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“Taming the Maternal”: Mother-women and the Construction of the Maternal Body in Harriet Jacobs, Kate Chopin, and Evelyn Scott

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kelly Ann Masterson entitled ""Taming the Maternal": Mother-women and the Construction of the Maternal Body in Harriet Jacobs, Kate Chopin, and Evelyn Scott." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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“Taming the Maternal”: Mother-Women and the Construction of the Maternal Body in Harriet Jacobs, Kate Chopin, and Evelyn Scott

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ABSTRACT

From the nineteenth century to the present day, constructions of motherhood have often run counter to the best interests of women. The repression of desire and sexuality necessitated by ideals of motherhood and maternity are detrimental to women's awareness of and authority over their own bodies. The physical body, then, becomes problematic for these women, who find themselves trapped within bodies that are expected to behave according to popular ideals of True Womanhood. A rupture occurs between body and mind – a rupture that often results in (sometimes literal) destruction.

The fiction of women writers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries illustrates the bind that restricts mothers according to constrictive ideals of motherhood and womanhood. Although each wrote in a different time period and each represents through her characters a different type of mother, Harriet Jacobs, Kate Chopin, and Evelyn Scott portray Southern women who cannot or will not adhere to ideals of True Womanhood through their mothering practices. Although it runs counter to initial belief that a former slave woman would have more control over and agency of both her desire and her maternal body, Jacobs's Linda Brent, because she is not held to the same cultural norms and expectations for motherhood as are Chopin's Edna Pontellier and Scott's Winnie Farley, is able to subvert and eventually escape from the repression of desire and denial of the body that True Womanhood dictates. Even with the progression of time, the characters in Chopin's and Scott's novels do not have greater freedom from expectations of true motherhood and true femininity; they continue to be held to rigid Victorian standards. I argue that for each of these writers, motherhood becomes the space in which to figure the issues of the repression of sexuality, lack of subjectivity, and (both literal and figurative) entrapment.

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Introduction

"A mother-woman is a rather strange 'fold' (*pli)*, which turns nature into culture,
and the 'speaking subject' (*le parlant)* into biology."
Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater"

With the advent of fads like attachment parenting, the Center for Disease Control's recommendations that all mothers breastfeed as a matter of public health, and the dozens upon dozens of parenting books written by a plethora of experts, modern motherhood is now more than ever a public practice. Celebrity mothers in particular illustrate this phenomenon, and with constant tabloid watches for baby bumps, rapid post-pregnancy weight loss, and acceptable mothering practices, the public has now become the ultimate policing force of the maternal body. Mothers and their bodies are constantly being watched, and it is not just those mothers who are in the national or international celebrity spotlight. Although discrimination against women in the workplace is prohibited by law, many employers are sometimes hesitant to hire women whom they fear may take time off or move to part-time work to start a family. These fears, accelerated by the proliferation of the Internet and with access to quick information at the fingertips, are vestiges of a tradition of policing the maternal body that began in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although the circumstances of black women and white women in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century South were inarguably separated by a vast chasm of experience, all Southern women were typically held to expectations that required them to maintain a distance between the real self and the veneer of their role in society (no matter what that role was). Women were expected to be wives and mothers (for slave women, often mothers to their own children as well as their masters' children), and there was little room for negotiation of those duties. The inability of women to move outside these prescribed roles as wives and mothers often stifled their

individualism, their creativity, and, perhaps most importantly, their voices. The dual forces of social taboo and lack of personal time left women with little to no opportunity for agency. After the Civil War, these problems were exacerbated by the economic devastation of the war and the shift of men's labor from farms to factories, leaving women at home where their primary occupation became the primary caregiver to children. Motherhood, thus, more than ever became women's foremost means of identification; their roles as mothers became what society, and eventually the mothers themselves, began to consider the premier definition for "true women," black and white, upper class and lower class. However, this sterilized image of women as mothers that was necessitated by societal ideals of motherhood and maternity (what Barbara Welter has termed The Cult of True Womanhood) was detrimental to women's awareness of and authority over their own bodies and even turned maternal bodies into abject ones. Even though Welter situates True Womanhood primarily in the antebellum United States, the resonances of these standards for women sounded throughout the rest of the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries.

The fiction of women writers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often illustrates this bind. Although each wrote in a different time period and each represents through her characters a different type of mother, Harriet Jacobs, Kate Chopin, and Evelyn Scott portray women who cannot or will not adhere to ideals of True Womanhood through their mothering practices (or lack thereof). Through their characters, these women, though distanced by time, space, and circumstance, each seek to deconstruct social codes of womanhood and motherhood by subverting these norms in their characters' maternal practices and in depictions of the maternal body. Each woman must adapt her subversion according to her position in time and in society. Although it runs counter to initial belief that a former slave woman would have more

control over and agency of both her desire and maternal body, Jacobs's protagonist in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brent, because she is not held to the same cultural norms and expectations as are Chopin's Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* and Scott's Winnie Farley in *The Narrow House*, is able to subvert and eventually escape from the repression of desire and denial of the body that is dictated by True Womanhood. Even with the progression of time, the characters in Chopin's and Scott's novels do not have greater freedom from expectations of motherhood and femininity; they continue to be held to rigid Victorian standards. For each of these writers, motherhood becomes the space in which to figure the issues of the repression of sexuality, lack of subjectivity, and (both literal and figurative) entrapment.

This project, then, seeks to explore the differences in how motherhood is constructed at the intersections of race, gender, and class. Even though the issues and interests of these three texts may not at first appear to coincide, examining them together and placing them in conversation with each other can provide an enriched understanding of constructions and performances of motherhood in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Exploring these three novels, which depict motherhood at three different points in time for three women of different social standings and family relationships, together can help to trace the effects of the Cult of True Womanhood on motherhood through time and space and can make clearer the vestiges of this tradition that we still see in American culture today. With this project, then, I hope to map the trajectory for constructions of motherhood within American society for both black and white women. The female protagonists in the fiction of Jacobs, Chopin, and Scott provide stopping points within this trajectory at which to measure the effects of the tradition of true, "correct" femininity and maternity. Linda Brent, Edna Pontellier, and Winnie and Alice Farley each represent women at the mercy of societally dictated ideals for womanhood who find

it biologically or socially impossible to adhere to those ideals – whether it is because she is literally trapped within slavery or trapped by the pressure to find fulfillment in a singular, predetermined subject position.

Although women have long fulfilled both biological and social maternal roles, it was not until the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century that "mother" became the primary signifier for "woman." Nancy Chodorow explains in *The Reproduction of Mothering* that reproduction's duality of meaning in modern society originates in modes of production. Chodorow argues that as societies moved away from unindustrialized forms of material production that were organized around family and kin and into urban, industrial methods of production, modes of *re*production were also transformed. As production moved outside of the home, "the relations of material production, and the extended public and political ties and associations – the state, finally – which these relations make possible, dominate, and define family relations – the sphere of human reproduction. … Kinship, then, is progressively stripped of its functions and its ability to organize the social world" (Chodorow 12). As their husbands moved outside of the home to work, women were left at home with little to do except care for their children; as a result, reproduction became "even more immediately defining and circumscribing of women's life activities and of women themselves" (Chodorow 13). Women's identities became inextricably intertwined with their children's. Because their status as workers and as productive members of society had diminished so significantly, women began defining themselves more completely and singularly as mothers. This mentality is then reproduced cyclically, handed down from mother to daughter. The echoes of this shift resound in the novels of women writers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they began to express

their frustration with the limitations of this role. When restricted by such rigid parameters, motherhood can become a chore rather than a choice.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the height of the push toward a singular woman-as-mother identification. As more and more women became confined to the domestic sphere, rhetoric aimed toward women also changed. Advice and etiquette literature became increasingly popular, encouraging women to immerse themselves in their maternal roles. With this literature (often authored by men), mothering practices began to be regulated; even as women were limited to the domestic sphere, motherhood was now a public practice, policed by society. The books often emphasized women's primary maternal role by establishing a firm, essential difference between the sexes. For example, *Advice to Young Ladies on their Duties and Conduct in Life*, an advice manual published in 1854 by T.S. Arthur, urges young women to reject the equality espoused by "a class of intellectual ladies" (Arthur 124) in favor of a vision of equality that promotes "the equal right of both [sexes] to be useful and happy in the particular spheres for God created them" (125). Arthur continues:

> The main point of equality which is contended for, and upon which all the rest is made to depend, is *intellectual* equality; and here the great error is committed, and it is committed by the "intellectual" or "masculine" women, who hold the same false relation to their sex, that "effeminate" women hold to theirs. It is a little curious that the first use is made, by these intellectual women, of their great mental powers, is to lead their followers into a most dangerous error! (126)

Advice from supposed authorities such as Arthur was disseminated more broadly as the book became more widely available as a print medium and therefore reached many more women than ever before. Men and women were equated more and more with biology and "nature"; the body

was looked to as the primary indicator of gender and gender roles, emphasizing essential differences between men and women. Therefore, women began to be subsumed under their potential for reproduction, which in turn became their primary role.

After establishing the essential differences between men and women and, thus, between the roles each were meant to hold, much advice literature then encouraged women to immerse themselves in their most important role – that of a mother. This all-encompassing form of motherhood that much of the advice literature championed, which Nancy Theriot refers to as imperial motherhood, was unlike previous typical motherhood practices promoted by literature and by society, especially the "republican motherhood" of the late eighteenth century that simply required women to take on the *additional* responsibility of her children's moral health and "did not change the nature of her work, demand a special personality type, or celebrate women's reproductive capacity per se" (Theriot 18). However, as mothers became able to devote extended (and often unlimited) periods of time to their children, constant and vigilant attention became a requirement. Theriot terms the offspring of these mothers the "new child" – a child born with malleable characteristics and unlimited potential that the child's mother had the duty to shape in order for the child to become a productive member of society. The success of the child, then, was seen as a direct result of the success or failure of the mother to provide "willing, child-centered self-sacrifice" (Theriot 19). As Mary Ries Melendy writes in the chapter on motherhood in her 1904 advice manual to young women entitled *Vivilore: The Pathway to Mental and Physical Perfection,* it was mothers' sole responsibility to provide constant care to their children from the very beginning, reminding readers that "it is now an unquestioned fact that initial impressions, those stamped upon the nature of the child at the moment of conception, are sufficient to influence in a marked degree its physical, mental, moral, and social traits" (Melendy). As

payment for her constant attention, availability, and sacrifice, the mother "was assured that she held the most powerful role in the world: the molding of the future, the care of souls" (Theriot 19).

The frustration and limitation that many women felt as a result of feeling forced to follow these restrictive mothering practices is evident in the works of contemporary women novelists. If women failed to live up to the standards of motherhood imposed upon them, they chanced experiencing disdain and contempt from both their fellow mothers and even men; the consequences were worse for women who, either by choice or by chance, failed to become mothers at all. The extreme physical and emotional self-effacement required by imperial motherhood and the pressure that many women were under to live up to its standards often left women's creativity stunted and their senses of fulfillment dulled. The lack of awareness of and authority over their own bodies led to a disconnect between women's minds and bodies. Julia Kristeva has discussed extensively the implications of this disconnect and of the relegation of the female body to a strictly maternal one, a body that cannot acknowledge its own sexuality or desire. Kristeva describes the maternal body as a subject-in-process: "Through a body, destined to insure the reproduction of the species, the woman-subject, although under the sway of the paternal function (as symbolizing, speaking subject and like all others), more of a *filter* than anyone else – a thoroughfare, a threshold where 'nature' confronts culture'" ("Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini" 302). According to Kristeva, the mother exists as a site in which to figure this meeting of nature and culture, of the biological and the social. However, in fulfilling this role, women's subjectivity is often compromised. Because women hold the control of the perpetuation of the species, this also means that they can also withhold this power. This power worries the paternal authority, leading to greater control over and regulation of the

maternal body. Women's serving as venues for the confrontation between biology and society inevitably glosses over the woman as a subject and the maternal body as speaking and desiring. Maternal authority is subsumed under paternalistic control and its ability to speak silenced by patriarchal systems of language.

Kristeva has also discussed the maternal body in terms of abjection, which for her can be a positive experience. At the same time the maternal body is "disgusting, horrifying, and unpredictable," it is also "creative and life-affirming" (Caputi 43). Although the maternal body, especially in the act of childbirth, is utterly abjected and exists at "the border of [its] condition as a living being," (Kristeva 231), Kristeva argues in her essay "Stabat Mater" that the abject maternal also challenges strict categorization and binaries that characterize the orderliness of dominant systems of language and of culture. Motherhood exists outside of these categories, disallowing definition, and allows for *jouissance*, or the ecstatic joy of the maternal. However, it is also this feature that "threatens the law of the Father" (Caputi 43) – a threat that cannot be allowed. It is the disallowance of any threat to the dominant discourse that writers like Jacobs, Chopin, and Scott write against. All three writers allow for the possibility for the *jouissance* that the abject maternal brings; however, all three also recognize that it cannot exist as long as dominant culture seeks to contain it. As Caputi points out, the abject maternal "proves subversive only if it resonates with the repressed, the unconscious, and the outside-of-language" (42) – which culture will not allow. This contained form of the abject maternal then becomes a negative experience.

