

NICKY: No pain, no gain!

JEFFREY: WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

SANDY: Your pathetic wife!

JEFFREY: Excuse me?

SANDY: The woman on the floor who's afraid to have children.

JEFFREY: 'Afraid to have children'? My dear Sandy, you don't have a clue about that woman and her feelings for children. Not. One. Fucking. Clue!

SANDY: Sorry, sorry...

BILL: We were just...

JEFFREY: I said, *drop it!* (Howe 58)

Rather than backing down or taking stock of what they have just done, the Apples band together in their moral superiority to denigrate Mia for not acquiescing to their abuse. As in earlier scenes, the Apples resort to recitations of idioms and aphorisms to dismiss Mia as unworthy, incomplete. The exchange reflects their refusal to take responsibility for their actions, while parroting the mindset of a social attitude that supports those actions. This scene implies that the Apples feel entitled to their actions because they can use these 'everyday truths' to justify them, to support their enforcement of a socially-derived mandate over the individual will of their target. It is not until Nicky begins to worry about Mia's still unresponsive form that their frenetic energy turns from berating Mia to reviving her. As they scramble, blaming each other and seeking futile

solutions like smelling salts or propping her up, Jeffrey again takes control, telling the Apples, “Finish the party so we can go home and forget the whole thing” (Howe 60). It’s a chilling reply to an assault on his wife, perhaps implying that this type of event has happened before—possibly even with the Apples—and that this is their agreed-upon solution. Jeffrey carts Mia’s lifeless body over to a table and props her up as if she is still mentally present. Interestingly, Howe comments on this trend in her plays in the introduction to this collection, stating, “In my plays the husband always saves the day. It’s the *man* who brings solace and hope. The *man* who doffs his feathered hat. And this from a *woman* who writes plays! How subversive is *that?*” (original emphasis, xii). Howe’s protagonist women, as well as the antagonist women, get to be rescued from their partners, surely a romantic ideal, but it begs the question what she is trying to say about this type of pronatalist debate in terms of the world of her play and the greater world at large.

This question is particularly germane as the scene moves on. In an attempt to ‘finish the party,’ Sandy wheels out Nicky’s birthday cake and prompts him to make a wish. Nicky’s wish, he reveals, is to have a sibling. His parents immediately become uncomfortable, as Nicky expands on his wish: “I wish I had three brothers for my birthday! [...] I want five brothers! No, I want eleven brothers...thirty-seven brothers...a hundred brothers...six hundred brothers...nine hundred brothers!” (Howe 61). Bill and Sandy try to talk to Nicky about this wish, while Jeffrey intercuts his support as well: “All children need siblings. [...] It would do Nicky good to have siblings, I should know. [...] The only child is more prone towards psychosis in the later years. [...] Forensic studies show that sixty-seven percent of all serial killers were only children” (Howe 61). These horrifying statistics, coming from a child anthropologist, serve only to inflame the anxiety felt by Bill and Sandy as they confess to Nicky that they cannot have more children. Sandy explains

to Nicky that she'd like to have more babies, that there's nothing she loves more, but that they have been to special doctors and they cannot--"They can't seem to find any reason why we can't conceive again, it's just one of those things" (Howe 62). Bill reflects upon the 'pressure' he feels and how trying too hard can make it worse. Nicky, compromising, offers that he'd accept a sister in lieu of a brother.

The tender scene reflects a social pressure on Sandy to not only become a mother, but then to become a mother again and again. Jeffrey's comments about single children only serve to increase that pressure and reflect back upon the withholding mother: if Sandy cannot produce more children, then her one child will become deficient due to her inabilities. Jeffrey helpfully provides more insight into the worldview by providing anecdotes of tribal traditions, but this time focusing on Sandy, not Nicky: "The barren woman of the Gabon Tua tribe is considered a witch [...] The barren Tot woman is taken out and drowned." (Howe 62). Just as the Apples pelted Mia with judgments and warnings about her childless state, so too is Sandy now treated to that same behavior, putting her in the same position as Mia, a position under which Sandy physically deteriorates. Are they not both barren women, one for behavioral and one for physical reasons? At the end, how differently are these women treated by those around them?

When Mia finally wakes, she is disoriented but also enlightened, as she tells the group about the dream she had while unconscious. She was in a terrifying landscape, charged with caring for Nicky, and she lost him. As she searched, she witnessed wondrous things and eventually realized that Nicky was all around her, stating, "I'd never lost you. Sometimes you were a tiny baby, sometimes you were a cake, but you were always with me...On land, sea and in

the air...You were my talisman, my magic charm...my boy..." (Howe 64). With that understanding, she and Jeffrey leave, to go off on their next adventure.

Mia seemingly has a newfound clarity following the events of this evening, but Sandy does not emerge with such awareness. As Mia and Jeffrey leave, amidst the cries and pleads by the Apples to stay, Bill and Sandy return to the taunts she lobbed at Mia earlier: "BILL: Ingrates! [...]
SANDY: It's pathetic! I feel sorry for them!" (Howe 66). They must abuse the Freeds in order to feel confident in their own position. Mia was able to find solace in her choices and awoke from her dream confident that she was not missing anything by not having children, since she had a meaningful connection to Nicky. Sandy, however, must revert to her judgments of Mia in order to feel confident. As she mocks Mia's lifestyle, she suffers more physical deterioration. The final moment of the play shows the Apples on the couch, about to watch Bill's video. Nicky and Bill are both focused on the screen, enamored by the vanity project, so Sandy is reflecting on her maternal joy alone, as the sound of waves overtake the scene, implying a reciprocal, mysterious, and natural return to self-satisfaction.

Howe's construction of this final scene begs the question 'who is better off'? Is it Sandy, still withering in her domestic scene, or is it Mia, untraditional but self-assured? An analysis of characters suggests Mia has prevailed. Sandy did not achieve her goal, but she is still grateful for her child and her maternity. Once Mia wakes, Sandy does not take responsibility or feel any guilt for how she treated Mia. She remains confident in the correctness of her choices and, interestingly, Mia does not comment on the behavior once she wakes. However, Mia has been changed by the events of the evening. She moves forward from the play with a new understanding of herself and the world. By discovering and validating a connection with Nicky,

Mia is able to somewhat fit into the maternalistic world, suggesting that maternalism is correct. Sandy remains unchanged, firmly entrenched in the maternalism and pronatalism that has directed her choices. In looking at the discourse between these two characters, both are contentious, but only the non-mother learns from the experience. Neither changes sides in the debate, but Mia finds a way to incorporate individual desires with the prevailing social attitude. This suggests that though she interrogated the subject, Howe is siding with maternalism, if not pronatalism, in this play. She sees the value of connection between women and children, and she has created a story that does as well.

Mother and Barbara

Mother and Barbara are sisters, and seemingly very close. They confide in each other and frequently spend time together. And yet, as with Sandy and Mia, they are divided. In the introductory tableau of *Crumble (Lay Me Down, Justin Timberlake)*, Mother and Barbara are presented in isolation, as are the other characters, and both are cast in their respective domestic environs: Mother, in an apron cutting vegetables, and Barbara, opening a can of tuna. The choice to present both characters in the act of mothering, feeding their families, is an interesting way of drawing connections between the two characters, as well as illuminating their differences. Out of context, opening a can of tuna is a peculiar activity. In context, as the play progresses, this image solidifies Barbara as ridiculous—a caricature of the ‘crazy cat-lady’—a depiction which Callaghan reinforces throughout the play. While the opening tableau serves as a means of introducing the characters to the audience in a nonverbal way, the pictures of Mother and Barbara set them in comparison—and not to Barbara’s favor.

The interactions between the two characters continue to draw this divide between them. Mother and Barbara interact five times throughout the course of the play, primarily over the phone, an interesting device to establish the distance between the two characters. In the first of these interactions, one of the phone calls, Mother seeks advice from Barbara. The conversation comes in Callaghan's signature overlapping dialogue and gets right to the point:

MOTHER: I need your help
 BARBARA: I'm here, Clara
 MOTHER: I know
 BARBARA: Talking helps
 MOTHER: To talk
 BARBARA: It really does
 MOTHER: Hurts/⁴⁴
 BARBARA: It really does.
 (*A beat.*)
 BARBARA: I bought tuna today...
 MOTHER: What? (Callaghan 62)

In this exchange, Mother comes to Barbara for help, indicating that Barbara is a trusted confidant, but Barbara's solution is not valid. Mother tells her that talking hurts, but Barbara does not listen, interrupting the line to reiterate her conclusion, and then she moves on to discuss herself. It takes a few lines of dialogue, in which Mother only utters "Oh," before Mother is able to express her frustration—"MOTHER: You aren't listening. BARBARA: Oh. I thought you were done" (Callaghan 62). Immediately, Barbara is cast as the selfish, self-important counterpart to Mother's real suffering and grief. Barbara remains a character that is disconnected from the real matters of the family throughout the play. When Barbara lets Mother continue and Mother expresses her

⁴⁴ Indicating an interruption of the line.

concern about Janice and her strange behavior since ‘the calamity’—Barbara’s euphemistic term for Father’s death—Barbara’s solution is similarly self-focused:

MOTHER: What does she need

BARBARA: To talk

MOTHER: I’ve tried

BARBARA: To me

MOTHER: She won’t

BARBARA: I know things, Clara

I know what to make of small girls

I know what they think of at night as they watch the squares of moon prowl across their ceilings

I know what they think of in the bathtub when they wash behind their knees with a new soap

MOTHER: You always did know things

Just like Mother

BARBARA: I intuit like no other (Callaghan 63).

Again, Barbara positions herself as the solution to all ailments; talking to *her* is the only cure.

Again, Barbara sets herself above Mother’s intuition and Mother’s abilities. Mother, interestingly, agrees, setting Barbara and their own mother together on a pedestal of the ideal maternal, expressing Mother’s own insecurities about her abilities as a mother.

Their second interaction, a scene unspecified in its location, comes after Barbara has spoken with Janice. Mother asks how it went, and Barbara is wholly unaware of how unproductive the conversation was. In the conversation, Barbara tells Janice that she is driving her mother crazy with worry; she does ask if she is thinking about her father, but before Janice can respond, quickly jumps to the conclusion that her turmoil is related to ‘boys.’ She then attempts to coax Janice to talk about these boy troubles, but Janice refuses to respond. It is interesting to note that Callaghan provides in the stage directions moments for Janice to not respond, say nothing, or stare blankly at Barbara, but Callaghan does not include a reaction from

Janice following Barbara's question about her father, leaving open for interpretation whether Janice would have responded to Barbara, had she pursued that conversational path.

Barbara's report to Mother focuses on her assumption and has disastrous ramifications. Barbara assures Mother that Janice only has 'boys on the brain' and that she set her straight—a conversation the audience does not see, calling into question if it actually occurred—before encouraging her to humor her odd requests for Christmas gifts. These gifts, which concerned Mother, seem harmless and merely eccentric to Barbara; the gifts, it is revealed, are bomb-making materials. Again, we see Barbara preferencing her own intuition over Mother's and, ultimately, that intuition will prove to be flawed. Again, Callaghan creates an exchange in which Mother attempts to express doubt and concern but is overridden by Barbara's unearned assurance. Again, Mother's acquiescence to Barbara comes with another allusion to the great mothering potential Barbara holds: "You would have been a wonderful mother. If things had...you know...worked out. If nature had been kind to you" (Callaghan 72). Callaghan colors the relationship between Mother and Barbara with this air of regret and misfortune, and yet it is Mother who experienced the most recent loss, intimating that this dynamic of dominance and submission between the two sisters is foundational to their relationship.

Between the second and third interactions, Barbara has a scene in her apartment, "sitting by the phone, not working on her watercolor" (Callaghan 78). In Barbara's monologue, she expresses critiques of Mother while conversing with her cats. The one-sided conversation depicts a lonely woman who speaks aloud to her animal companions. Of Mother, she comments, "She's a good mother. She's just a little twangy sometimes. [...] But she's so small now. A peanut. A frightened little mother-person" (Callaghan 78). Though Barbara's comment on Mother's

figurative size mirrors comments Mother will make about herself, in isolation, they are reflective of the way Mother has been diminished in Barbara's perception. Barbara sees her as someone who cannot cope, who does not fill space. Barbara reduces Mother to a 'frightened little mother-person,' a description that cannot be seen as wholly pitying. Barbara continues, responding to her cats' imagined replies, "What, Garrison? I'm a better mother? It's not a competition..." "What's that? ... I have a sexy voice? Stop it, Leon, you're flattering me" (Callaghan 78). This monologue is humorous, but at Barbara's expense. She seems deranged and deeply lonely in this one-sided exchange. Unlike the other childless women in this paper, Barbara does not seem to have a profession. Her entire depiction is framed in relation to Mother. In this way, Callaghan disregards Barbara, reducing her to one aspect- the crazy cat lady- which Callaghan often uses to ridicule her, similar to the way Mother is reduced to her maternal status by stripping her of her name.

The third interaction between the two, another phone call, serves as a climactic scene for Mother's journey through the play. The scene comes after Mother attempts to overcome her fears and talk to Janice. Janice reveals that she started her period, but tells her mother, chillingly, that she is bleeding her father's blood. Mother, in her panic, turns to Barbara for support. Her panic fuels a cathartic purge of all her deepest insecurities and fears, the root of which being that she caused her husband's death. But with that purge, she receives an uncharacteristically honest response from Barbara:

MOTHER: But tell me this, Barbara:
 How can this body
 This perverse apparatus of bones and muscles and other wet things
 How can this little body wrap itself around such a moment
 Without falling apart
 (*A pause.*)

BARBARA (*Quietly*):
I don't know. (Callaghan 85)

In the wake of Barbara's candid response comes a torrent of the thoughts Mother seems to have held back. Barbara's uncertainty seems to have triggered Mother's onslaught:

MOTHER: You don't know. You seem to know everything else. Why my daughter is disappearing. Boys, right? Why my hands are always shaking. Caffeine. Why I can't sleep at night, television, why my vegetable garden is dying, aphids...is there a goddamn thing you don't know?

BARBARA: Why are you yelling at me? I'm trying to help you!

MOTHER: Help me? You're pushing her farther away. You barely know her. You bought her a tea set for her eleventh birthday. And a sweater that would suit a child half her age. She got her *period* today, Barbara.

BARBARA: Oh.

MOTHER: And another thing. She is NOT average, like you said. She is ODD. She has ZERO friends. She rarely showers. She is doing terribly in school. She locks herself in her bedroom all day and sometimes? I hear her talking to NO ONE. Entire conversations. She makes up terrifying songs that I don't understand. I am losing her drop by drop, Barbara. So how can YOU try to fix things when you don't know how they work in the first place? (Callaghan 85)

In this extended exchange, Mother comes to Barbara for help, but when Barbara fails to provide it, Mother turns on her sister and criticizes her for every perceived failing Barbara has committed. Mother berates Barbara for being incompetent, unqualified to help her in matters with her daughter and beyond. Though Mother has sought out Barbara's help, she attacks her for trying to give it:

BARBARA: Listen, Ms. Mother, I PLENTY understand how things work

MOTHER: How can you say that? What experience do you have with a child?

BARBARA: You are not the only woman on the planet responsible for the lives of others

MOTHER: Your children are not children, they are *animals*

(*A beat.*)

BARBARA: That is probably the most insensitive thing you've ever said to me.

(*A beat.*)

MOTHER: I...I'm...Barbara, I'm...

BARBARA: Don't. Just...okay.

MOTHER: I'm sorry.

BARBARA: People don't choose some things, you know. Things like a defective womb. A defective husband.

MOTHER: I know. I'm sorry.

(A beat.)

BARBARA: I have to go feed my...my cats. (Callaghan 85-6)

Callaghan has crafted this interaction to be a metaphorical slaying of the domineering beast, a critical step in Mother's journey toward self-recovery and autonomy. Mother attacks Barbara for always having an answer, but then harangues her for none of her answers being correct, never acknowledging that she has sought out these answers. Mother refers to the inappropriate gifts that Barbara purchases Janice, yet Janice is seen playing with the tea set throughout the play (albeit using it as a tool to aid her bomb-making). Mother further seems to blame Barbara for not realizing how freakish Janice is, and yet by Barbara calling Janice 'average' and ascribing her odd behavior to 'an awkward phase,' this could be seen in a different light as an attempt by Barbara to love Janice unconditionally. And as the coup de grâce, just as Barbara attempts to defend herself, Mother eviscerates Barbara by negating her caregiving experience, rendering her worthless for not having children. The confrontation is strategic, as Callaghan uses the scene as a turning point for Mother, who becomes emboldened after this scene, shedding her insecurities in order to find new ways to cope and connect with her daughter. Barbara is removed as the voice of authority and replaced by Mother, and it is in that corruption and substitution of the authoritative figure that Mother earns her credentials. She becomes worthy by defeating the one who kept her inferior, who is the one to whom she allowed herself to be inferior.