Motherhood and maternal authority become even more problematic for the black maternal body – especially the enslaved black maternal body, which is always already abject. Slaveholders saw reproduction of slave women within the realm of their control, much as they

would control the breeding of livestock; they didn't just own the bodies of their slave women, but they owned their reproductive systems as well. Marie Jenkins Schwartz explains this system in *Birthing a Slave* as central to slaveholders' vision of the future of slavery:

> The importance of their wombs and breasts for the future of slavery meant that the struggle for domination centered on women's bodies. The women suffered a peculiar form of violence as slaveholders and doctors exploited female anatomy for their own purposes. Thus women experienced slavery differently from men precisely because of their childbearing experiences. (5)

Since children of black women "followed the condition of the mother," children who were born to slave mothers were automatically added to slaveholders' stocks of slaves. Slaveholders had complete control over not only their slaves' bodies but over the bodies of their children as well. Any authority that a slave mother might declare over her body or those of her children was revoked by her status as a black woman. Although black women gained legal authority over their bodies with the abolishment of slavery, because of the treatment of the black female body in slavery and the stereotypes of lasciviousness that were attached to it, many black women *themselves* denied acknowledgement of desire and agency over their bodies out of shame and embarrassment – a denial that Jacobs's Linda Brent skillfully both plays into and subverts.

In order to remedy this silencing of the maternal body, Kristeva calls for a "feminine ethics" that "bring[s] to the law flesh, language, and jouissance," one that "requires the participation of women" ("Stabat Mater" 151). Each of the three writers I will discuss here suggests a feminine ethics in her depiction of motherhood and the maternal body – despite how grim that picture of motherhood may be. Each writer critiques the current systems in the enforcement of motherhood and the policing of maternal practices. Even though a solution to the

problems that a sterilized image of the perfect mother presents may not be explicit, each novel calls for an alternative version of motherhood, one which allows for women's subjectivity, agency, and exercising of desire.

Chapter 1 discusses Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* I begin by setting the theoretical framework for my discussion, examining the conditions of motherhood for slave women in the mid-nineteenth century. I argue that despite the extreme restrictions placed upon her body by slavery, Linda Brent subverts both these restrictions and notions of True (white) Womanhood using her maternal body. I also discuss the myth of True Womanhood in some detail, explaining how and why black women were unable and yet expected to adhere to these impossibly high standards of femininity. Finally, I describe in this section the role that Aunt Martha plays as a maternal model and the issues she presents about the "ownership" of children.

Chapter 2 focuses on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. I examine Chopin's depictions of motherhood and the maternal body through the characters of both Adele Ratignolle and Edna Pontellier, as well as how Chopin presents the maternal body as a potential site of entrapment and limitation. I also discuss the ideal of the mother-woman, as embodied by Adele, as an illustration of the higher expectations for members of the upper-middle class to adhere to principles of True Womanhood. As I argue, Edna's early loss of her mother complicates both her relationships with her "surrogate" mothers, Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz, and with her own children.

Chapter 3 discusses Evelyn Scott's *The Narrow House* and its representations of multiple generations of mothers. I use the novel to show that despite the progression of time, women in the novel are still trapped by Victorian ideals of motherhood and womanhood. As Scott points

out in her novel, the suppression of sexuality and enforcement of compulsory motherhood lead to the (physical and psychological) destruction of the mother. What results is the ultimate abjection of both Winnie and Alice. I am especially interested in juxtaposing the characters of Winnie and Alice, as both find it impossible to adhere to ideals of True Womanhood and are entrapped by their respective bodies – even though one is a mother and one is not.

Finally, my conclusion offers a brief overview of the connections readers may make between the three texts and then will bring the conversation into contemporary discussions and constructions of motherhood. Elizabeth Badinter's *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* is essential to my discussion of how although the feminist movement has brought about changes in attitudes toward women and women's bodies, especially women's attitudes toward their own selves, these changes are beginning to regress because of legislation and societal policing of maternal bodies and mothering practices.

Chapter 1: "With Such Feelings as Only a Slave Mother Can Experience": Linda Brent's Strategic Motherhood in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Hortense Spillers points out in her influential essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" that the paradigmatic image of a slave is female, both in terms of the domesticization of the slave trade and in the typical depiction of a slave's life in the United States. As Spillers argues, "female gender for captive women's community is the tale writ between the lines and in the not-quite spaces of an American domesticity" (77). Harriet Jacobs brings this phenomenon into clear focus in her portrayal of the particularly female slave experience in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs, who published her narrative in 1861 following in the tradition of male authors such as Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, represents the daily horrors faced by slave women in her depiction of sexual pursuit by her owner Dr. Flint; the emotional, spiritual, and physical degradation as a result of her status as chattel; and the absolute need for freedom in order to subvert this status. Jacobs, through her protagonist Linda Brent, further delineates the specifically female experience of slavery primarily through images of motherhood and the use of her maternal body to gain her freedom and the paradoxes inherent to motherhood in slavery. As Jacobs describes, the experience of the female captive is one full of paradoxes and impossibilities – which she negotiates particularly skillfully through her account of motherhood in slavery. In particular, Jacobs, through a consensual sexual relationship with a white man, uses her maternal body and the children that she produces from it in an attempt to subvert her position as chattel. However, her children serve as both further motivation for her escape to the north and as a hindrance to her freedom, keeping her confined in her grandmother's house for seven years out of fear for her own and her

children's safety. She uses these paradoxes to further her advocacy of abolition by positing that motherhood cannot fully function within the system of slavery. Motherhood, I argue, is the structuring paradox among many in this work. Although slavery is inherently restrictive of maternal rights, Linda manages to subvert these restrictions in order to gain both her own bodily freedom and the bodily freedom of her children. Because of her status as a slave, this subversion of the master-slave power dynamic and the use of her maternal body to gain emancipation is not perfect; however, Brent ultimately does regain both the material ownership of her body and her sexual desire through her relationship with Sands and her subsequent pregnancies.

As Spillers argues in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," within the system of slavery, the gender of black bodies becomes erased completely upon the relegation of the black subject to ethnic Other. African Americans, she points out, must always define themselves in relation to whites, which inevitably results in a "theft of the body … [,]a patent loss of identity and a willful and violent … severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire" (67). This theft of the body, resulting in a state whereby "the respective subject-positions of 'female' and 'male' adhere to no symbolic integrity" (66) has unique implications for the female and, in particular, the maternal body. African and African American women's captors recognized gender only in relation to capacity for childbearing (and thus for enlarging slave stock). However, slave owners rarely acknowledged actual kinship and family ties of their slaves, stripping the female slave of all but the "biological element of motherhood" – and even that was restricted, subject to the control of her white master. It was the white master's "right" to order her to produce children with other slaves. It was his right to possess her sexually himself, as well, as readers almost immediately see in *Incidents* when Linda describes the physical and psychological terrorism written onto her body and mind because of the sexual pursuit of her body by Dr. Flint. Under

these conditions, the child of the female slave "does not 'belong' to the Mother, nor is s/he 'related' to the 'owner,' though the latter 'possesses' it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, *and* as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony" (74). In addition, Linda literally had no maternal figure after her mother passed away, instead turning to Aunt Martha as a surrogate mother, compounding this literal loss with the legal one.

Spillers' argument brings the paradoxes inherent in Linda Brent's experience of motherhood in slavery into sharp focus. Because of their status as commodities, slave women like Linda Brent were unable to act out nineteenth-century white ideals and values of "true womanhood" and motherhood and were thus incapable of demonstrating acts of femininity and maternity. Motherhood then loses its "sacredness … as a female blood-rite/right" (75). Although Spillers contends that even though children were produced in the act, "we do not read 'birth' in this instance [of captivity] as a reproduction of mothering precisely because the female, like the male, has been robbed of the parental right" (78). I argue that Jacobs actually subverts this theft of parental rights and theft of the body in her narrative when Linda takes control of her own body by transforming it into a maternal body. She willfully enters into a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, thus producing her children by her own volition and then reconstitutes her family upon fleeing captivity and gaining emancipation. Motherhood for Jacobs provides a means for emancipation from slavery rather than a restriction on the captive female body as a result of it. Although I would agree with Spillers' assertion that traditionally "the provisions of patriarchy … declare Mother Right, by definition, a negating feature of human community" (80), I would suggest that Jacobs within the space of her narrative denies this negation by taking control of both her maternal body and her maternal rights in her removal of herself and her children from the tethers of slavery. In addition, Aunt Martha plays a pivotal role in the narrative as an example

of alternative (although not entirely unproblematic) womanhood and motherhood by providing Linda with a model for how to use her own body to subvert white systems of control.

Images of slave women as hypersexualized, as mere breeders incapable of maternal feeling, would likely have been in readers' minds as they read Jacobs's narrative. Hypersexualized images rendered slave women as unable to have the same level of maternal feelings or the ability to nurture as white women did – even as slave women often stepped into white homes to care for their mistresses' children. These stereotypes, useful for maintaining white justifications for slavery, dated back to the first European "discovery" and conquest of African countries and their inhabitants, when whites began to ascribe African's physical differences in appearance and lifestyle to inherent mental and physical deformity, depravity, and inferiority. For example, scientist J.J. Virey wrote in 1819 that Africans' sexuality was "developed to such a degree of lascivity unknown in our climate, for their sexual organs are much more developed than those of whites" (qtd. Gilman 212-3). This "lascivity," like the opposing skin colors of Europeans and Africans, was the opposite of European ideals of sexuality as well, thus serving to further emphasize difference. After Europeans began to capture and enslave these persons, these so-called pathological differences became a justification for slavery. Because persons of color were viewed as occupying a lower place on the evolutionary scale, physiological "differences" gave way to social differences. Kaila Story argues that assigning sexual, intellectual, and even criminal differences to black bodies was what enabled Europeans to turn them into commodity (40). This objectification thus allowed white men to write new scripts onto the body of the black woman and so make them "inherent to what blackness and femaleness meant and mean" (40-1).

These were the notions that Harriet Jacobs battled against as she wrote the narrative of her experience as a black woman in slavery. Beverly Guy-Sheftall illustrates this peculiar double bind that African-American women were placed in as a result of slavery. She contends that "with the inception of slavery in America, African women were conceptualized by whites on the one hand as oversexed and also as something other than woman. Furthermore, their moral stature was said to have deteriorated further during slavery" (25). *Incidents*, edited by prominent abolitionist and sentimental novelist Lydia Maria Child, utilized calls to sympathy and sentiment in order to attempt to address this gap between Jacobs's position as an African-American former slave and her audience of white Northern women. However, because of this wide disparity between experiences, in order to lead white women not only to sympathize with black women but also to be moved to action, former slave women like Jacobs had to demonstrate how they attempted as best they could to adhere to ideals of the white Cult of True Womanhood – which necessarily involved stripping themselves of sexual agency and portraying themselves as "pure, passionless, almost holy" (Kaiser 97). In order to gain sympathy, she had to appeal to the values of this type of womanhood – specifically the maternal values. Through her narrative, Jacobs explains how motherhood is not possible within the confines of slavery and thus, paradoxically, justifies why she had to use her maternal body to escape it.

In order to convince her audience of her message of the impossibility of functional motherhood within slavery, Jacobs had to craft her narrative in such a way that white northern women who valued (at least in principle) the Cult of True Womanhood, a system of values that prioritized chastity, virtue, and passivity, would recognize her celebration of women's roles as wives and mothers. True Womanhood, as Barbara Welter explains in her influential 1966 essay, held women "hostage" in the home, dictating norms for how all women should behave. This

feminine ideal, presented by magazines, advice and etiquette literature, and religious rhetoric, was comprised of the four overriding principles of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. "Put them together," Welter writes, "and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman. Without them … all was ashes. With them, she was promised happiness and power" (153). If a woman did not conform to those virtues, she was considered unfeminine and unnatural.

Piety, the "core of a woman's virtue, the source of her strength" (Welter 153), and purity both required a "purifying, passionless love" for God, husband, and children; a woman was to be self-effacing at all times in all things. While more excusable for men, any form of sex or physical impropriety before marriage was a mark of shame on a woman. Girls who lost their innocence before their wedding night were often depicted in literature as victims of depravity and hysteria in addition to reaping social and spiritual condemnation. Even after marriage, sex within those bounds was problematic. Because sexual purity was valued so highly and sexual activity so condemned, the loss of this purity presented a paradox for women: "Woman must preserve her virtue until marriage, and marriage was necessary for her happiness. Yet marriage was, literally, an end to innocence. She was told not to question this dilemma, but simply to accept it" (Welter 158).