After this confrontation, Callaghan creates a split scene in which Mother prepares to become the parent she wishes to be, and Barbara processes the argument she just had. As

Mother moves on, Barbara is stuck in the moment. Callaghan's construction of the scene reinforces the derogation of Barbara, as she again converses with her cats and attributes the toil of caring for 57 cats as the same as caring for a child. Barbara's dialogue, intercut with chiding the cats, keeps Barbara from being taken seriously. While preparing the Christmas gifts for her cats, she uses words like 'confusterated' and confuses the cats' dislikes and allergies, working herself into a tizzy of unnecessary preparations—cats don't appreciate Christmas, after all—before exclaiming, "She thinks I don't understand. What a joke. Someone has to feed you and change your litter and buy you toys and take you to the doctor when you catch—put that down! Not until tomorrow. You'll ruin the surprise. Good lord. And she thinks I don't understand..." (Callaghan 87). Only after Barbara is firmly rooted in her ridiculousness does Callaghan allow her a sympathetic moment, but this moment serves only to reinforce Barbara's lack:

She can have her Christmas morning with her delicate progeny. I won't be bitter. I have my own beautiful ones, fifty-seven of them, all devoted, all content. You'd never drink bleach, would you? That's right. You'd never talk back to me or wear my curtains in a school play or wet your bed in your sleep or draw on my kitchen table with permanent marker. And you won't break my. Heart. (87)

Barbara is clearly trying to convince herself that her cats are better than a child, but the ever-growing number of cats suggests that they have not filled the hole they are meant to fill. Barbara's words, preferencing the conduct and simplicity of her cats to the behavior of Janice, is meant as a compensatory gesture, but only serves to support her desire for a child of her own. Barbara is made ridiculous by the circumstance Callaghan puts her in, but her words make her a pathetic, wanting, desperate figure. Now that Mother has overcome her reliance on Barbara, Callaghan makes sure to cast Barbara as a figure to be pitied, derided.

The fourth interaction comes after the climatic plot event—Janice’s bomb exploding—and begins the play’s denouement. Mother and Barbara have yet another phone call, in which Mother informs Barbara that Janice lost her hand in the explosion. The prior contention between the two is set aside, in lieu of the accident, but Barbara notes the change in Mother’s demeanor: “Clara, you do not sound fine. [...] Your breathing is normal, your voice isn’t shaking” (Callaghan 92). Barbara’s concerns are ironic, as the evidences she voices imply that Mother sounds calm and composed. Barbara is not used to this new Mother and insists that this is not normal, but the concern only serves to render Barbara more distant than before, further evidence that she is out of sync with Mother and Janice.

The final interaction is a dinner scene with all three characters. Callaghan uses the scene to establish a new normal after the accident. Despite the fight, Barbara is welcomed to dinner and is tentatively trying to insert herself back into the family unit. She compliments Mother on the improvements to the apartment that have been made but points out matters she thinks still need to be addressed. Mother, however, has already handled the matters. Barbara then suggests that she could move in with Mother and Janice to help them out, a suggestion that neither Mother nor Janice consider. Though the tone of the conversation is polite, it is dismissive of Barbara, as both Mother and Janice share private looks and jokes. Barbara is clearly separate from this little family, and neither Mother nor Janice want to invite her in. In the final lines of the play, Mother appeases Barbara by saying she’ll think about the idea, but Janice mouths ‘NO WAY,’ and Mother smiles at her. The audience is left with an image of Mother and Janice together and Barbara on the outside.

Callaghan's use of Barbara as the antagonistic force that Mother must overcome may be utile in its intention, as Barbara represents more than just an overbearing sister, but a source of Mother's insecurities; yet, Callaghan falls into a trap similar to the one Howe encountered. The battle between Mother and Barbara became based on Barbara's inappropriateness as a mother. Barbara's failed instincts kept Mother from being the mother she wanted to be, and it was through overcoming Barbara's influence that Mother found her rightful place again.

Rachel and Zelda

Unlike the other plays in this study, which incorporate the discourse between mother and non-mother characters amidst the greater drama at hand, Sarah Treem's *The How and the Why* focuses entirely on this discourse. Her two characters, Zelda and Rachel, are the focus of the play, and all plot events happen off-stage, resulting in a script that focuses entirely on two meetings between these characters. The dynamic between the two characters is constantly uneasy, and the story of the play is rooted in their struggle to build a personal relationship. The two characters, biological mother and daughter, are at odds personally and professionally, as Rachel has developed a theory that seemingly contradicts her mother's. Their research serves as a metaphor for their personal relationship—it is not until their theories can co-exist that they can do so—as well as for their standing in society at large, as research speaks to their desires to validate a different role for women in society. In this way, Treem moves beyond a discussion of motherhood as the essential female experience and into a discussion of the struggle women face to be treated as subjects, not others.

With only two characters, it is not easy to determine which character is the protagonist and which is the antagonist. Treem's script often oscillates between perspectives, shifting the

scale of who is the offender throughout the play. Zelda, who, interestingly, is the mother character, is functionally treated as a non-mother character, and can be summarized as attempting to atone for the transgression of abandonment in the eyes of Rachel. Rachel, who is not a mother but whose worldview most closely reflects that of the other scripts' mother characters, seeks from Zelda a chance to patch up her personal and professional concerns. She is less interested in forging a personal relationship with Zelda than she is with utilizing their tenuous relationship for her own benefit. For this reason, I loosely position Zelda as protagonist and Rachel as the antagonist.

Much of the direct conflict between Rachel and Zelda lies in the details of their personal relationship, as Zelda attempts to forge a connection between them, and Rachel rebuffs those efforts. Rachel's bitterness toward Zelda comes out in rebellious criticisms of Zelda's office, research, and attempts at reconciliation. Zelda's assurance reads as superiority, as she continually pulls rank on the defiant Rachel. The script is peppered with petulant exchanges like the following:

ZELDA: Please sit down.

RACHEL: No.

ZELDA: Jesus. This is quite difficult.

RACHEL: Did you expect it to be easy?

ZELDA: Well, I think I'm trying a bit harder than you are.

RACHEL: Which is appropriate, isn't it? (Treem 12-3)

The play reads more like a character study than an Aristotelian plot. As previously mentioned, the events that drive the conversation (Rachel contacting Zelda, Rachel's presentation) happen offstage. The focus then is not on the events, but on the interaction, and it is therefore the ideas expressed that are the focus of the play. For this reason, my analysis of this play will engage character depiction, discourse, and symbolism concurrently.

In the previous chapter, I discussed Zelda as representative of an ‘Unwoman,’ a character that has sacrificed her maternal and feminine self in pursuit of her professional identity. Rachel, an emerging scholar, finds herself at the precipice of a similar decision but is inclined to make the opposite choice. In the first act of the play, Zelda offers Rachel a chance to present her work on a national stage, but Rachel wants to share the opportunity with her male romantic partner. Zelda, whose response to a similar situation resulted in her giving Rachel up for adoption, attempts to explain the implications of this choice to Rachel. This device allows Treem to construct an argument about the merits of that choice, and to uncover the minutiae involved. Zelda’s initial concern is that the scientific community will assume he is responsible for Rachel’s theory, as she posits that when a man and a woman share credit for a work, it is assumed that the man is chiefly responsible. Unlike the relationship between Jeffrey and Mia in *Birth and After Birth*, in which Mia is seemingly the face of their research team, Zelda sees no room for collaboration: “The big deal is people will think Dean created your hypothesis” (Treem 19). Rachel is unbothered by this possibility, indicating an early point of difference between the two characters.

Treem’s depiction of Rachel utilizes a maternalist mindset, though not a pronatalist one. Rachel sees the need to make personal sacrifices for domestic happiness, sacrifices that she does not seem to expect from her partner. This attitude can be connected to the root of the insecurities that plague the mother characters in the other plays: they hold themselves, and are held simultaneously to, a behavioral standard that requires personal sacrifice for the benefit of the family unit. Indeed, Treem’s construction of Rachel seems to echo the ‘new momism’ Douglas and Michaels write of, the flawed belief that “the only truly enlightened choice to make as a

woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a 'real' woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a 'mom' and to bring to child rearing a combination of selflessness and professionalism" (5). When Zelda questions why Rachel would want to share her thesis with her romantic partner, despite being the sole author on the abstract, Rachel quickly defends their working partnership, ascribing her personal success to the support from her partner: "He works so hard. He deserves a little recognition in his field. I know you think I'm committing some sort of heinous crime, but I know what I'm doing. I want a family. I want children. I want a full life. I don't want to end up alone with my research in thirty years" (Treem 20-1). In this statement, Rachel is prioritizing her personal life over her professional one, a mindset that reflects the antithesis of Zelda's beliefs and choices: "They are going to want to dismiss you too," Zelda tells her. "They will look for any excuse. I have been fighting for thirty years, with everything I have, to get people to listen to [me...]. You have no idea the work it has taken just to be heard, never mind believed. And the sacrifices I've...but I got here. And now, when I talk, people listen" (Treem 25). Zelda views her professional reputation as the most important litmus of her life's work. Rachel, however, does not view professional respect and personal relationships as mutually exclusive, and for her, the balance skews toward the personal.

In these contradictions of opinion, Treem is setting up the very real debate feminist scholars and women in general grapple with. Patrice DiQuinzio describes this debate as a paradox, stating:

The paradox of representation emerges in feminist theory's attempt to represent women's social and political interest while also representing women's specific situations and experiences. Representing women in these two ways means that feminism must create the conditions in which women can articulate their own situations and experiences and must recognize the epistemological significance of women's reports of their situations and experiences. (16)

Rachel wants domestic 'normalcy' but also wants professional success. Rachel wants to 'have it all' and believes that sharing credit for her thesis is the way to get it. Zelda, who made the opposite sacrifice, does not believe in the ability to 'have it all.' Where Rachel thinks she needs to make this 'small' sacrifice to fulfill her fantasy, Zelda finds fault in the fantasy itself:

RACHEL: Have you ever loved *anyone*? (*Beat.*)

ZELDA: Yes.