True Womanhood was full of such paradoxes, engendering guilt in those who would inevitably fail to hold up its impossible standards and rendering it unintelligible for women who weren't the stereotypical white or middle-class angels in the household. As such, it was impossible for Jacobs (or any slave woman) to adhere to these standards; however, in order to reach her white female audience, Jacobs still had to portray an *attempt* to align herself with at least some aspect of True Womanhood – in her case, motherhood. Although Jacobs recognizes

that she, as a slave woman, "ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (Jacobs 67), to persuade them to buy into her abolitionist message, she must also cause them to identify with her in order to gain their sympathy. However, this narrative intention is also paradoxical; although Jacobs had to write herself into existence by attempting to adhere to the tenets of the Cult, she also knew that because of her status as a slave, achieving it was impossible. Dana Nelson argues that True Womanhood served as a "double negation for black women":

> First, as for the 'white' woman, the imaginative ideal of True Womanhood required an ostensible denial of her full sexuality. But, second, because of the rape and forced cohabitation institutionalized under slavery, True Womanhood functioned as a negation of the slave woman's ability to live up to that ideal of absent sexuality. So her enforced sexuality defined her failed status as 'woman.' (134)

As Beth Maclay Doriani also points out, slave women's "very ability to survive abuse meant that they could not hope to meet white women's ideal of womanhood, since fragility – even death – were associated by whites with innocence, purity, and femininity" (206). Jacobs, in other words, even though she recognized that it was impossible for white women to see her as occupying the same moral ground as themselves, still had to portray herself as attempting to adhere to their principles in order to gain their sympathy, even though the mere facts of her escape from slavery and her writing of her abolitionist text violated the tenets of True Womanhood. Jacobs, then, must walk a thin line between this identification and concession. However, Jacobs also subtly reworks her call for sympathy, playing off and critiquing the popularity of sentimental fiction to grab the attention of readers while furthering her message of abolition. This demonstrating model has the potential to be "liberational": Jacobs' narrative "reads the real practice of sympathy more

critically, questioning its actual efficacy, and suggesting that it too can be subtly (and not so subtly) coopted by social models of domination" (Nelson 138). The critiques of both True Womanhood and of the sympathetic appeals she uses to address the reasons for her incapability of achieving its standards underlie Jacobs' strategic maneuvering of nineteenth-century political and social constructions.

The paradox between sympathy and the impossibility of attaining True Womanhood becomes especially apparent when she must account for the presence of her two children, Benny and Ellen. As an attempted subversion of the status of her body as property of Dr. Flint, Linda enters into a relationship with another white man, Mr. Sands, a soon-to-be U.S. senator from the town in which she lives. Linda explains to the reader that the motivation for her relationship with Sands and her resulting pregnancy was in hopes that Flint, upon discovering these, would be angry enough to sell her to Sands, who would then give her and her unborn child their freedom. Linda acknowledges that "I know what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation" (Jacobs 64), citing the fact that "it *seems* less degrading to *give* one's self, than to submit to compulsion" (65, emphasis mine) as additional motivation. In this act, Linda assumes responsibility for her own "degradation," making clear to both herself and to her readers that she is in full control of her attempted reclamation of her subject-position through pregnancy, and at the same time she "powerfully marks her revision of self and reclaims her honor, counter to the self-negating imperatives of white hegemony" (Nelson 136). Her use of language here is subtle, but strategic; she subverts Flint's attempts to *take* her by *giving* herself to another man, thus exercising her agency and denying Flint's control over her. Thus, her choice in Sands is, too, a strategic one – Sands is not only a white man but a *powerful* white man who holds power in the community and will soon become a senator, a man who can effect political change. No mention is made of how

he and Linda met or even of any romantic feelings between them except for "kindness and attachment," thus underscoring his "strategic value," as well as Linda's ability to "[maneuver] the pieces into position, playing master against master, king against king" (137).

Motherhood was a central element to both Southern and Northern womanhood, so Jacobs had to negotiate it carefully within her text when discussing the children that resulted from her relationship with Sands. True Womanhood stressed a focus on the spiritual aspects of pregnancy and motherhood, which involved an erasure of more physical elements like the acts of conception and childbirth; however, Jacobs had to address these physical components in order to explain her children and her relationship with Sands. Slave mothers, due to their status and the status of any children they had as property, had no right whatsoever to traditional kinship systems; the material of their body and of the bodies of their children was not their own due to their status as chattel. As I have argued above and as Saidiya Hartman points out, "the maternal function was not enshrined with minimal or restricted rights but indistinguishable from the condition of enslavement and its reproduction. Motherhood was critical to the reproduction of property and black subjection, but parental rights were unknown to the law" (98). Slaveholders saw childbirth and procreation as their responsibility – indeed, as their right. Once importing slaves became illegal in the United States in 1808, ensuring a steady stock of slaves became essential for continuing plantation owners' supply of labor. As a result, slave owners oversaw with increasing vigilance the reproduction of their female slaves. This coincided with the boom of professional medicine, particularly in obstetrics. Both slaveholders and doctors saw this attention to slave women as a good business practice, as well as "evidence of a benevolent concern for the slave woman's well-being" (Schwartz 2). However, the traditions of those same women saw childbirth and prenatal care as a woman's domain, in direct conflict, then, with slave

owners' insistence on the care of male doctors. Women's struggle for control over their reproductive systems thus marked a larger fight for control over the material of their own bodies and those of their children. Women's bodies became the territory on which slaveholders' interests in preserving slavery and slaves' interest in owning agency over their own bodies did battle (Schwartz 5).

After birth, this battle was transferred onto the bodies of slave women's children. Slave children could be bought and sold with the mother knowing nothing until they were being taken away to the auction block or picked up to be transported to their new owners. In addition, slave children "followed the condition of the mother," so even if the children were fathered by a white man, if their mother was a slave, the children automatically were as well. Despite this, however, familial bonds, generally, and maternal bonds, specifically, remained strong in many slave kinship systems, as we can see in Linda Brent's own relationship with her maternal grandmother. Linda's grandmother, who is known as Aunt Martha, was a "great treasure" to Linda and a "remarkable woman in many respects" (Jacobs 11), taking on the role of a traditional mother after Linda's own mother passed away. She serves as a protector, confidant, and refuge for Linda both during Linda's time in slavery and after she makes her escape. Martha, a "very spirited woman" (17), holds some influence over Flint and in the community, standing up to Flint several times throughout the text. As a strong maternal figure anchored by her unwavering faith in God, Aunt Martha has been described by some critics as a representative of True Womanhood. She is "mistress of a snug little home, surrounded with the necessities of life" (23) that acted as a "sweet balsam" to Linda; and Martha is also described by Linda as "so loving, so sympathizing!" (23). Martha is extremely pious as well, often urging Linda to put her trust in God rather than in her own actions to escape the miseries of slavery.

However, as much as Martha might appear to conform to the ideals of True Womanhood, I argue that she in fact, on a deeper level, actively subverts those ideals, providing an alternative model for womanhood and motherhood. Martha is the sole proprietor of her home; she has no husband to answer to. She refuses to submit to figures of male authority, becoming positively fearsome when Flint enters her house in search of Linda:

> [Flint] gave me the blow that would have fallen upon Rose if she had still been his slave. My grandmother's attention had been attracted by loud voices, and she entered in time to see a second blow dealt. She was not a woman to let such an outrage, in her own house, go unrebuked. The doctor undertook to explain that I had been insolent. Her indignant feelings rose higher and higher, and finally boiled over in words. "Get out of my house!" she exclaimed. "Go home, and take care of your wife and children, and you will have enough to do, without watching my family." … "Do you know whom you are talking to?" [Flint] exclaimed. She replied, "Yes, I know very well who I am talking to." (83)

Martha defends her children and grandchildren at all costs; even though she urges them not to take risks, she herself takes them repeatedly – namely by hiding Linda in her house for seven years.

Martha also provides a model for Linda in how both women use their bodies to subvert systems of slavery and white patriarchal authority. Linda describes how Martha, in order to prevent herself from being sold by Flint despite being promised freedom, "sprang upon the auction block" at the public sale against Flint's wishes, deciding that "if he was base enough to sell her when her mistress intended she should be free, she was determined the public should know it" (17). Knowing that she was well-respected by the community, Martha knew no one

would bid on her, save the elderly sister of Martha's deceased mistress, who immediately after buying her gave her freedom. Both Martha and eventually Linda quickly realize that in a society so strictly structured by race, gender, and class that afforded so few options for agency, the use of their bodies to obtain liberation becomes a necessity.

Although Aunt Martha holds some influence over Dr. Flint and in the community, her role as a maternal figure remains limited while her granddaughter remains in slavery; she must ultimately submit to Flint's wishes for Linda as he is her legal owner. As Caroline Levander argues, "Dr. Flint's authority overpowers the grandmother's limited maternal influence and ultimately keeps Linda from drawing upon the support the older woman offers" (31). Aunt Martha's limited influence emphasizes the fact that maternity cannot do its job while confined within the system of slavery and thus serves as a further appeal to the maternal sympathies of Jacobs's audience. In addition, this limitation provides evidence for the necessity of Linda's escape to the North with her own children.

The importance of motherhood is nevertheless crucial to Linda's rationale both to herself and to her audience to use her maternity to reclaim the material of her own body. Because she has witnessed familial ties being broken by slaveholders selling both members of her own family and members of friends' families, she is fully aware of the potential consequences of her pregnancies. She knows that her children could be sold away from her and that white social and legal codes dictate that she will have no right either to her children or to her own maternal body. However, in entering into a consensual relationship with Sands, Linda attempts to place the power for subversion in her own capacity for pregnancy and motherhood by "converting her body and reproductive abilities from sites of exploitation to vehicles of resistance" (Li 15). Her maternal body and the children it eventually produces, she hopes, will provide the means for her

to reclaim the material of her body and that of her children, thus subverting the necessarily fragmented slave kinship system.

Jacobs's representation of Linda's maternal body within slavery operates on multiple levels here. On one level, it serves in its appeals to her white female audience in that the maternity that they so value cannot do its job while confined within slavery. Linda repeatedly expresses that she would rather her children be dead than grow up being exposed to the "mortifications" of slavery in order to express to her readers how maternity is restricted within slavery. The desire to commit infanticide – something that would presumably horrify white Northern mothers – is a shocking way for slave women to "express their desire to exert maternal control" (Levander 34). Levander argues that "by illustrating how race inevitably determines characters' understandings of motherhood, Jacobs implies that rather than being 'natural,' the motherhood upon which domesticity depends is constructed within slave-owning culture for particular social and political ends" (29). Jacobs's portrayal of the unnaturalness of maternity within slavery, then, serves to further her abolitionist message; that is, the motherhood that the Cult of True Womanhood privileges forces white women readers to recognize that tension between upholding these ideals and allowing the slavery that places mothers in this position to continue.

On another level, Jacobs presents the maternal body as a literal means for emancipation. In the choice she makes to enter into a consensual relationship with Sands, Linda is fully aware (and admits that she hopes) that such a relationship will result in pregnancy. As discussed above, Linda hopes that upon discovering her pregnancy, Flint would be angry enough to sell both her and her unborn child. The attempt to gain control of the material of her body shows Jacobs to be aware of "how subjectivity might be won through an understanding of – or at least possession of

– one's body" (Marotte 15). Although Linda's plan to provoke Flint into selling her initially fails and keeps both her and her two children confined within slavery, it is her children that provide the final push of motivation that Linda needs to make her escape:

> I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. … Every trail I endured, every sacrifice I made for their sakes, drew them closer to my heart, and gave me fresh courage to beat back the dark waves that rolled and rolled over me in a seemingly endless night of storms. (Jacobs 102)

By taking control of her maternal body, Linda is ultimately able to take control of the material of her entire body, pregnant or not, and make her escape.

However, Linda also recognizes that in admitting to the nature of her relationship with Sands, she is also veering quickly away from the tenets of True (White) Womanhood. Her repeated apologies to readers insist that even though she realizes her departure from these ideals, she as a slave woman whose body is not her own cannot be held to the same standards as white women: "I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (66). Her apologies, however, mask a "more radical maternal subjectivity" (Wearn 80) – one that operates on turning traditional notions of passive maternity and the demure angel in the household on their heads. Jacobs skillfully negotiates this upheaval by playing on and then subverting constructions of white motherhood that have the potential and the historical precedence to entrap her even further. Wearn argues that "because they can be used as a tool of oppression in the slave state, traditional maternal bonds and the cultural values that underwrite

them must, then, at a deeper level be resisted. Jacobs' nuanced, multi-layered depiction of her own motherhood and slavehood, then, both politically exploits *and* critically deconstructs nineteenth-century maternal ideals" (80). Children can be constraining, another example of slave women's status as hypersexual "breeders," but Jacobs uses her pregnancy and her children to provide a means for emancipation.

Ultimately, Linda's plan for emancipation fails; Flint refuses to sell Linda and her child to Sands, threatening to "grind [her] bones to powder" (69) and reminding her that "[her] child was an addition to his stock of slaves" (72) – erasing any doubt in her mind that her body (as well as the body of her child) is purely commodity. However, even after Flint's refusal and the entrance of her son, Benny, into the institution of slavery, Linda continues her relationship with Sands and is soon pregnant with a second child. Readers do not receive the same lengthy account for the birth of this child as they did for Linda's first; the news of her second pregnancy is given no more than a passing mention. This erasure is crucial; in stark contrast to her earlier rationale, this silence perhaps indicates that Linda likely carried on her sexual relationship with Sands not because she believed that it would earn her freedom but because of her *own desire*. This desire would clearly not appeal to her white readers who would have adhered (at least in principle) to the Cult of True Womanhood and would certainly not fit the formula of the sentimental novel, wherein female protagonists who give in to their desire meet fateful and usually fatal ends. Linda tries to deflect attention away from the presence of this second child in order to retain the sympathy she requires from her readers; however, this erasure is at the expense of expressing her own sexual agency.

At the same time, we can read Linda's second pregnancy as a result of her exercising of a desire that has been dually repressed by slavery and by her readers' nineteenth-century

sensibilities. Because of the stereotypes of black women as "licentious and morally suspect" (Li 21) discussed above, Jacobs must bury the language of any active desire and sexuality. Stephanie Li attributes this tension to the narrative gap between Jacobs and her protagonist; as she argues, "all of Linda's actions are influenced by more complex motives and desires" (22). Savvy readers can recognize this gap, but the true nature of Linda's sexuality and of her relationship with Sands is left to conjecture. Under the system of slavery, as Spillers points out, "the customary lexis of sexuality, including 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire,' is thrown into unrelieved crisis" (76). Any discussion of Linda's desire in this setting, while important to acknowledge, is also subject to this paradox.

Linda's escape from slavery and her attempt to reclaim her body are not perfect. After Linda leaves the Flint house and conceals herself at the houses of several friends before ending up at her grandmother's, Dr. Flint, enraged, posts a reward for her return and searches for her unrelentingly. Flint's relentlessness in his pursuit forces Linda into her "loophole of retreat" – the garret-space adjoined to her grandmother's house. This space, nine feet long, seven feet wide, and three feet high, houses Linda in continuous darkness and dampness; it lacks air, but runs aplenty with rats and mice (127). However, the garret-space is still a subject-space for Linda; as she points out, "I could have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave. … [And] though my life in slavery was comparatively devoid of hardships, God pity the woman who is compelled to lead such a life!" (127-128). It allows Linda to continue developing her sense of subjectivity in relation to loved ones, using her children's presence, even though they cannot see her, to strengthen her resolve to escape: "I was so weary of my long imprisonment that, had it not been for the hope of serving my children, I should have been thankful to die; but, for their sakes, I was willing to bear on" (140).

Although Linda appears to prefer the confinement of the garret-space to the confinement of slavery, her inability to venture out of the space or even to make her presence known to her children reveals another paradox in Linda's journey to emancipation. In escaping from slavery to the hidden space in her grandmother's house, she trades one form of captivity for another. She is still subject to Flint's control; his mere presence terrorizes her into remaining in the space for seven years. Although in being able to watch Dr. Flint periodically on the street through a hole in the boards that confine her, Linda reverses the white male gaze upon her, she still recognizes the fact that her escape has been far from perfect. She is also able to see her children but cannot even make them aware of her presence, much less protect them from Dr. Flint or even from Mr. Sands. After being informed of her husband's relationship to Benny and Ellen, Mrs. Sands's sister expresses a wish to adopt Ellen. Linda's grandmother asks Linda what to do, but to Linda, "the question seemed a mockery. What *could* I do? They were Mr. Sands' slaves, and their mother was a slave, whom he had represented to be dead" (151). Sands assures Linda that the children are not his property, but both decide that in order to keep her daughter from the hands of Dr. Flint, Ellen should part with her family and join Mrs. Sands's relatives in the north. However, Linda wonders if she is selfish in not allowing Ellen to be fully adopted by Mrs. Sands's sister, but in the end, it is her "experience of slavery that decided [her] against it" due to the "circumstances that might arise that would cause her to be sent back" (155). Therefore, to be able to protect both her daughter and herself from the potential of returning to slavery, Linda strengthens her resolve to flee to New York to "be able to watch over her, and in some degree protect her" (155). Linda's insistence on regaining the materiality of her own body in order to protect her child further emphasizes Jacobs's message of the impossibility of true motherhood

under slavery and thus illustrates the paradox (and impossibility) of her position as both slave and mother.

Not surprisingly, as her confinement continues, Linda becomes more and more restless: "At times, I was stupefied and listless; at other times I became very impatient to know when these dark years would end and I should again be allowed to feel the sunshine, and breathe the pure air" (163). In addition, she not only constantly fears recapture as a deterrent for her escape but also fears "Dr. Flint's alleged power" over her children that may be strengthened upon her escape (165). Paradoxically, then, her children seem to serve as both a motivation for and a hindrance to Linda's escape. However, a friend of Linda's eventually persuades her that her children are free and therefore outside Dr. Flint's control and that "for the sake of [her] children's welfare [she] ought not to hesitate a moment" (165). The sense of subjectivity Linda has been gaining in her time in the garret-space and the possibility of making a better life for herself and for her children drive her escape to New York. Linda's ability to "redefine motherhood within the context of slavery" (Levander 36) and to gain emancipation both through and in spite of her children allows her to maintain maternal bonds upon her escape to the north; after arriving in New York, Linda immediately seeks out Ellen in the home of Mrs. Hobbs, a relation to Sands. However, Mrs. Hobbs refuses to give up Ellen – something that Linda can do nothing about since Ellen is still technically the property of another. Linda recognizes that "in order to protect [her] children, it was necessary that [she] should own [herself,]" longing to be "entirely free to act a mother's part toward [her] children" (184, 186). Linda is eventually able to bring her family back together; with her escape, her children are able to gain their freedom as well. After Dr. Flint's death, Linda's friend and employer Mrs. Bruce is able to buy and then give Linda her freedom at last. Although Linda objects to "having my freedom bought," she feels

as though "a heavy load had been lifted from [her] weary shoulders" (218), recognizing that both she and her children are finally able to be truly reconstituted as a family.

However, the question of who legally owns Benny and Ellen is muddy at best throughout much of the text, raising questions of whose right it is to own and to claim children. After Linda makes her escape from slavery and goes into hiding, Flint sells her two children to a slave trader, who was instructed by Sands to buy them for him. Although the children are released to Martha's care, they remain legally owned by Sands for much of the rest of the text, a source of overwhelming anguish for Linda. Although he had promised to sell them legally to Martha, Sands sends Ellen to live with his wife's relatives; despite Linda's uneasiness, she consents for Ellen to go. It isn't until Linda flees north that she is able to fully reconstitute her family. It is unclear at what exact point ownership is transferred from Sands to Martha, but after several bouts of despair that Sands will never emancipate them, Linda mentions, almost in passing, that her grandmother holds the children's bill of sale. Even in this case, Linda is still not technically the legal owner of her children. However, Linda places equal importance on the fact that Ellen was hers by birth and by "strength of a mother's love" (181), as well as by "Southern law" (197). With this assertion, Linda raises issues about the viability of a system of legal ownership of children and who has the right to lay claim upon them. At the time in which Jacobs was writing, neither white nor black women had automatic legal rights to their children; slave women almost never did, no matter what the circumstance. Linda recognizes this, even though she fights against it; however, she asserts a claim to her children through the sole practice of motherhood – something with which her white female readers who were also mothers would have been able to identify and sympathize.

It is also worth noting that, even if the paradox may not be able to be fully resolved, after the bill of sale is transferred from Sands, Martha herself technically becomes a slave owner. Besides the ambiguity concerning at which point the children actually become Martha's, in any case, the children still are not free. Linda mentions a Southern law that made Ellen "mine … since my grandmother held the bill that made her so" (197), but fails to elaborate. Linda tells her readers in the closing pages of the text that her children are "now free" (219), but does she mean legally free? Or simply free from the ownership of Flint or Sands? Whether the ambiguity of this language was intentional on Jacobs's part in order to problematize or gloss over the facts of the legal ownership of her children, or if slave law and ownership is simply less intelligible to readers so far removed from mid-nineteenth-century Southern slave culture, either way it raises questions for Jacobs's readers about who can claim (legal, moral, and social) rights to children and further problematizes how maternity functions within slavery.

In the closing paragraphs of the novel, Linda further subverts nineteenth-century ideals of womanhood, telling readers that her story "ends with freedom, not in the usual way with marriage. I and my children are now free!" (219). However, she still plays into the sympathies and ideals of her audience by buying into the standards of the traditional American household: "The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble" (291). Linda remains in the employ of Mrs. Bruce in a position of servitude, but she still has her freedom and the freedom of her children. Interestingly, the fact of Linda's gaining her emancipation through a woman, Mrs. Bruce, further plays into the social and cultural ideals of her white female audience. According to the Cult of True Womanhood, the woman as the angel in the household meant that she was responsible for the moral health of her family, including that of her husband. It was the

responsibility, then, as well as the motivation for Jacobs's strategic appeals to this particular audience to further her message of abolition to call upon her readers to persuade their husbands, the ones with the voting and law-making power, to push for abolition. Mrs. Bruce thus becomes a metaphor for Jacobs's larger strategy of the roles her audience of white Northern women was supposed to play upon the conclusion of her novel.

The erasure of gender and of the very self-identity of slave women is evidence of how extensive and pervasive the damage done to the bodies of these women in slavery was. In her narrative, Jacobs provides both insight into how this damage was enacted and how she used her maternal body to subvert it. Although as an African-American woman in the mid-nineteenth century, Jacobs would never be given the same freedoms and rights as the white women to whom she was writing, she does ultimately regain the material of her body and ensures the same self-possession for her children upon her escape to New York. Although Linda's maternal identity and maternal power are restricted by white slave laws and codes, she manages to use maternity to overthrow these same restrictions and to gain emancipation. Through her skillful negotiation of the paradox of True Womanhood ideals in relation to slavery and through her appeals to and subtle critiques of the sympathies of her audience, Jacobs presents a powerful picture of the restrictions placed on her body in slavery. In this representation, the necessity of the use of her maternal body to subvert these restrictions becomes apparent. Although these paradoxes may make Jacobs' narrative a difficult text to work through, they ultimately give readers a richer understanding of the female experience in slavery.

Chapter 2: "A Responsibility For Which Fate Had Not Fitted Her": Edna Pontellier's Maternal Dilemma

One would be hard pressed to find two women whose lives are further apart than *Incidents's* Linda Brent and *The Awakening*'s Edna Pontellier. The former, a character largely modeled after the actual experiences of her author who was born into slavery and lived in a nine-by-seven-by-three-foot space for seven years, existed in a near-constant state of anxiety over her own safety and that of her children; the latter, a fictionalized character, was born into a middle-class family and married into the wealthy, upper leisure class, untouched by fear for her family's welfare and readily ensured every material comfort. First impressions would suggest that the two women's experiences would not have even existed on the same plane, much less run parallel – and, indeed, the lives of slave and former slave women like Linda cannot come close to comparing with those of white upper-class women like Edna. However, it is also important to remember that despite the worlds-apart life conditions of these women, both existed in a space governed by a society that sought to regulate *all* women's behaviors, attitudes, and even thoughts. As discussed in Chapter 1, Linda Brent actually uses the dominant and white model of femininity to critique values from her unique position as one who is simultaneously faulted for her failure to live up to True Womanhood standards and set apart from women who do seek to uphold them; thus, because of her dual position, Brent is ultimately able to subvert the white model of femininity to fit her needs. However, perhaps *because* of her status as an upper-class woman, Edna Pontellier ultimately falls victim to patriarchal society's insistence on white women upholding the values of this model. As in *Incidents*, motherhood in *The Awakening* becomes the central space for the critique of True Womanhood. Writing half a century later, Chopin adds a naturalistic element that is not present in Jacobs's writing, questioning the

influences that both social and biological forces exert on women's (maternal) choices. Therefore, whereas Jacobs's narrative privileges these social forces as having the greatest effect upon her experience of maternity, Chopin's novel brings the two forces together, predicating her protagonist's conflict on their clash. Erik Margraf calls for a dual naturalistic and feminist reading of the novel in order to "not only [form] an apt background for Chopin's dramatization of a woman's quest for her self but [to enlarge] our understanding of both naturalism and feminism" (110). The novel is not "to be judged as either 'feminist or naturalist' but [as] a remarkable achievement of *naturalism as feminism*" (Margraf 94). Although Edna is surrounded by models of "correct" femininity (exemplified by Adele Ratignolle), she becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her restrictive, biologically and socially determined roles as wife and mother. Edna strives to branch out from these roles, but in the end the dual forces of society and nature stymie her. Although the novel approaches an alternative model of womanhood through Edna's journey of self-discovery as well as in the lifestyle of Edna's mentor, Madamoiselle Reisz, it is clear that this model cannot be achieved while society insists that women remain defined by their socio-biological roles as wife and mother. Further, by Chopin's questioning the viability of a maternal instinct and thus of biological determinism, motherhood becomes one of the central grounds on which the conflict between female sexuality and selfhood and women's social roles is staged.