RACHEL: I mean, really loved them. Enough to give up everything for them?

ZELDA: No. Because that sort of love does not exist. It is a fantasy that cowardly young women tell themselves to avoid the reality that they voluntarily fucked up their lives. (Treem 37)

Zelda reproves the very tenets of Rachel's idealism and chides Rachel for being so driven by what she deems is a fairytale. Rachel speaks of wanting a "full life," and Zelda attempts to explain that she found fulfillment on another path, a path that necessarily doesn't include motherhood or romantic attachment. When Rachel lashes out at Zelda, asking her "Does the Grandmother Hypothesis keep you warm at night?" Zelda responds, "As a matter of fact, it does" (Treem 23). Treem creates these characters so as to provide a multiplicity of representation of women, allowing their differences to speak for the differences across the gender as a whole.

Treem tackles many issues that are of concern for the feminist movement, often coming at an issue from both sides, utilizing the conflict between Zelda and Rachel as the battleground for these exercises. Unlike the other playwrights in this study, Treem attempts to provide a narrative with a non-mother character who is satisfied with her life. By offering up single, established, respected Zelda, Treem is saying that it is possible to consider a female character

‘satisfied’ without being a mother. Indeed, the concept of ‘having it all’⁴⁵ references an idealistic view of women’s position in the home and professional world and the perception is that it reflects the ideals of finding personal fulfillment and social approval in one lifestyle. Many feminist theorists speak of the pressure women feel to be mothers, to be professionals, to attain a vision of this balance that is hard to achieve; as one *Huffington Post* contributor quipped, “You can have it all — just not at the same time” (Bonfante). In creating Zelda, who confidently states that the ideal is unattainable, Treem is experimenting with a practical application of feminist thought. Zelda is the posterchild for a second-wave vision of equality. Writing of the second wave of feminism, Julia Kristeva feels that the primal scene⁴⁶ is a representation of a sacrificial relationship of separation and articulation of differences between the sexes, which produces meaning (Kristeva 199). The second wave views this sacrifice as against their will and seeks to revolt against the dynamic as a source of resurrection of Woman. As a result, the second wave poses a ‘counter social order’ that offers a more egalitarian relationship between the sexes. Zelda, willingly sacrificing motherhood, represents the woman who is in charge of her own destiny and whose revolutionary spirit has coopted that sacrifice to benefit her personal goals, rather than allowing the sacrifice to dictate her opportunities through expected motherhood.

Rachel, who firmly believes in the ‘have it all’ ideal, seems to represent the third-wave mindset that a woman’s sexuality and maternal desires are not mutually exclusive, nor are they

⁴⁵ The phrase and concept of “having it all” entered the zeitgeist in 1982, with a book by *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown: *Having It All: Love, Success, Sex, Money, Even If You’re Starting With Nothing*. (Salam)

⁴⁶ The ‘Primal Scene’ directly refers to the Freudian castration theory, but Kristeva uses it figuratively, referring to it as a hypothetical origin of sexual difference (Kristeva 197).

prohibitive for professional success. And with such a juxtaposition, Treem is able to expand into a metacritique of feminism as well. As Rachel recounts her disastrous conference presentation, Treem finds an opportunity to comment on the ways in which women are judged and judge each other, both issues oft addressed in feminist theory: “Because I am a woman. [...] They dismissed me. They never even engaged my argument. [...] They went after me *personally*. Not my theories, my right to have them” (Treem 29). Treem finds opportunity to present an instance where her young character is openly criticized by ‘the establishment,’ primarily men. But, as Rachel continues, reliving her embarrassment, she comes to a point that would echo with many third-wave feminists: “RACHEL: The criticism. The most...injurious criticism. I expected it to come from a man. But not a woman. I thought we were all on the same team. ZELDA: Yes, well, that was naïve of you” (Treem 32). In this moment, and indeed throughout the entire play, Treem does not shy away from the reality of women being other women’s worst critics. Rachel’s line reflects Helene Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa”, in which she writes, “Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves” (878).

But Treem does not restrict herself to these ‘boogeymen,’ who do not appear on stage, to torment her two heroines. They are often each other’s biggest critics, fueled by conflicting theories and personal strife. Treem constructs a conflict between the characters that is not unlike the conflict between the other mother and non-mother characters, but the perspective is flipped. The act of convincing someone not to conform to social gender roles inverts the debates at play within the other scripts and calls forth an interrogation of those roles in general. Rather than defending the choice to become a mother and enforcing the superiority of that lifestyle on the

other, in this play Zelda defends her choice to *not* 'become' a mother, to not be shackled with the trappings of that societal paradigm, and she attempts to convince Rachel to make that same choice. In response, Rachel is armed with the same dubious discourses other non-mother characters are subjected to, always ready to unleash them on Zelda. In perhaps the most cutting critique in the entire play, Rachel lashes out, "You fucking feminists. You're so hypocritical. You go on and on about female empowerment and all you did for us, but the truth is, you're ten times harder on us than anybody else" (Treem 35). It is notable that Rachel seems to distance herself from 'feminists.' A recent survey found that fewer than 20% of Millennials surveyed identify as 'feminist,' despite the majority of those polled believing in gender equality and women's rights, an interesting issue that is currently plaguing feminist activists and theorists (GenForward).

In addition to these opportunities to implant larger feminist commentary within her play, Treem invokes a criticism of the performative structures of gender by questioning their mandate. Zelda does not hold to the pronatalist model of womanhood; in fact, she actively rejected it. She bought with her non-maternity professional success. Rachel, offering up her professional success for a chance at maternity, provides an interesting counter-relationship with not only Zelda, but with womanhood. By positioning Zelda in conflict with Rachel, Treem has created a debate between patriarchal gender norms and non-patriarchal ones. Howe creates a mother character who attempts to convert the non-mother to her side. Callaghan champions a mother who must overcome the nagging, unqualified voice of the non-mother to realize her own wisdom. Treem combines the two, showing us a woman who decided that motherhood was not worth it and who works to liberate the other character from the maternalist mandate. Unlike Barbara in *Crumble*, Zelda had every opportunity to follow the maternalist road, yet she did not choose to do so.

Unlike Sandy in *Birth and After Birth*, Zelda's warnings and words of caution to Rachel do not tout a philosophy, nor does she have any direct stake in Rachel's decision; she is simply voicing the range of options available to Rachel. She is making sure Rachel knows that there are other options. In this way, *Zelda*, and *The How and the Why* itself, is the most revolutionary subject of this study.

Early in the first act, Zelda attempts to understand Rachel's reasoning for wanting to share credit for her theory. With stereotypical scientific rigor, Zelda pinpoints the root of her motivation:

ZELDA: We all lie to ourselves to get through our lives. And then every so often, somebody comes around and hands us a magic mirror. It's a gift, really, though at the time—

RACHEL: A magic mirror? Look, I've enjoyed meeting you. Forget about presenting me, or Dean, at the conference. If I didn't get in, I didn't get in. I don't need a favor from *you*. (*Rachel gathers her things.*)

ZELDA: Whose name was on the abstract?

RACHEL: What?

ZELDA: I'm just curious, since I never saw the application itself, did it list both names? (*Rachel starts for the door.*) You've come up with a really good idea. It took rigor, it took study, it took courage and it took genius. And it is *yours*. You created it. You gave *birth to it*. Don't give it away because you're frightened of the implications. It is yours. Keep the damn thing! (Treem 22)

Zelda is affirming Rachel's ability to reproduce, just not to have a literal child. She is encouraging Rachel to commit to her life's work, instead of taking a, to her, more cowardly option. She is further trying to convince Rachel that she does not have to commit to this pronatalist, patriarchal narrative, but that she has the skills and ability to write her own narrative, to forge her own path. Once Rachel reveals that her relationship is over—Dean left Rachel because she did not share credit for her work with him—Zelda's words work on two levels. Zelda's words can be read as a justification from a mother to a daughter, explaining why she was put up for adoption, or as the comforting words of one rebellious woman to another; but, at the heart of either interpretation

is the same message: you have a choice in how you want to live your life. In the play's conclusion, as Rachel theorizes Zelda's motivations for giving her up and for choosing the less-travelled path, Treem provides this simple exchange:

(Silence. And from the silence, comes the question of the play.)

Rachel: So...was it worth it? *(Zelda thinks. For a long time.)*

ZELDA: Some days, yes. Some days, no. *(Silence.)* (Treem 47-8)

Treem's play seems to revolve around this idea, that neither motherhood, nor pursuits that distract from it, is the answer to fulfillment. Treem offers no solution, but only the commentary that there may not be one, evoking the Edna St. Vincent Millay quote she utilizes earlier: "Safe among the solid rock the ugly houses stand: Come see my shining palace built upon the sand!" (127). Treem finds no answers to the 'woman question,' articulated by Ehrenreich and English as, "What is women's true nature? And what, in an industrial world which no longer honored women's traditional skills, was she to *do*?" (6), but rather concludes that each woman gets to choose her own answer. The choice will not be easy, but she gets to choose.