Although Kate Chopin enjoyed modest critical success for her short stories, the 1899 publication of *The Awakening* was met with harsh criticism for its "disagreeable glimpses of sensuality" ("Novels and Tales") and its "essentially vulgar" ("Fiction") subject matter. Early (mostly male) critics attacked Chopin, the novel, and its characters, offended by Edna's apparent lack of attention to her family. The author of a review that appeared in *The Nation* proposed that

"had [Edna] lived by Professor William James's advice to do one thing a day one does not want to do (in Creole society, two would perhaps be better), flirted less and looked after her children more, or even assisted at more *accouchements* – her chief d'oeuvre in self-denial – we need not have been put to the unpleasantness of reading about her and the temptations she trumped up for herself" ("Recent Novels"). The *Providence Sunday Journal* had a similarly hostile review, calling the novel "gilded dirt," the plot of which could "hardly be described in language fit for publication" ("Books of the Week"). It went so far as to suggest that "Miss Chopin did not herself realize what she was doing when she wrote it" ("Books of the Week").

However, some newspapers reviewed the novel more favorably, praising Chopin's "clever way of managing a difficult subject" and her ability to present "the life and not the mask that is the subject of the story" ("100 Books"). The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* recognized that "there may be many opinions touching other aspects of Mrs. Chopin's novel 'The Awakening,' but all must concede its flawless art" ("The Newest Books"). In addition, the novel was also well-received by women's clubs in St. Louis, which wrote Chopin letters praising the novel and inviting her to speak at meetings (Toth 118). However, the novel's negative reviews overshadowed the acclaim of reviews like those that appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, damaging Chopin's literary reputation and leaving her work largely forgotten until its revival in the 1960s.

In sharp contrast to its reception at the turn of the century, *The Awakening* is now widely read and respected by both critics and students. Out of its many important themes of stifling gender roles and double standards, motherhood is one that has remained somewhat peripheral to these other concerns. However, bringing it to the center is essential for understanding exactly how Chopin's critique of biological essentialism and the social necessity of women's roles as

wives and mothers functions in the novel. In order to do this, an understanding of the somewhat unique roles that Creole women were expected to fulfill can provide valuable context for exactly how mother-women functioned in Edna's New Orleans society.

Creole women were subject to the True Womanhood ideal of the woman as the angel in the household and the self-effacing maternal figure "arguably even more so than the average American woman" (Bendel-Simso 36). Because most Creole families living in New Orleans at the turn of the century (including the Pontelliers) were members of a "cosmopolitan and urbane" (Taylor 149) leisure class, women had few to no responsibilities other than their duties to their husbands and children. In addition, Creole society was decidedly insular. Nicknamed the "American Paris," New Orleans, despite being ravaged by the Civil War and plagued by crime, highlighted the extent of the disparity between upper and lower classes. As a sort of backlash against the diminishing Creole culture, it "expressed itself all the more strongly" (Bendel-Simso 37) in places like Grand Isle. As a result of this insularity, family became paramount in Creole society, and it also became women's primary mode of identification. However, unlike the tradition of repression that was foundational in definitions of True Womanhood in most of America, sensual expression for Creole women was considered the norm. Because women's roles were "based in biology," Creole True Womanhood "required only that this libidinal energy be rechanneled into wifely and maternal identity" (Bendel-Simso 37). Although this may at first appear to indicate a greater degree of sexual and social freedom, as Edna initially believes, Creole women's sensual display is strictly performative, in actuality offering a more restrictive model of women's social roles. Any allowance of women's expression of sensuality is predicated upon her biological capacity to reproduce, not upon an acknowledgement of an active and accepted desire, and certainly not at the expense of her biological maternal destiny. Women's

sensuality, while still a public good, had to be contained within the realm of what patriarchal authority deemed acceptable.

The performance is a condition of the privileged maternity that women like Edna and Adele act out, paradoxically allowing motherhood to become a matter of convenience and yet prohibiting women from attaining true subjectivity outside of it. Even though Edna and Adele are able to transfer the care of their children to nurses, they still must demonstrate that they "remember the children" in order to perform their roles as women – which is why Adele cannot be prevailed upon to leave the sewing of her children's clothes or the folding of her husband's laundry behind, even when Adele and Edna are alone together. However, even though Adele's particular performance of motherhood is the one that is socially sanctioned, it is by no means the only or the "true" performance; motherhood is always already a performance – something that Edna comes to recognize. While not all *modes* of motherhood (including Edna's) are deemed as correct by society, understanding the nature of Adele's performative motherhood, and Edna's lack thereof, hinges on the understanding that all motherhood is a constructed performance. What changes is how each woman enacts the sanctioned mode. The assumption that motherhood is something other than performative, something that is natural (with the underlying assumption that women who do not act out this performance are *un*natural), is one that Edna is able to see through.

Adele Ratignolle is an exemplar of the standards for Creole women, fulfilling her domestic role faultlessly. She is the epitome of the mother-women, the kind of women who "idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 9). Adele is "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm" (9), with "exquisite" hands that are always

preoccupied with sewing some small garment for her children. She is a "faultless Madonna" (11) – the first of many descriptions aligning her with the Virgin Mary – chaste, but sensual. Edna is shocked by Adele's frank descriptions of her experiences in childbirth, but these descriptions are central to the all-encompassing maternal identity that Adele has taken on. Adele's own placement of her maternal body into the public sphere indicates the larger position of women in society, Creole or otherwise, thus emphasizing the "sight of woman as social wealth," her "sexual and reproductive value … already located in the sphere of public exchange" (Stange 30). Adele and other women of the upper class, however, unlike women like Linda Brent, enact a privileged maternity, one that simultaneously requires that women value it above all else and to use it to define their subjectivity and allows them to transfer the day-to-day care of their children to servants or nannies. As such, motherhood is a performance, again pushing the maternal body onto the public stage. Adele's body is, in other words, valued predominantly for its ability to procreate and to display social status and thus to perpetuate not only the species but also patriarchal systems of control. The fact that the novel is structured around Adele's nine-month gestation and peaks with the birth of her child demonstrates maternity's extreme importance not only to the novel itself but also as an obstacle to Edna's subjectivity.

The repeated images of Adele as a Madonna in this largely Catholic Creole community further indicate the privileged maternity that she represents. As Julia Kristeva points out, "many civilizations have subsumed femininity under the Maternal, but Christianity in its own way developed this tendency to the full" (135). However, what decidedly sets this privileged maternity apart from the maternity of women like Linda Brent is that it positions mothers as distinguished among the human race because they are consecrated, as opposed to hypersexualized as slave women often were positioned. Instead of children as the result of

women's uncontrollable sexuality and desire, children for these white, upper-class women are the result of a biological and religious destiny, effectively erasing women's sexuality in order to uphold the sacredness of their maternal role. The image of the mother as the Virgin encapsulates the woman's three primary prescribed roles – daughter, wife, and mother – and it is while negotiating between these roles that women "lose their specific corporeal identities while retaining their psychological functions" (Kristeva 139). Using imagery of the Virgin likens mothers' devotion to their children to worshippers' devotion to Christ – one of complete self-sacrifice in exchange for an everlasting reward. Kristeva argues persuasively that the mother "knows that she is destined to that eternity (*of spirit or species*) of which every mother is subconsciously aware, and in relation to which the devotion, or even the sacrifice, of motherhood is but a small price to pay" (142, emphasis mine). Women, then, must make themselves "anonymous" (149) in order to make space for their children's subjectivity and to ensure societal stability – and Adele is a perfect example of such a woman, a model of the performative sexuality that Creole women are taught to embody – but only within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage.

Edna, however, is not a Creole mother-woman; growing up in Kentucky and raised by her father, she married into Creole society and is uncomfortable with, even shocked by, its women's overt sensuality. Her husband Leonce scolds her for her constant "inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" (Chopin 7) and for marring her appearance with a sunburn that "burnt [her] beyond recognition" (4). Their two young sons, whom Edna loves in an "uneven, impulsive way" (9), do not seek affection from Edna, while Adele's children are never far from her mind (at least as far as we can tell, as she is forever discussing her "condition" and sewing clothes for her children). Edna appears to be oblivious to any need to perform her motherhood or

her sensuality, as Creole women do, and the almost masculine descriptions of her body serve to further emphasize this difference. While Adele's hands are small and "exquisite," unused to any labor more strenuous than holding a needle, Edna's are "strong" and "shapely"; whereas Adele has a "feminine and matronly figure" (15), Edna has more of a boyish build, with "long, clean, and symmetrical" lines, "noble beauty," and "graceful severity of pose and movement," which further makes her "different from the crowd" (15).

Edna is set apart from the Creole mothers in more than just appearance. She is practically scandalized by their open sensuality and frank way of speaking. Their "entire absence of prudery" (10) shocks her, as does their open passing around and discussing racy books. The establishment of this difference solidifies Edna as a figure set apart from these other women, foreshadowing her eventual complete departure from the ideal for which these women stand. However, being around the Creole women, especially Adele, for the summer at Grand Isle is not without influence on Edna. Instead of moving her to emulate their practices, however, the "impact of the exotic environment and the Creole milieu" (Margraf 102) acts rather as a catalyst to Edna's awakening. She no longer wishes to live a "dual live" that is made up of "that outward existence which conforms [and] the inward life which questions" (14). For Edna, this outward existence is centered on her maternal body. More and more as the novel develops, Edna realizes that in her current roles of wife and mother, it is impossible for her to acknowledge the reality of her desires and to assert ownership over her body and her actions. She distances herself from her husband and children as she comes into herself, suggesting that the discovery of self and demonstration of self-ownership cannot coexist with these roles. Juxtaposing her own body to that of Adele, Edna withdraws it from the sphere of public exchange; she quickly realizes that her body, the site of reproduction, is hers only, not a space for public scrutiny, and for Edna, this

withdrawal means a withdrawal from motherhood itself. As Margit Stange claims, "in the logic of self-ownership and voluntary motherhood, motherhood is itself the ground on which woman claims ownership of her sexual value" (34). Instead of using her body as a site of public display and as a sign that she, by acting out accepted motherhood practices – such as Adele's constant sewing and attention to her children and her open sensuality – has also accepted larger society's conventions for women's behavior, Edna turns away from these roles as an attempt to subvert their control over her body and her agency. Although this attempt is ultimately unsuccessful, the endeavor alone signals Edna's (and, more generally, the possibility of all women's) unhappiness with and unwillingness to conform to these prescribed gender roles that command a "one size fits all" identity for women.

Even though Edna already has two children and cannot disavow the experience of motherhood completely, she distances herself virtually entirely from the performance of motherhood by transferring the responsibility of her children almost exclusively to their nurse and later to her mother-in-law in order to make space for her blossoming subjectivity. She claims further ownership of her body by refusing to sleep with Leonce, as he relates to Dr. Mandelet: "She's making it devilishly uncomfortable for me. … She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and – you understand – we meet in the morning at the breakfast table" (Chopin 63). With this act, Edna not only withholds control of her body from Leonce but also forecloses any possibility of future motherhood with him. This "revolt of nature," Margraf points out, is "crucial to an understanding of the novel as a whole," not just because it provides insight into its ambiguous ending, but also because "in awakening to the inevitable connection between womanhood and motherhood Edna is finally able to transcend the solipsistic tendencies of her individual quest for self-knowledge and perceive the universal

significance of her personal experience" (108). She refuses to buy into constructions of women as mere property of their husbands and slaves to their children. Stange argues convincingly that in doing so, Chopin establishes Edna as a *femme seule* and connects her to the Married Women's Property Acts, reforms that "gave married women varying rights of ownership" (26) to property. Kentucky, Edna's home state, "had the most advanced Married Women's Property Act in the nation, granting women not only the right to own separate property and make contracts, but the right to keep their own earnings" (27). Louisiana, however, the state into which Edna married, had no such law, making her a *femme couverte* – a woman whose legal identity was subsumed by her husband's, and thus she has no rights to personal property. This connection, though subtle, suggests that Edna's desire to establish an identity separate from her husband's and children's may have had roots that originated long before her awakening at Grand Isle. In being raised in a state where women's identities – at least their material ones – existed outside of their roles as wives, Edna may have been unused to the limited degree of separation between husband and wife that she discovers in Creole society. If the catalyst to Edna's awakening is her summer at Grand Isle, perhaps, then, the fact that she grew up in an environment that gave women greater material freedom and property rights laid the foundation that allowed this catalyst to exert its full force.