Conclusion

The scripts in this study each provide a mother and a non-mother character who, with varying directness, question each other's life choices based on their maternity. Howe voices the pressures of a pronatalist society through Sandy's aggressive coercion of Mia. Callaghan questions the ability of a woman who is not a mother to understand and support one that is. Treem's protagonist/antagonist dynamic between Zelda and Rachel is based in Zelda's initial transgression of not embracing her role as mother. Through these explorations of the position of motherhood in society, each playwright comes to her own conclusion in regard to the 'Woman Question'—or what should women do—but these conclusions do not find themselves far from

each other. Howe created a play in which both women exit feeling more secure in the maternalism that plagued them at the onset of the play. Sandy, who did not feel like she was 'worthy' or somehow deficient in her maternalist duties, enforced her pronatalist view on Mia, and found satisfaction in her own maternity and abilities through the experience. Mia, who was insecure about her refusal of maternalism, found a new way forward that allowed her to remain childless, while still connected to a child, thereby exercising her maternalist instincts in an untraditional, but satisfactory way. Howe's play suggests that one does not need to be traditional in her maternity, but can assimilate within maternalist society in her own way, upholding both individuality and maternalism. Callaghan creates a character that attempts to integrate into maternalism through means that deem her inappropriate and deficient. Barbara's surplus of cats and damaging advice distracts Mother from her own instincts. Barbara's efforts to insert herself into Mother's nuclear family unit is seen as invasive. Barbara is not worthy or equipped to experience motherhood, and Mother must overcome Barbara's influence and reject her interference in order to reclaim her rightful maternal position. Callaghan depicts a natural maternity that should not be interfered with by outside voices, but rather values a mother's inherent expertise above all others. In doing so, she holds maternity as the essential female experience: Mother must trust her natural instincts, supporting a maternalistic view that women are inherently nurturing and suited for motherhood, while Barbara desperately craves the experience and attempts to assuage those impulses by compensating with pale imitations of the maternal experience, supporting a pronatalist paradigm. Treem offers up a character that has removed herself from the pronatalist, maternalist impulse, but when confronted with her biological child, ultimately attempts to rebuild the connection. Ultimately, both characters value

motherhood, one looking forward to motherhood as a desirable result, and the other, looking back at a missed experience, who attempts to rectify the lapse. Treem's play also takes a maternalist stance, even as she provides the most palpably liberated depiction of a character who lives outside of its parameters.

These playwrights each grapple to varying degrees with the idea of characters seeking the super-objective⁴⁷ of personal fulfillment in given circumstances and societal systems that are thus far not conducive. Mia wants to be liberated from the pressure to have a child, and finds maternalist satisfaction in her work and her relationship with Nicky. Barbara exercises her maternalist impulses on Janice and her horde of cats, but is disappointed and ultimately unfulfilled. Zelda, given an opportunity to reverse her rejection of her own maternalism, pursues a connection with her daughter. Rachel embraces her research as an equally valid way to spend her life. These playwrights are attempting to question the primacy of motherhood in a woman's life, addressing characters who do and do not want to become mothers. These explorations seek to determine how women can liberate themselves from a single ultimate definition—mother—and embrace the multiplicitous definition: person.

Revisiting Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian ideals, these works can be considered an attempt at rectifying the real turmoil women experience as they struggle to make order out of their daily chaos. The playwrights each engage a character who tows the orderly party line of maternalism, and one who does not, for varying reasons. The interaction between the two can be seen as an attempt to explore the boundaries of female expression. The playwrights have

⁴⁷ "The main character's overall goal, helps to establish a sense of forward motion in the play" (Thomas 35).

taken motherhood as their area of inquiry and interrogate the ideal by casting their two main characters on the opposite sides of this ideal, the better to understand its stronghold on female expression. The presence of both mother and non-mother characters in these plays suggests that it is not childlessness that puts characters at risk of oppression, as our pronatalist society is seemingly built to suggest, but womanhood itself. A dramatic text can be seen as a congruence of theoretical influences as well as its own independent artistic endeavor. In taking Motherhood as a pastpresent, it seems to reflect that while Motherhood may have been a path to societal approval, if not personal fulfillment, at one time, the multiplicity of choice hard-won by the latter waves of feminism may have only provided alternatives in how women experience that oppression—a choose-your-own-oppressive-adventure, if you will—not insignificantly because these plays utilize the same structure in regard to their female characters, tapping into a structure of protagonist/antagonist that seems to promote oppression rather than dispel it.

Rather than providing social commentary on the myriad ways women experience oppression, regardless of their maternal state, the manipulation of the protagonist/antagonist structure of these characters serves to actually reify the patriarchal beliefs that created them. The attempts by these playwrights to investigate the pastpresent Motherhood and its complicated relationship within a patriarchal society have fallen into an insidious trap that refuses to let these characters coexist without conflict. Recalling feminism's own difficulties in rectifying not only the disparate voices of the maternal experience, but also the difficulty in validating a voluntarily childless existence, further study of the relationship between mother and non-mother characters seems greatly warranted. The challenges inherent in these grapplings

with the pastpresent motherhood suggest we need to pay attention to not only the depictions and discourses of such subjects, but also the structures in which they reside.

CONCLUSION

“The monster may not only be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within the angel.”⁴⁸

My mother keeps dropping hints that she wants grandchildren. I tell her, “I can’t have kids right now; I’m having a dissertation.” My sister feels like she can’t mention her marriage without being asked, “So when are you having kids?” No one asks her if she even wants kids. Maternalism and pronatalism are palpable in the midwestern, middle-class environment of my upbringing, but their reach extends far beyond the Great Plains states. Women of the Western world have been writing about these social assumptions for the better part of the modern era. Despite social growth and expansion, the discussions about the pressure to mother, and the pressures of mothering, have not fundamentally changed⁴⁹. One of the earliest notable examples, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, first published in 1892, speaks out against the forcible control of women’s occupations and lifestyle by a patriarchal world. Jill Bergman notes,

[In *The Yellow Wallpaper*] we see how deeply saturated place and space can be with male authority—backed up with such forms of manipulation as “reason,” “knowing what’s best,” and a few timely commands. The rules, regulations, and laws of the father—almost by themselves, by their all-but-palpable presence—force the narrator into the nursery—prison cell and otherwise assault her thoughts, creativity, and desire for freedom of expression and of the self. (3)

This type of ‘male authority’ is still experienced, written about, and struggled against by contemporary women. As Gilman’s narrator is literally locked into a room by her physician husband—recalling Ehrenreich and English’s oppressive ‘expert:’ “the mother...is expected to turn an obedient and worshipful ear to the father figures who will coach her in her new role.

⁴⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, 29.

⁴⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, xi.

Accordingly, the voice of the professional becomes insidiously paternalistic” (246)—so too is the modern woman oppressed by strictures on female expression. In their groundbreaking work *The Mad Woman In the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observed a trend among female writers: each dealt with the confinement of gender expectations, resulting in a sense of suppressing the artistic self for the feminine one or eschewing the feminine to fight for the validity of the artistic self. “The literature produced by women confronted with such anxiety-inducing choices,” Gilbert and Gubar write, “has been strongly marked not only by an obsessive interest in these limited options but also by obsessive imagery of confinement that reveals the ways in which female artists feel trapped and sickened both by suffocating alternatives and by the culture that created them” (64). Engaging Brontë, Austen, Woolf, Dickinson, Shelley, and more, Gilbert and Gubar go on to find that there is a, “psychic split between the lady who submits to male dicta and the lunatic who rebels. But in examining these matters the paradigmatic female story inevitably considers also the equally uncomfortable spatial options of expulsion into the cold outside or suffocation in the hot indoors” (86). Similarly, Lindal Buchanan invokes Richard Weaver’s god and devil terms⁵⁰, ascribing Mother as the god term to Woman’s devil term: “Woman is the antithesis of Mother— the dark to its light, the failure to its success— and a necessary internal scapegoat” (8). These theoretical dichotomies echo similar critical dyads and speak to the observations I have made about the mother/non-mother characters appearing in this work. They all imply a sense of impossibility, of two undesirable alternatives, and a desire for

⁵⁰ “A god term is an ultimate expression to which all others are subordinate; god terms establish the scale of comparison and thus diminish the force of other terms...Devil terms, meanwhile, are the counterparts of god terms. If god terms attract, then devil terms repulse; if god terms invite approval, then their opposites merit reproach” (Weaver 212).

balance in the middle, if not escape from the dyad in general. Unlike Nietzsche's Apollonian/Dionysian paradigm, in which the two extremes coalesced into a suitable middle ground that was equal parts controlling and inspiring, the binaries allotted for women are too restrictive and ultimately damaging.

Looking at these three scripts as dramatic approaches to theoretical debate, I cannot help but think that their shared intent is one of liberation from oppression of gendered expectations. It is interesting that all three playwrights engage motherhood as the battleground of this fight for liberation, that motherhood has become the inadvertent locus of female oppression and expression. Harkening back to the early days of second-wave feminist theory, Adrienne Rich identified two theoretical meanings of motherhood: motherhood as a potential relationship with reproduction, a meaning that speaks to possibilities and gives life; and the institution of motherhood, that controls that potential. The field of motherhood studies, led by Andrea O'Reilly, further interrogates the subject of motherhood by focusing on three areas of inquiry: motherhood as institution, motherhood as experience, and motherhood as identity or subjectivity. In a way, Rich and O'Reilly are speaking to the same 'psychic split' that Gilbert and Gubar note, as they view motherhood as both a source of joy and a source of oppression. The playwrights engage all three of O'Reilly's areas, but seem to find specific inspiration in the realm of 'motherhood as identity or subjectivity.' Taking the theatrical stage as a sign-system, these plays can be understood to represent the playwrights' individual experiences and attitudes toward motherhood, while also representing a critique of the institution of motherhood through their depictions of mother characters and their anxieties expressed about the mothering experience. So, too, do the non-mother characters exemplify a socially-mandated performance

of gender through the lens of motherhood and the repercussions of such non-conformity. Under the institutional structures of motherhood, Carolyn Morell notes, “Mothers and not-mothers both lose, one trying to live up to an impossible model, the other trying to live an undesirable one down” (83). If the non-mothers are freezing outside, the mothers are stifled inside the structure of such gender conformity.

Looking back on the mother characters, there are many commonalities in these characterizations. Sandy is isolated from the outside world, as her maternal identity has consumed her private self. Her identity is Nicky-centric, and her sense of value is rooted in others’ approval of Nicky’s. She has no personal connections outside her family that do not involve her son. She is also conflicted, as she expresses her state of ruination. Her infertility has supplanted her identity as a mother, and she is therefore at war with herself, as her own body lets her down. Reflecting Gilbert and Gubar’s poetic conclusion about women authors, Sandy, and by extension Howe, is conflicted by the presence of both the angel and the monster within her. Yet, as Sandy has not come to criticize the institutional expectations of motherhood, she turns instead on herself, damning the parts of her that do not conform to ruination, which physically manifests itself on stage. Not trusting her own nature—after all, Sandy blames herself, not the impossible expectations she fails to meet—Sandy exists in a constant state of anxiety, if not fear. She fails to properly discipline her son, for fear of causing him harm, which only serves to refract back upon her own sense of failure, as she bemoans her son’s lack of discipline. This cycle of self-criticism is compounded by the childlike behavior of her husband, Bill, who often competes for Sandy’s attention rather than serving as a support in dealing with their son, Nicky. This results in Sandy serving as the only self-sacrificing figure in the family dynamic, further complicating her already

conflicted sense of self. Though she may strive to fulfill her interpretation of the angel-mother, the cost of that effort mutates her into the very monster-woman she fears she already is, a nod to the constantly churning sea that Sandy hears throughout the play. As Sandy is equally disconcerted and soothed by the sounds of waves, she is also vexed and appeased by her maternity.

Mother is similarly insecure and fearful. Entrenched in the guilt she feels over her husband's death, she views every odd action and queer behavior displayed by Janice as a further proof of her own faults. Like Sandy, Mother is reduced to her maternal role; however, that reduction is not presented as isolation, but as a denial of her private self. Mother is shown only in relation to her maternal function, though she has a life outside motherhood. Her job, her homeownership, her Pilates, and her widowhood are only referred to as they serve her relationship with Janice. They are distractions from her responsibilities to Janice and support Mother's internal thesis that she is at fault for Janice's abnormal condition. Mother's original sin—demanding Father fix the angel on the tree, which resulted in his death—is proof positive to Mother that the surrounding ruination in her apartment and her daughter's behavior all originate from her. Reflecting on her moment of motherhood, Mother's only reaction, amidst the awe of the miracle of her child, was one of fear: "Please let no harm come to this child" (Callaghan 75). The fear that resides in Mother's characterization echoes the sentiment author Samantha Hunt shared in a *New Yorker* interview:

The part of sexism that bores and angers me most is the culling, the simplification of women into Hallmark cards of femininity. When I became a mom, no one ever said, 'Hey, you made a death. You made your children's deaths.' Meanwhile, I could think of little else. It's scary to think of mothers as makers of death, but it sure gives them more power and complexity than one usually finds. (Leyshon)

Within *Mother*, Callaghan is attempting to express a similar sense of power and complexity, but *Mother's* fear, and the resulting reduction of self, limits the material Callaghan allows herself. Callaghan has taken the fear that accompanies motherhood and teases it out to its extreme in her creation of *Mother*, but this extremity has obscured the detail of *Mother's* character.

Treem's character Rachel, still interacting with motherhood in terms of her potential for motherhood, is, interestingly, already privy to these themes. Rachel is willing to diminish her own accomplishments by sharing credit with her partner, in the hopes of strengthening their romantic relationship, but after she decides not to do so, the relationship ends. After the presentation of that work, she feels attacked and discredited for simply being a woman. Though she is not physically or situationally isolated, Rachel feels singled-out by the scientific community and names the reason as her womanhood. At the end of the play, she also experiences fear, as she wonders how she can continue, now that her professional reputation has suffered and her relationship is over. She feels that she has no path forward since she has lost her potential to mother, in both the traditional sense with the end of her relationship and the professional one after her research was so poorly received. Rachel acts based on her understanding of the maternalist expectations set out for her, and when those failed her, she does not know how to proceed.

Howe, Callaghan, and Treem each utilize the themes of isolation, fear, and diminution in their depictions of motherhood. In this way, the playwrights attempt to critique the power and pressure motherhood holds over the life of a woman who participates in the institution. They are ironic themes to employ in the portrayal of a behavior that is foundational to a maternalistic, pronatalist society. Therefore, I assert that the playwrights are utilizing such irony as a means of

forming a critique of these social attitudes and the resultant institutional understanding of motherhood. By presenting the impossibility of essential motherhood, the playwrights are stating that the expectations of perfect motherhood are damaging and perilous to the women who attempt to aspire to them. Such a critique would seemingly go on to question the merits of continuing to propagate such social structures, but these mother characters do not exist in isolation. To determine the full scope of the argument these playwrights are making, we must turn to the non-mother characters that share these plays' stages.

The theoretical critiques of maternalism and pronatalism that question the essentialism of motherhood are relatively new in comparison to the larger field of feminist theory. They question the validity of the mother mandate—can women really only find true fulfillment through motherhood?—and examine the way patriarchal society propagates such an assumption. For, as bell hooks notes, “Motherhood is as romanticized by some feminist activists as it was by the nineteenth-century men and women who extolled the virtues of the ‘cult of domesticity’” (135). These theorists work to unmask the ways in which women are encouraged to conform to the maternalist structure by deciphering the ways childless women, specifically voluntarily childless women, are stigmatized for their childlessness. Gilla Shapiro values this work by observing, “The different responses of voluntarily childless women to the stigma they face can be perceived as an attempt to deconstruct this essentialist argument that equates womanhood with motherhood (12). Carolyn Morell and Maura Kelly are two theorists who attempt to codify the ways in which childlessness is stigmatized. Morell’s ‘three dubious discourses of voluntary childlessness’ are discourses of derogation, compensation, and regret. Kelly similarly finds four main types of responses to voluntary childlessness: disbelief (the VC woman will change her

mind), regret (the VC woman will wish she made the other choice), selfishness, and lack of femininity (the VC woman is unfeminine). Morell and Kelly's observations about the reaction to voluntary childlessness support the socialized assumption that voluntary childlessness is a deviant identity. Recalling my argument that the playwrights are specifically interested in motherhood as an identity or subjectivity, so too do I argue they are interested in the identity of childlessness, voluntary or not.

Mia, a voluntarily childless woman, is a character very familiar with the stigmatization of childlessness. Dedicated to the study of children, Mia experiences maternal temptation and pressure throughout the events of *Birth and After Birth*, first by recounting her exceptional experiences with the Whan See tribe, and then again at the hands of her relatives. Mia, refusing these attempts at coercion, suffers through Morell's dubious discourses and many of Kelly's noted responses. Mia is told she will 'miss everything' and is teased by her relatives for her 'odd' interest in foreign children. The commentary and pressure build throughout the play toward the climactic scene in which Mia is forcibly confronted with her childlessness, and every effort is made to change her decision. Being forced to confront her 'deviant' choice, Mia sidesteps the essentialism and instead finds a type of peace in the meaningful relationship she has with Nicky. Rather than acquiescing to the social mandate, she finds a path of compromise, devoting her life to children and taking comfort in her relationship with her nephew. Howe uses Mia as an attempt to interrogate essentialized motherhood and presents a character who finds a way to move through a maternalist society with a type of surrogate-motherhood; but ultimately, the play does not question the mandate itself. Certainly, Howe paints the extreme pressure on women to

mother in a negative light, but Mia's resolution is one that coincides with maternalism. She does not ultimately reject it, but simply finds a way to excuse herself from it.