As Edna pulls further away from her domestic roles, she seeks counsel from Mademoiselle Reisz, a "disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others" (Chopin 25). Unmarried, childless, and with no responsibility to anyone other than herself, Mademoiselle Reisz represents for Edna a model of alternative womanhood. Mademoiselle Reisz's self-directedness appeals to Edna, especially when the older woman is

juxtaposed to Grand Isle's proliferation of mother-women like Adele. Mademoiselle Reisz, like Edna, is set apart from these women, unmarried with no apparent regret at being so, appearing to be unconcerned about the regard of others. The need to perform a traditional role is not present for Mademoiselle Reisz, as she lives outside of traditional domestic roles. Because as an unmarried, childless woman Mademoiselle Reisz is not expected by greater society to perform these roles, she is what Edna desires to be. The performance Mademoiselle Reisz gives is of a different kind – as an artist, at the piano. Edna feels a connection to Mademoiselle Reisz that she cannot find in other Creole women, perceiving her ability to "echo the thought which was ever in Edna's mind; or, better, the feeling which constantly possessed her" (44). Edna is drawn to Mademoiselle Reisz because she represents what she cannot herself achieve while her present roles require her to put aside her subjectivity in favor of serving her children's and husband's.

While Edna's growing independence finds a kindred spirit in Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna is ultimately unable to reach the full autonomy that Mademoiselle Reisz enjoys. While Mademoiselle Reisz "might escape the conflicts within her own sex by absconding to an arena of sexlessness, not only is Edna unprepared to do this … but she has already given birth, she is already a mother and a slave to nature" (Killeen 423). Further, even though Mademoiselle Reisz stands for a lifestyle free from constraints of True Womanhood that Edna seeks to mimic, her lifestyle ultimately does not offer a viable model of alternative womanhood – not merely for Edna but for all women while they are held by society to constrictive modes of femininity. Many critics argue that Reisz is a "proto-lesbian" because "that is the only sexual relationship open to her that would not threaten her independence, not from male society but from the harsh facts of Nature, that dictates that woman is necessarily mother too" (Killeen 423). Lesbian or not, Mademoiselle Reisz is not depicted as the ideal, suggesting that her apparent disavowal of any

sexuality cannot provide a fulfilling way of life for women, including Edna. Mademoiselle Reisz is physically "exceedingly diminutive," so much so that while seated at the table she must be "elevated upon cushions, as small children are sometimes hoisted at the table upon bulky volumes" (Chopin 83). She is described by other characters as "disagreeable" at least seven times in the short text, indicating mainstream society's distaste for her aberrant lifestyle. Even Edna admits Mademoiselle Reisz's personality is "offensive to her" (75). An atmosphere of decay surrounds her, from the artificial violets she wears in her hair to the rusty stove and dust-covered bust of Beethoven that she keeps in her "cheerless and dingy" apartment. She is, in other words, an utterly abjected character. It is because she lives in this state of abjection that she is not taken seriously by anyone she comes into contact with, not just because she is so disagreeable, but, more importantly, because she so resolutely and unabashedly refuses to buy into what is expected of her as a woman. She is indeed no longer even seen as a woman but, rather, as an alien Other.

In doing so, Mademoiselle Reisz queers the maternity that Adele represents, disrupting Creole performances of normative motherhood and making whether or not she is a proto-lesbian character beside the point. In acting as a maternal force to Edna, while she herself is (and does not desire to be anything other than) unmarried and childless, Mademoiselle Reisz further ruptures the notion of a "true," nonperformative maternity. Her state of abjection deepens this rupture, emphasizing the position of difference that she occupies. Because she does not adequately perform acceptable gender roles as Adele and the other mother-women do, Mademoiselle Reisz deconstructs the idea of a singular, correct, natural maternity, providing an alternative (although, as we will see, not entirely viable) model of motherhood.

Paradoxically, though situated at opposite ends of the spectrum of social acceptability, Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle both represent an eroticized kind of maternity for Edna. At Grand Isle, Edna first turns to Adele as a surrogate mother, opening up under Adele's maternal influence. Adele's maternity, as that of all Creole women, is a sensual one. Edna is first attracted by Adele's "excessive physical charm … for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty" (Chopin 14). Adele provides the "outward and spoken expression of affection" (17) that Edna did not receive as a young girl. Adele is also Edna's guide through the unfamiliar Creole society, serving as a policing force for Edna's behavior, particularly her maternal behavior. Adele's attempt to bring Edna back to the center and to remind her of her maternal responsibilities culminates in Adele's childbirth experience near the end of the novel. Called to Adele's bedside, Edna finds her friend with her face "drawn and pinched, her sweet blue eyes haggard and unnatural," her beauty vanished and her hair ominously "coiled like a golden serpent" around her (103). While in labor, Adele presumably hopes her urging Edna to "think of the children" (104) will help Edna to remember her duty as a mother both to her current and future children; however, witnessing Adele's experience only fills her with disturbing memories of her own birth events, which seemed to her "far away, unreal, and only half remembered … scene[s] of torture" (104) The use of chloroform, a common practice in nineteenth- and twentieth-century medicine, not only numbed pain but also deadened most sensory perception, thus further reducing any sense of agency that pregnant women had over their own bodies. Instead of remembering her duty as a mother, Edna's resolution to fight the "ways of Nature" (104) is solidified. She resolves that she is "not going to be forced into doing things" (105) any longer, including adding more children to the "great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go" (104).

Because Edna finds that Adele's maternal influence does not cohere with her newly awakened sense of self, Edna turns to Adele's representational opposite – Mademoiselle Reisz. Although Reisz is about as far from a maternal presence as a Creole woman can get, she like Adele becomes an eroticized mother figure in her unofficial mentorship of Edna. Edna does not find the physical affection that Adele offers but, rather, intellectual stimulation and growth, though Mademoiselle Reisz also does compliment Edna on her figure in her bathing suit (47) and refers to her as "my love" and "my queen." It is Mademoiselle Reisz whom Edna goes to when she first resolves to move out of her home with Leonce and into the pigeon-house, and Mademoiselle Reisz is Edna's link to Robert by allowing Edna to read his letters and thus to retain hope that he loves her. However, as with Adele, Edna ultimately cannot find what she needs in Mademoiselle Reisz's role as a surrogate either. She can be neither an Adele nor a Mademoiselle Reisz, and society will not allow her to exist in the space in between. Edna thus is caught in this liminal space; yet, she cannot remain here. She must choose, but cannot or will not, and it is this impossibility that ultimately leads to her (literal) destruction.

Although it is Edna's newly awakened sense of selfhood that drives her further into this liminal space, she has existed here since her mother's death as a young girl – and it is here that a feminist reading of the novel's social forces meets a naturalist reading that accounts for the forces of nature upon Edna's behavior and desires. Sexuality for Edna exists within this liminal space. Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz represent the two spheres of available sexuality (performative sensuality within the confines of marriage and the lack of sexuality without), and the two cannot overlap within the boundaries set by Victorian standards of women's roles. The "animal nature of the sexual instinct, its relation to moral conventions, and the question of 'free will' in regard to sexual desire" (Margraf 104) that Edna represents are relegated to this liminal

space because they do not cohere with those spheres. However, because the primary influence upon Edna in her formative years was a masculine one, she was not inoculated with these principles of acceptable womanly performance from a young age. Upon the death of Edna's mother when she was young, Edna and her two sisters were raised by their father; however, their relationship was not a close one. Edna is not "very warmly or deeply attached to [her father]" (65). She discovers upon his visit to New Orleans that her father "interested her" (66), but they soon fall to arguing, and upon his departure Edna is "glad to be rid of him" (68). Edna's two sisters did not step into effective mother-roles for Edna either. Her older sister, Margaret, while "matronly and dignified," was "not effusive; she was practical" (17), and Edna frequently fought with her younger sister, Janet, and thus did not have the experience of acting as a surrogate mother-figure to her younger sister either.

Much like Jacobs's Linda Brent, Edna, then, has lacked maternal influence for the majority of her life, including, crucially, her formative years in which cultural expectations and gender roles are solidified. The lack of this influence for both women fostered an early sense of independence and made gender roles, if not more fluid, then at least less fixed. Although Margaret had assumed the responsibilities of the house early on, her reserved and rather stoic nature and lack of affection isolated Edna from her. Thus Edna could not, or did not wish to, emulate Margaret's performance of True Womanhood because she could not identify with it. In addition, Margaret's embodiment of femininity as the caretaker of the house was likely more of a figurative than a literal one because of the family's middle-class position of privilege. It is clear, however, that Edna does identify more with her father. The two have "certain tastes" in common, such as an enthusiasm for horse racing, and in the course of his visit to the Pontelliers' New Orleans home, Edna feels for the first time that she knows him. As Dr. Mandelet observes,

Edna's father "transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed to palpitate with the forces of life" (67). In her father's presence, Edna is able not only to forget her present dilemma, but to escape the current demands of her inflexible roles as wife and mother and return to a state of childhood wherein she was free from those standards. Edna's enjoyment of her father's presence, however, hinges upon her ability to remain in this state; once the Colonel reminds her of her duties as a woman who must attend her sister's wedding, the illusion is shattered. Her father scolds her for her "lack of filial kindness and respect, her want of sisterly affection and womanly consideration" (68), but Edna ultimately refuses, and he leaves with Edna glad to see him go.

In the absence of her mother, it is her father's masculine presence that Edna would have had as a model for behavior, and it is this that may, at least in part, explain why Edna rebels as she does against constructions of femininity that do not allow her to move outside strictly defined womanly behavior. The lack of maternal presence provides Edna with the unique perspective to see these modes of behavior for what they are – socially constructed, rather than biologically determined. However, the incapability (or refusal) of the environment in which she lives and of the society which enforces these codes to see them as such makes it impossible for Edna to act upon this realization and forces her into the only course of action she sees as available – suicide. Natural and social forces combine against Edna's newfound subjectivity. She realizes that she does not want to act out the role of the angel in the household – demure, chaste, and self-sacrificing. She cannot efface the desire she feels for Robert and the lack of passion she feels for her husband, even though she is required to by society. However, Nature does not allow her to diverge from the path she is already on either. She is already a mother, bound by Nature as well as by law to her children. Society dictates that she must remain so because of her already

proven biological capacity for reproduction. Adele's missive to "think of the children" hints at this double bind, both to remember the responsibilities she has as a mother to her children and to consider the implications her quest for subjectivity might have on any future children that it is her biological destiny to bear. The selfhood that Edna seeks, at least under current constructions of femininity, cannot cohere with "the permanent reality of motherhood" (Margraf 111), and it is after this realization that Edna believes that the only way to escape this double bind is through suicide.

Although the maternity of Edna and other white upper-class women is a privileged one, it is still one that entangles women in a web of cultural ideals that leaves little room for individuality and subjectivity. Chopin's depiction of the dilemma of motherhood within this tight space that defines a woman by her biology and Edna's tragic fate emphasize its impossibility. Definitions of subjectivity predicated upon biological predetermination become unstable throughout the course of the novel, and Edna's journey of self-discovery proves the dangers of confining women strictly within roles of wife and mother. Reading the novel through these dual lenses of feminism and naturalism provides a greater insight into the text itself, as well as more easily allowing for fuller connections to be drawn between texts like Chopin's and texts like Jacobs's, which seem to exist in separate spheres but in actuality have more in common than meets the eye.

Chapter 3: The Abject (M)Other: Maternal and Nonmaternal Bodies in Evelyn Scott's *The Narrow House*

Evelyn Scott's first novel *The Narrow House* (1921) moves Chopin's concerns in *The Awakening* forward more than twenty years but paints a decidedly more grim picture of marriage, motherhood, and the capacity for female individualism. Situated more solidly in the Naturalist tradition than Chopin's work, Scott's novel offers a more rigorous and pessimistic questioning of the structures that seek both to restrict and to support American society at large. A seemingly direct response to the Romanticism of the early to mid-nineteenth century, Naturalism seeks to deconstruct notions of individualism, progressiveness, and human infallibility. Naturalist works, instead, are characterized by "the social construction of its authors, their recognition of a particular set of economic, social, psychological, and natural pressures upon individuals that constrain, propel, determine" ("Twisted" viii). The influence of literary Naturalism is evident in Scott's deconstruction of the myth of the traditional family and of the traditional roles of husband and wife, of mother and children, and in the overwhelming influences of environment and heredity. Scott's novel, as Tim Edwards points out, yields "a surprisingly complex and disturbing naturalism in the familiar and deceptively innocuous setting of the domestic sphere, a naturalism that critiques the shallow moral conventionalities and domestic ideologies Evelyn Scott observed around her" (290). These Naturalist themes are informed by the same forms of abjection that appear in Chopin's and Jacobs's novels and are taken to the extreme in Scott's novel so that each female character is abjected in some way. This abjection, married with the themes so often taken up in Naturalist writing, works to produce a complete deconstruction of the outdated True Womanhood ideals that Jacobs's and Chopin's novels also critiqued.