Barbara, involuntarily childless, is not a subject of pity, but is similarly derided for her childlessness. She is cast as selfish, delusional, and unqualified. Her childlessness is evidence of her deficiencies, and she is therefore seen as the unworthy outsider, rightfully excluded from the family unit. Barbara's worst transgression is inserting herself between mother and daughter, assuming a superiority she does not merit. Barbara's interference with the family disastrously supports Janice's efforts to kill both herself and Mother so as to reunite with Father. It is Mother, not Barbara, that is appropriately apprehensive of Janice's behavior, but it is Barbara that quells those suspicions, allowing Janice's plan to come to fruition. Barbara's lack of proper intuition—of a *mother's* intuition—and her selfish assertion of expertise in children support an idea of the correctness of her childlessness. The comically extreme compensation for her childlessness, 57 cats, works to undermine her sanity in the eyes of the audience, while at the same time speaking to the universality of the desire for children. Barbara wants to be a mother so badly that 57 cats cannot fill that void, and her interference with Janice is seen as a continuation of that compensation. Callaghan's depiction of Barbara is merciless, as she keeps Barbara firmly in the realm of the ridiculous. Any sympathetic moment for Barbara is quickly followed by another attack on her character. The play ends with Barbara firmly removed from the nuclear family, and the audience is meant to find this satisfying. The play ends with mother and daughter strongly connected, and the audience delights in Barbara's expulsion from the tribe. In this way, Callaghan fails to interrogate maternalism through Barbara's characterization in the way she did with Mother. Like Mother, Barbara also suffers for not living up to a maternalistic ideal, but Barbara

arguably suffers more than Mother. After all, Mother receives an optimistic resolution, whereas Barbara is relegated to a miserable, distanced realm outside the family. Barbara is understood to be inherently flawed and therefore unworthy of the liberation from maternalistic pressure that Mother is afforded. Callaghan punishes Barbara for not being worthy of motherhood.

Zelda is a complicated depiction of childlessness, as hers is truly voluntary. Zelda is introduced after a career of intentionally distancing from her feminine identity. Zelda's professional cautions to Rachel about accusations of sexism, her concern for Rachel's reputation, and focus on Rachel receiving proper credit for her work all indicate a character that is deeply aware of how burdensome a female identity can be. Despite these efforts, however, Zelda cannot truly escape her own womanhood. Her biological child, sitting across the desk from her, serves as yet another reminder of this identity she did not choose but cannot shirk. Years ago, Zelda chose a professional life over a traditionally female one and therefore did not rear her child. Her own experience with motherhood became synonymous with a characterization she worked to overthrow. Treem's construction of Zelda as a character who has maternal instincts—after all, she did give birth to her child and does attempt to reformulate some kind of relationship with her daughter at the end of the play—and yet actively stifles those instincts indicates the powerful extent to which Treem views the lure of such socialized performances of gender. Zelda had to go to such extremes to liberate herself from the shackles of femininity in a maternalist society, and those extremes speak to the suppressive force with which those social structures operate.

All three of these non-mother characters suffer for their childlessness in the maternalistic, pronatalist society about which these playwrights are writing. That they suffer in similar ways, despite experiencing their childlessness under different circumstances, speaks to the universality

of those suppressive forces. Both the mother and non-mother character types suffer in their roles, as neither role reflects a realistic or attainable ideal. The playwrights each engage with these expectations for women to reveal the flaws and comment on the disparity by which women experience the world. Exposing the ways in which women are controlled by a patriarchal society through the tools of maternalism and pronatalism can begin the work of dismantling those structures; this is the goal of feminist, and specifically mother, theorists, and I argue that it is also the goal of each playwright. By engaging characters that either conform or do not conform to these social strictures, a dialogue is created within these plays that suggests that neither road is easily trod. If this is truly the goal of the playwrights, as I argue, then it is disappointing that each playwright placed these two character types in conflict, rather than allowing them to exist together.

By placing the two character types in conflict with each other, indeed by positioning them as protagonist and antagonist to each other, the playwrights establish their plays' central arguments and put their respective two characters at either side of that argument. Instead of utilizing these depictions to comment on oppressive social structures, or even to posit the idea that being a woman is hard, the playwrights employ interactions in which one character must ultimately *win*, thereby eschewing the thesis/antithesis/synthesis model of dialectics in favor of one that is far simpler. Selecting their respective mother characters as the champions of the plays' arguments and designating the non-mothers as the main combatants presents an argument that says: despite how hard it may be to be a mother at times, it is ultimately correct to be one. The mother as the protagonist, referring back to Müller's definition, excites the audience's sympathies. These playwrights are implying that the mother is the one to be

sympathized with, pitied, understood. Crafting non-mother characters that must be overcome, coerced, and punished suggests that there is an appropriateness about the stigma on childlessness. In these plays that address the importance of motherhood in a woman's life, each playwright very clearly takes the same side: the side of the mother, at the expense of the childless.

As a woman without children, researching and writing this project, dissecting the role of motherhood in the lived experiences of women, exposes my own internal biases. I can't help but wonder about the playwrights, all of whom chose to have children and yet find themselves pondering this same philosophical debate. I wonder what their motivations were in writing these plays. Close reading and formalist analysis both require the text to be taken in isolation, so musing on the playwrights' motivations is more an extension, rather than a key component, of the analysis in this work. Yet I still feel it is worthwhile to wonder. Were they seeking to justify their own life choices or attempting to parse out their conflicted thoughts? Do they truly feel that non-mothers are villains, or was the selection of these antagonists an unintentional extension of patriarchal structures? I postulate that the protagonist/antagonist structure they selected was intended to encourage debate, to invoke 'the woman question,' and to examine the essentialism of motherhood to a woman's experience. Each play looks at motherhood in a way that questions its necessity, as well as the cost of becoming or not becoming a mother. Yet, the protagonist/antagonist structure they employed undermined their intent. Rather than providing a space to illuminate and discuss the myriad ways in which women experience oppression, the playwrights instead set their characters against each other and, in doing so, established a hierarchy in which one was 'correct' and the other 'incorrect,' in which one prospered and the

other failed. Instead of unmasking the social disparity of women's otherness, they reified that disparity, solidifying the non-mother's place as the already-other's other.

Of course, this study has its limitations, the primary one being the singular representation of playwrights engaged. The scripts were selected for their shared content. Unintentionally, the playwrights engaged all happen to be mothers. They also happen to be white and reflect a heteronormative, middle-class perspective. The lack of representation of childless women, non-white women, non-heterosexual, and non-binary individuals was unplanned. However, I was intentional in my exclusion of male playwrights in this study of motherhood, as I feel it is appropriate to study motherhood through the lens of those who are most likely to experience it and suffer the pressures of maternalism and pronatalism. Already noted in this study, motherhood is a concept that has a far wider definition than is often acknowledged, and yet women interact with the institution of motherhood exclusively. Though there are many ways to mother, the theoretical works engaged take as their basis Adrienne Rich's two root definitions of motherhood: motherhood as potential and motherhood as institution. For this reason, I feel justified in my choice of only utilizing the work of female playwrights.

My intentional limiting of the scope of this work to motherhood refines not only the scripts available for selection—dramatically so, to be honest—but also refines the theoretical scope. The field of feminist theory is vast and ever-growing. Focusing on motherhood, mother studies, and its counterpart, the study of childless women, provides a useful boundary to define this work. I also believe that the study of motherhood—the representations of, as well as discourse about—brings needed attention to a subject that has been relatively unexamined in the academic world. Lynda Ross notes, “given the universal nature of mothering, it is surprising

that until recently motherhood has remained almost invisible as a comprehensive area of academic study” (1). I feel that this project’s strengths outweigh this particular limitation and establish space to expand the project in order to address this limitation. Bringing mother studies and theoretical works that focus on childlessness into conversation together, through the lens of script analysis, provides a unique opportunity to engage these theories in an applied manner. While these aforementioned exclusions were not intentional during the selection of the scripts that make up the content of this study, I feel these scripts are nevertheless appropriate selections in relation to the feminist theory engaged. Many theorists make note that the discussions of motherhood and childlessness reflect a limited worldview. As Kelly notes, “the narrow focus of most studies on heterosexual middle-class women neglects the complexity of negotiating multiple deviant⁵¹ identities” (166). Research that does address these outside populations has a palpably different tone and tends to focus on the ways in which other oppressive systems, such as socioeconomic and racial structures, seek to control these populations of women. In considering the limitations of the theory engaged, the scripts selected accurately reflect a similar world view.