Although Naturalist themes are easily recognizable in her writing, Scott also wrote in the period of the "Southern Renaissance," a time in which, following World War I, there was an outpouring of literary activity out of the South as the effects of post-war industrialization began to seep into the region. Histories of the Southern Renaissance customarily focus on male authors, but as Carol S. Manning contends, traditional parameters must be broadened to include the many Southern women writers who were similarly active during this time in order to understand and contextualize more fully these women's work. Manning argues for the need to expand traditional conceptions of the beginnings of Southern Renaissance to include the late nineteenth century, considering authors such as Kate Chopin and Ellen Glasgow, and to place the influence of the suffrage movement and the awakenings of women to gender inequality alongside the influence that the war had on male authors. According to Manning, the inclusion of late nineteenth-century texts will highlight how "many [Southern] women – like American women elsewhere – grew dissatisfied with traditional values and assumptions regarding the female role and began to question the cultures they had inherited. Out of their questioning would develop a modern southern literature" (244). Adjusting ideas about the onset of the Southern Renaissance, then, is essential to recognizing the tensions that informed the texts of many women writers in the South – including Evelyn Scott.

Considering both the tradition of the Naturalism movement and the Southern Renaissance, then, can provide us with a deeper understanding of the context out of which Scott's first novel grew. Born Elsie Dunn in Clarksville, Tennessee, in 1893, Scott spent her childhood living in a cottage in the region until she moved as a teenager with her parents to New Orleans. However, Scott grew disillusioned with the South for its restrictive social and sexual codes. After meeting Creighton Wellman, a forty-three-year-old professor at Tulane University,

she moved to Brazil with him, changing her name to Evelyn Scott, where she and Wellman then lived for nearly six years (Scura xiv). It was in Brazil that Scott began writing in earnest, completing her memoir *Escapade* (pub. 1923) and submitting poems for publication in 1919. Published in 1921, *The Narrow House* was Scott's first novel and was the first in a trilogy of novels that centered on three generations of the Farley family. Scott continued to publish into the 1920s and '30s, garnering both criticism and praise for her "distinctive writing" that "featured technical experimentation and verbal pyrotechnics that were at once new and at the same time representative of the modernist movement" (Scura xv).

Despite these "verbal pyrotechnics" and the sometimes unpleasant subject matter in the novel, Scott published *The Narrow House* in 1921 to a largely positive critical reception. Many critics praised her ability to offer realistic insight into modern American life with artistic flair. Most acknowledged that the novel was, thematically, sordid and somewhat depressing, but it was her manner in presenting this subject matter that fascinated them. *The Nation* declared the novel a harbinger of change in American literature, allowing readers to see with "adult eyes," and called the book "beautifully brave and formidably searching." The *New York Times Book Review*, similarly, begins with "Salute to Evelyn Scott! She belongs, she understands, she is an artist" (Lewis 18). Lewis writes that Scott found "magic" in the "drab people drably eating the drabbest food," calling the novel an "event … one of those recognitions of life by which life itself becomes greater" (18). The reviews in *The Nation* and *The New York Times* characterize much of the critical response to the novel.

However, some reviewers are more ambivalent, recognizing her ability and talent but deploring the novel's unsavory depiction of the state of the American family. Theodore Dreiser was particularly critical of Scott's treatment of her material. In a 1923 *New York Times*

interview, Dreiser condemned the state of American literature, citing Scott's work as an example of one of these writers who "set out to write a novel of realism and then proceed to ignore life entirely" (Feld). Dreiser argues that Scott is guilty of this, that her novels are too dark and grim to portray American life accurately: "[Scott] peoples her [*The Narrow House*] with characters that show an intense poverty of physical comforts and a bitter poverty of soul. … It's like locking a lot of people into a pen and torturing them. If that is typical of the United States, I never saw it" (Feld). Dreiser's misinterpretation of Scott's novel marks a break in the genteel realism of the nineteenth century and the line between naturalism and modernism that Scott straddled in the twentieth century. With this comment, Dreiser seems to equate Scott's treatment of the psychological trauma of her characters and the lack of a traditionally happy and closed ending with giving in to excess and imagination, failing to present a picture of life that could be drawn from the life of any individual American. However, this disagreement highlights a marked difference between the goals of Realist writers like Dreiser and those of Naturalist writers like Scott – the characters are not meant to be completely realistic but rather representations of types, meant to stand in for larger issues and phenomena that the work aims to address.

The Narrow House plays off of societal, familial, and psychological tensions in the Farley family, but the novel's most compelling feature is its insights into the female characters of the family – Mrs. Farley, Winnie, Alice, even little May – and their experience of and reaction to motherhood and maternity. Scott's language heightens the sense of entrapment for her characters and uncannily recreates the same emotion in the reader, simultaneously keeping her characters at arm's length and inviting the reader to share in their emotions and interactions. *The Narrow House* is narrow, indeed; both the house and its inhabitants are stifling, restricted, oppressed by gender roles and societal and familial expectations. The house, a reflection of what is going on

inside of it, is described as being "old-fashioned," "grimy," and "disheveled," with "dingy brick walls" and "massive shutters [that] … were rotting away" (Scott 1). The rooms inside are always dark, especially the bedrooms of Winnie and Alice. The house, then, acts as a representation of the nonviability of the crumbling Victorian ideals to which its inhabitants must adhere. Similarly, the interactions between members of the Farley family within the house serve as a microcosm for the larger social order. Even into the twentieth century and especially in the South, as represented by Scott's characters, women were still expected to adhere to the same ideals of True Womanhood as women in Jacobs's and Chopin's times, ideals which included passive sexuality, repressed desire, and demure, self-effacing manners. Women in the early twentieth-century South, as manifest in the Farley family, were stifled by these norms and ideals, and there were few options for escape (short of a literal, physical escape, as Scott herself accomplished). As in *Incidents* and *The Awakening*, this sense of entrapment within the private sphere and within women's own bodies is fully realized in the role of the mother.

The Narrow House depicts these themes across three generations of the Farley family. Every woman, from the elder Mrs. Farley to her granddaughter, May, finds herself confined by both the house itself and by the larger modes of custom that it represents. Mrs. Farley and her husband have an unhappy, contentious marriage; it is revealed early on in the novel that Mr. Farley had an affair and a resulting illegitimate child with a woman in Kansas City. Although Mrs. Farley, who is portrayed as asexual and cold, is aware of the affair, she refuses to acknowledge it to either herself or her husband. The marriage of Mrs. Farley's son, Laurence, and his wife, Winnie, offers another example of marital unhappiness. Laurence and Winnie both admit to themselves that neither loves their spouse, and although Winnie attempts multiple times to express her sexuality and desire, she is continually rejected by her husband. The repression of

sexual agency, whether that repression is self-imposed or enforced by men, signifies the impossibility of women's subjectivity under True Womanhood ideals of womanhood. As Edwards points out, this repression "is overshadowed by a different trajectory of dangers, dangers built primarily around culturally constructed notions of ideal femininity" (296). In other words, in order to liberate women's (and men's) desire and agency, these norms must be deconstructed. In order to achieve this deconstruction, Scott centers her critique on the implications of motherhood and the maternal body, taking the danger of being forced into roles of wife and mother to the utmost with the abjection of Winnie and Alice.

Andrea Powell Jenkins has filtered the novel through a "herethics" discourse described by Kristeva in her "Stabat Mater." Kristeva examines constructions of the mother in Christianity (specifically, images of the Virgin Mary) in order to deconstruct representations of maternity in Western culture as a whole and to offer an alternative space that allows women to "make their voices heard" when issues of conception, contraception, and motherhood are debated. According to Kristeva, images of the Virgin Mother have become so ingrained into discourses of motherhood that the Virgin Mary is the only model available to women to emulate. The "cult of the Virgin Mother" necessitates and facilitates a virgin/whore dichotomy in which women are expected to perform an impossible paradox: to procreate but to be simultaneously innocent of sexual knowledge. Kristeva deconstructs this myth as a way to call for women to create their own discourse on maternity, one that reflects mothers' physicality and lived experience outside the parameters of patriarchy. This lived experience includes the physical joy, or the *jouissance*, that is inherent in women's experiences of childbirth and motherhood – something that Kristeva describes in the fragmentary comments of her personal experience of maternity that run throughout the essay. Jenkins argues that Kristeva's essay "opens the door for a new

conversation about maternity and motherhood, one that subsumes both its joyous and grievous aspects" and, further, that Kristeva's ideas can help readers to "unpack and begin to deconstruct the discourses surrounding maternity and motherhood" (82) in Scott's novels. *The Narrow House* answers Kristeva's call for new conversations on maternity. I argue that although the novel paints a grim picture of motherhood and the maternal body, especially as this is conveyed through the characters of Winnie and Alice, Scott calls for new discourses of maternity but also reveals the impossibility of these new conversations being heard while women are stripped of their agency by restrictive Victorian ideals that necessitate the denial of their bodies and of their desire.

As shown by the multiple dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships throughout the text, motherhood (and, even more broadly, parenthood) becomes unfulfilling when restricted by social parameters. Mothers, especially Winnie and her mother, Mrs. Price, are portrayed as helpless, even useless; there is no Adele Ratignolle, representation of maternal force and nurturing mother, in this text. The two main adult male characters, Laurence and Mr. Farley, are ineffectual at best, almost feminized; both take a hands-off approach to parenting their children. The mother figures are more physically present but still ineffective, and their relationships with their daughters are fraught with complications. Winnie is a deconstruction of the "tragic" heroine, plagued by an unnamed illness that threatens to become exacerbated and even to kill her if she has more children. She is not a romanticized, sentimental mother who would gladly give up her life for her children; rather, she represents the nonviability of the cultural myth of the idealized mother. Winnie has a possessive, uneven love for her children; she only loves them in their ability to reflect back onto herself. She looks upon the face of her daughter, May, with "soft, hostile possessiveness" (Scott 9), far from the unconditional, unobstructed love that

mothers are "supposed" to have for their daughters. May's love for her mother, in turn, is similar, as May feels "utterly subjugated" under her mother's gaze; she wishes to love her mother as a daughter should, "but the soft, angrily caressing eyes would not let her" (11).

Mrs. Farley, ever the representation of the (albeit failed) idealized mother, reminds Winnie that "children are the surest happiness" (73), but it is clear that neither Winnie nor Mrs. Farley any longer buys into this myth. Mrs. Farley's relationship with Alice is no better than Winnie's with May. Alice and her mother clearly do not get along, arguing continually throughout the text. Mrs. Farley does not understand Alice's lack of femininity, and Alice becomes frustrated with Mrs. Farley's refusal to confront her husband about his affair. The mothers and daughters in *The Narrow House* thus lack the understanding and relatability that characterize the ideal mother-daughter relationship, which is exemplified in the relationships of both Adele Ratignolle and Linda Brent with their respective children. Each is merely defined by her role, rather than any actual maternal behavior or feeling; as Winnie implores May, "You *must* love me, May! I'm your mamma!" (Scott 10). The mother-daughter relationship, so romanticized in culture and in literature, becomes here one of complication and struggle.

Further, the images of hens and other animals throughout the novel first signify the state of abjection that ties the women together. The hens – female, egg-laying chickens – parallel the state that the women devolve into after their childbirth experiences. Mrs. Farley views carcasses of the hens in a butcher shop, focusing on their "sickly bluish-yellow" feet, on which "the toes, cramped together yet flaccid, still suggested the fatigue which follows agony" (4). This imagery is recalled when Winnie gives birth to the child that will eventually kill her; Winnie, after being given chloroform, finds that "she had lost her feet" (190), her ability to move, and thus her agency as it is compromised by childbirth. This movement toward abjection runs throughout the

text; each female character in some way is abjected, suggesting that although each woman attempts to claim herself, she ends up abjecting herself "within the same motion which [she] claims to establish [herself]" (Kristeva 231).