The application of these theories allows for the opportunity to test their discourse as well as reflect on their interaction with the cultural circumstances from which they have emerged. Theatre, Keir Elam notes, is “the complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction: that is, with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the systems underlying it” (2). As such, the signifying potential of objects on stage is

⁵¹ Kelly defines ‘deviant identities’ as ones that result in disapproval and/or “negative responses from relatives, friends, acquaintances, and medical professionals” (166).

heightened by the theatrical form. Elam continues, “the very fact of [an object’s] appearance on stage suppresses the practical function of phenomena in favour of a symbolic or signifying role, allowing them to participate in dramatic representation” (5-6). By positioning mothers and non-mothers on stage, these plays bring to feminist theory the signifying opportunity of the theatre, which allows for those subjects to be studied in both the archetypal and the specific sense. Expanding this project to incorporate the voices of playwrights who are childless women, non-white women, and non-binary individuals would greatly strengthen this project by better reflecting the relationship between motherhood and the way motherhood interacts with culture and theory. Should this study be expanded, the primary effort should be to diversify the perspectives reflected in the scripts and theories utilized. A broader study of these themes would include a primer on intersectionality⁵², a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the analytical framework that looks at overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination. It is important to address that there is a wide range of circumstances under which women become, or choose not to become, mothers. A broader investigation into those myriad reasons must necessarily reach beyond a middle-class, white, Western set of circumstances. As Crenshaw notes, ‘single-axis analysis’ distorts the experiences of women outside those parameters, and theoretically erases the multidimensionality of women’s experiences outside that limited scope (139).

The second limitation of this study lies in the scripts selected. These scripts were selected because they each met the same criteria: they featured a mother and non-mother character who,

⁵² Introduced in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex..." in *University of Chicago Legal Forum* in 1989.

at some point, discuss motherhood and its primacy to the female experience. With this in mind, an expanded version of this project would benefit from widening its script selection requirements. My criteria for text selection, like the Bechdel test⁵³, focused on the conversation between characters, as well as on the representation of characters. Such tests are useful when interrogating a particular subject. Since such a method does not exist in relation to motherhood, I created my own. For reference, the closest that I could find was the Villarreal Test, in which a text⁵⁴ fails if “A lead female character is introduced as one of three common stereotypes in her first scene: as sexualized; as hardened, expressionless or soulless; or as a matriarch (tired, older or overworked),” but the text can redeem itself if the lead female character is later shown to be three or more of the following: “Someone with a career where she is in a position of authority or power, a mother, someone who’s reckless or makes bad decisions, someone who is sexual or chooses a sexual identity of her own” (Hickey, et al.). There are many variations of these simple tests, specifically in the areas of film and media studies, that seek to highlight representation in film, and these can be applied to various media and literature. Their efforts to encourage characterizations beyond the tropic, stereotypical depictions are beneficial to all script-based analysis, and the expanded version of this study could benefit from a more formally codified framework in its selection of new works. A continuation of this work could also potentially include works that offer only one character type, rather than both; however, it may be more challenging

⁵³ Created by Alison Bechdel, what is commonly referred to as The Bechdel Test first appeared in a comic strip entitled, “The Rule,” drawn by Bechdel in 1985. A movie passes ‘the test’ if it: 1- has at least two women in it, 2- they talk to each other, 3- about something other than a man. The original comic can be found here: <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/The-Rule-cleaned-up.jpg>

⁵⁴ The Villarreal Test is designed for films; however, like the Bechdel Test, its criteria could be applied to any form of literature.

to find a script with a non-mother character who discusses motherhood's relevance to the female experience if a mother character is not there to prompt such discussion.

There are, of course, additional analytical paths that would be incredibly interesting to journey down. A study of the depictions of mother and non-mother characters created by male playwrights would provide an interesting counterpoint to the work of female playwrights and perhaps create an even broader understanding of the patriarchal influences on such a subject as motherhood. However, I must admit that I feel particularly drawn toward works by non-male playwrights. There is a general lack of awareness of, and attention put on, the work of non-male playwrights. I am inspired by the work of groups like The Kilroys and The League of Professional Theatre Women, which work to bring gender parity to the American Theatre to promote the work of non-male playwrights. These efforts, paired with the popularity of discursive tests like the Bechdel test, are bringing awareness to the systemic underrepresentation of women, trans, and non-binary people in theatre, throughout all levels of the art. I feel that treating these playwrights' work as worthy of analysis in larger critical works helps to legitimize these texts in the eyes of the academic community.

While this particular study focuses on motherhood, a traditionally female experience, I believe it serves as part of a larger movement, bringing awareness to the ways in which female characters are represented and how those depictions need to be complicated, breaking beyond the stereotypic tropes that are all too often engaged. In the theatre, actors are tasked with learning their 'type,' an allusion to the already categorical nature of character types. By investigating the way characters are created, attention is brought to the ways in which characters are reduced into types or developed in ways that challenge theatrical, and possibly social,

expectations. Elam clearly notes that theatrical representation reverberates beyond the boundaries of the stage: “The role of the sign vehicle in standing for a class of objects by no means exhausts its semiotic range. Beyond this basic denotation, the theatrical sign inevitably acquires secondary meanings for the audience, relating it to the social, moral and ideological values operative in the community of which performers and spectators are part” (7). While formalist analysis may look at these depictions in isolation, theatre itself does not hold such restrictions on its symbolism, and much is made of the theatre’s expressive potential.

In this project, I have attempted to plumb one small aspect of theatre’s potential to expose and critique real-world systems. Using Katie King’s pastpresents as inspiration, breaking a subject into its constituent parts, and then examining the ways these parts work in isolation, as well as in collaboration, provides a deeper understanding of that subject’s definition and potential. Feminist theory and mother studies both interact, and attempt to rectify themselves, with motherhood. It was my intent to discern a deeper understanding of these mother and non-mother characters and examine their interactions for insights into the structures in which they exist. This project has illuminated trends and even faults in the standard operating procedures these playwrights utilized and opened up those structures to further scrutiny. In this way, I feel this project will make a useful contribution to the conversations in both the fields of feminist theory and theatrical analysis. I hope that this work will spark further interest in script analysis as a theoretical tool and that further studies of this type will be continued by myself and others. This project is by no means comprehensive, but rather participates in an ongoing conversation with fellow artists and theorists about how women may be present in symbolic and social realms in ways that are complex, free of stereotype or assumptions, and legitimate. Perhaps Gilbert and

Gubar say it best: "Yet through all these stages of her history this mythic woman artist dreamed, like her sibylline ancestress, of a visionary future, a utopian land in which she could be whole and energetic" (102). So, too, do the playwrights in this study seek to create female characters that are their own subjects, not othered by the femaleness or compounding that otherness through a lack of appropriate femaleness. In seeking legitimacy in a social system that works to diminish them, these artists created this art, these theorists crafted these theories. Though those systems may have proven difficult to navigate, they have lit a fire in the dialectical heart of motherhood. In their attempt to depict personhood in female terms, these playwrights have lit small fires in the realms of feminism and theatre studies. And small fires everywhere are harder to put out.

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ABSTRACT**MATERNAL INSTINCT: EXPLORING THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN MOTHER AND NON-MOTHER CHARACTERS IN CONTEMPORARY PLAYS**

by

JULIA KATHLEEN MORIARTY**DECEMBER 2019****Advisor:** Dr. Mary Anderson**Major:** Theatre**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

What happens when radical intentions meet ingrained narrative patterns? Focusing on *Birth and After Birth* by Tina Howe, *Crumble (Lay Me Down, Justin Timberlake)* by Sheila Callaghan, and *The How and the Why* by Sarah Treem, this paper will unpack the way these texts address cultural attitudes surrounding motherhood and childlessness. A feminist lens will be applied to a dramaturgical study of these plays and the inherited legacies of mothers and non-mothers on stage with which these playwrights grapple. Despite their attempts to expose and dismantle the oppressive cycle of essentialized maternity, these plays all utilize a protagonist/antagonist structure to craft their criticisms, posing mother against non-mother. It will be shown that rather than illuminating the many ways women face societal oppression, this dramatic structure supports a hegemonic motherhood that ties a woman's identity to her maternal status and fails to support a plurality of female expression. By putting two forms of such an expression in conflict, it is my argument that these depictions ultimately support the patriarchal system that creates that oppression.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Julia Moriarty is a theatre artist and educator from Kansas City. Prior to her doctoral studies at Wayne State University, she earned BAs in Theatre and Psychology from Drake University and an MA in Theatre Education from Emerson College. She is also earning a teaching certificate in the Michael Chekhov Technique from Great Lakes Michael Chekhov Consortium, sponsored by the University of Mount Union. In addition, she has studied at the Moscow Art Theatre School and the Gaiety School of Acting in summer intensive programs. She is the co-founder and an editor-in-chief of *Etudes*, an online theatre and performance studies journal for emerging scholars. Her writing has been published in *Communications from the International Brecht Society*, and she has contributed to *Theatre History Studies* and the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Her work will be featured in the forthcoming text *How to Teach a Play*, published by Bloomsbury Methuen. She was selected as a Mid-American Theatre Conference Emerging Scholar for the 2014 Graduate Student panel and as the 2019 Curtain's Up! American Theatre and Drama Society Emerging Scholar. For the MATC, she served as a Graduate Student Liaison for two years. She is a singer, baker, and ukulele enthusiast.