Winnie's narcissism and her obsession with mirrors represent her attempts to act out the cultural ideals of motherhood that she finds impossible to attain. Winnie repeatedly looks to the mirror for assurance of her bodily self; her identity as a woman is so fragmented that she cannot locate herself without seeing her own physical reflection in the mirror. As she looks into the mirror, her "rapt, tragic face became even more voluptuously tragic as it contemplated itself" (Scott 8). The mirror stands in for the larger societal expectations for Winnie as a mother; she attempts to posture and pose in front of the mirror in an attempt to "produce a reflection that appears to embody her impression of an ideal mother figure" (Jenkins 84). Her performance in front of the mirror reflects her performance as a mother as she "tries on" different poses that she considers fitting for a mother-woman, unable to separate her identity as a woman from her identity as a mother. Winnie's body becomes a "precious nonobject … no longer seen in [its] own right but forfeited, abject" (Kristeva 233); as much as she stares at herself in the mirror, she cannot locate her self as a subject.

Instead of finding her status as a mother as a tool for empowerment, Winnie's maternal body becomes a site of entrapment and contention. Although it is not explained explicitly, the novel alludes to the fact that Winnie's pregnancies and births of May and her son, Bobby, have led directly to her illness, and it is stated outright by Winnie's (male) doctor that more children will result in further illness and, most likely, death. Because she cannot risk having more children and because methods of contraception were unreliable and largely unknown, Winnie must stifle her own sexual desire, not allowing herself to exercise her sexuality in a sexual

relationship with her husband (not that Laurence seems to mind). However, Winnie relishes her illness, using it as a tool for power over her husband and as a space to deploy the subjectivity that she cannot find in motherhood or in individuality. In her illness, Winnie feels "superior to her husband, and [is] able to love herself more completely" (Scott 17). Even though Laurence expresses no interest in acting out his own sexual desire and agency with his wife, her illness gives Winnie a reason and thus the power to deny him and, in an interesting way, embrace abjection.

Scott's depiction of Winnie as a mother emphasizes the destruction of subjectivity that motherhood can create while its standards and practices become impossible to achieve. Her constant begging of her husband and children – "Do you love me?" – is a symptom of her efforts to find affirmation from others that she cannot find in herself. The text is saturated with the language of oppression, consumption, and death; even outside the space of the Farleys' narrow house, when Winnie transplants to her parents' country house, she cannot escape the pressure. Winnie finds herself "oppressed by the silence" (157) of the country; despite the tranquil setting away from the demands of her children and of the city, she cannot find peace. She is weighed down by the knowledge of her pregnancy – a knowledge which is always with her. The country, supposedly a scene of escape, a place to discover the self and to connect with the divine, provides no respite; the demands of the house and of her own body follow her. She cannot escape her own body, even though she tries to: "she knew [the knowledge of the child] was in her mind, but she would not recognize it" (157). This disconnect between the mind and body is a dangerous symptom of the virgin/whore dichotomy to which mothers are often subject. Although mothers have obviously engaged in sexual activity and are no longer virgins after conceiving and birthing a child, as both Rich and Kristeva have contended, they were still expected to deny their

sexual knowledge in language and behavior. According to this paradox, "the divisions of labor and allocations of power in patriarchy demand not merely a suffering Mother, but one divested of sexuality: the Virgin Mary, *virgo intacta*, perfectly chaste" (Rich 182). This seriously undermines women's agency over their own maternal bodies – an agency that Winnie repeatedly tries to reclaim in her attempts to foster her sexuality. However, as Edna also realizes in *The Awakening*, these attempts, because of the potentiality of a resulting pregnancy, also, ironically, necessitate the denial of her physical desires. Winnie too must "remember the children" that may result from acting out her desire.

Thus, even desire becomes abject; as Kristeva argues, "there is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (232). Winnie attempts time and time again to act out her desire, but, both because of Laurence's initial refusal to reciprocate and because any fulfillment could potentially lead to death, rather than allowing Winnie to claim her sexuality in a healthy way, it continues to stand in the way of it. When Laurence finally gives in to Winnie's seduction despite her doctor's warnings, he becomes the "death giver"; both know that another pregnancy will likely result in Winnie's death. Winnie herself, however, recognizes death *before* the actual conception. Winnie's almost-suicidal impulses and the exercising of her agency through her desire appear to go hand in hand. Winnie's attempts to subvert the tamping down of her desire become manifest in her efforts to seduce Laurence – even though she knows that any resulting pregnancy will almost certainly result in her death. Her attempts are shut down several times by Laurence, and readers can clearly see her frustration that her desire cannot find an outlet.

However, Winnie eventually succeeds in seducing Laurence, as they finally act out her desire. Even though they know that this consummation could result in her death, the tension

between the couple finally boils over. Laurence is fully aware of the risks that sex presents, but he practically welcomes them: "Death. His understanding could not hold the vagueness of the strange escaping word. … He became the death-giver, glad, in spite of himself, of the drunkenness of moving with the unseen. … He took her. They were dead" (105). Laurence is able to find fulfillment not in the act of sex itself but in his ability finally to exercise control over his wife; even though she succeeds in seducing Laurence, Winnie cannot find satisfaction in this encounter. Contrary to what she had originally believed, "there was no triumph in her now" (105). Her desire is always and already unfulfilled.

Death also becomes the vehicle by which Winnie attempts to resist the forces of maternity. Winnie repeatedly declares that she will die before having another baby; despite the fact that her resistance is futile, she attempts to make her voice heard above the voices of her mother and Mrs. Farley (who represent the enforcers of True Womanhood and the ideal mother, despite their own failings to adhere to what they are enforcing) and the doctor (who represents the voice of authoritative patriarchy who also seeks to enforce norms of motherhood). Winnie tries to subvert the language and the ideals for which these women serve as mouthpieces. Her own mother, Mrs. Price, espouses the values that are required of her as a mother figure, declaring "What a wonderful thing it is to be a mother!" but Winnie in her disillusionment with motherhood is able to see past Mrs. Price's romanticized language to recognize "the sickish reflection of a memory that was growing dim" (183) of Mrs. Price's own experience of childbirth.

Ultimately, Winnie's body does succumb, literally, to her child. Children, that is, here literally equal death, "death infecting life" (Kristeva 232). In a childbirth scene that can be easily compared to Adele Ratignolle's in its overriding sense of horror and unnaturalness, Winnie's

agency is degraded further. She is given chloroform to minimize her pain, but the drug, as was the case with Edna Pontellier and with many women in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries, also inhibits her agency and places her "physically at men's disposal, though still estranged from the potentialities of her own body" (Rich 171). Winnie slowly loses both her sense of subjectivity and her actual physicality, as she feels as if "she had lost her feet" (190). The midwife and the strong, maternal influence of someone who can relate to women's birthing experience is replaced with the doctor, who, although ostensibly there to help Winnie through the birthing process, represents the figure of male authority policing the maternal body and ensuring "correct" mothering practices. Winnie "hated the [doctor's] assertive hand on her, demanding her back out of pain" (191). After birth her "tongue and lips were wool" (191); she literally cannot speak against the influence of the doctor and against the trope of the idealized mother. Her child has "emerged from the blackness in which she was still caught" – a blackness out of which she will not herself emerge. The joy that all mothers are "supposed" to feel after the birth of a child eludes her, and "at the moment in which she knew it entirely, she ceased to be" (191). When the child, both a part of and an obstacle to Winnie's bodily existence, is expelled, Winnie hopes that the child, this nonobject who feeds off of her subject-position, will return her agency once no longer a part of her body. However, what Winnie does not realize is that the literal, physical act of expelling the child is not enough to regain her subject position, for while she continues to be defined solely by her role as mother, she also cannot escape from being identified by her children.

The implications of Winnie's literal death because of her maternal body are astounding. The liminal space that women inhabit during childbirth is a phenomenon that many women, including Rich, have discussed. However, while for Rich this liminal space can be a source of

ecstasy and of transcendence, for Winnie, the liberation that Rich finds is impossible. This liminal state that "disturbs identity, system, order … the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," heightened in childbirth, is what often results in abjection (Kristeva 232). Rich acknowledges that "typically, under patriarchy, the mother's life is exchanged for the child. … The self-denying, self-annihilative role of the Good Mother (linked implicitly with suffering and with the expression of anger) will spell the 'death' of the woman or girl who once had hopes, expectations, fantasies *for herself"* (166). Until society recognizes the possibility of an active desire for women and the plural subject-positions that they occupy, as both Rich and Scott's text suggest, Winnie's awakened sexuality and acknowledgement of desire cannot fully blossom.

Scott employs stream of consciousness to render the fragmentation of self that occurs when women do not and cannot adhere to ideals of womanhood. As Pat Tryer points out, "Alice has no place within the narrow existence of the home, wanting more than housewifery can give her, yet finds her dreams of personal success still tied to an ability to find a husband. … Through Alice's inner conflicts, Scott demonstrates the results of increased industrialization, increased expectations, and increased awakening brought on by rapid change" (49). Alice represents, then, the conflicting demands placed upon the modern woman by society. Scott's representations of both Alice and Winnie demonstrate the challenges of "new woman" who must fight past the limitations placed upon her in order to find a subject-position (Tryer 49).

Although it is Winnie's motherhood that serves as the hindrance to her subjectivity and agency, it is Alice's *lack* of status as a mother in a society that privileges those with this label that prevents her from self-fulfillment. Alice, too, must suppress her sexuality. She is embarrassed by her body; her breasts, the signifier of maternity and the ability to give life, become especially problematic for her. Alice at twenty-nine is a single woman creeping past her

prime – something that both she and her family members recognize. Although Alice ventures outside the home to work and, as is hinted in the text, gives her family a significant portion of her income, these are not markers of empowerment for Alice but, rather, markers of difference and deviation from True Womanhood. As Rich points out, "women who refuse to be mothers are not merely emotionally suspect, but are dangerous. Not only do they refuse to continue the species; they also deprive society of its emotional leaven – the suffering of the mother" (169). A single woman had no place in early twentieth-century society, and Alice feels the full weight of her exclusion from this world of mother-women and angels in the household.

Alice is clearly not a mother-woman. Unmarried and outside the roles that society has prescribed, she is described in almost masculine language, especially when placed beside Winnie. As Peggy Bach argues, "Alice is everybody's albatross, and perhaps all the discontent, trouble, and misery are manifest in her" (442). She does not have the same relationship with the mirror that Winnie has; she cannot, in fact, even bear to look at her own body. She avoids mirrors and has given up trying to please men with her appearance. Her body "oppressed her"; the "horror of herself crept over her body, shameful because of no use" (Scott 34). This utility of her body is predicated on its ability to mother, to carry, birth, and feed a child – and because of her denial of that utility, we see a "shortcoming" that is evident in Alice's shame over her breasts:

> She saw her breast. Strange shiver of curiosity about herself. Why did it hurt her to see her breast? She covered it up. She looked at herself, into her hot eyes. Something cried inside her for mercy, but she would not take her hot angry eyes from the face in the glass. No use to beat about the bush and pretend to be

> highfalutin'. … Her skin quivered against the hot cold engulfing sense of degradation. She was like a bird alive in a snake's body. (33)

Alice's embarrassment of her breasts hints at the larger shame she feels for her inability to become a mother. Ironically, her body as a site of shame prevents it, at least in Alice's mind, from being a site of maternity. As with Winnie, the disconnect between mind and body has dangerous implications for subjectivity and agency. Although Alice is not physically restricted to the private sphere, as Winnie is, she is still psychically and socially bound to the domestic space – even as she does not fit inside this space either.

Throughout the novel, Alice suppresses a jealousy of Winnie that is tied to Winnie's status as a mother. She is close to Winnie's children, closer than she is with any of the other members of her family. She buys presents for them, feeling a sense of relief in giving them to the children (31). However, May and Bobby at the same time serve as reminders of what her body cannot do and what she cannot achieve. Similar to the relationship of Winnie and Laurence with their children, Alice's relationship with her niece and nephew is one fraught with complication, not one of unconditional love and care. She cannot "bear to think of the children born of Winnie. Bobby born of Winnie. She could not think of him. Virgin Mary. There seemed something secret and awful in maternity – some desecration" (32). Winnie's ability to convert her body into a maternal one, even though for Winnie this serves as an obstacle to her subjectivity and eventually results in her death, underscores Alice's inability to convert her own body through maternity and therefore to fit into cultural expectations of womanhood. She finds her body a continuous site of contention but denies it at the same time; she is "capable of giving birth to endless selves … like a mother bearing herself for ever like endless children" (156), but she can actually give birth to neither children nor subjectivity.

The connection between Alice's body and its inability to produce children culminates in the novel when Alice puts the children to bed during the days immediately following Winnie's death. Alice becomes frustrated with May, and with this frustration arises also her frustration with the obstacle her physical appearance and body becomes. She asks May, "What makes you act as though I were an ogress?" and when May does not provide an answer, Alice slaps her. May begins to cry, which provokes Alice into hugging the child "against her breast in a fierce, unkind, smothering hug" (214). In this imitation of the act of breastfeeding, Alice simultaneously desires and is repulsed by May's closeness at her breast. She "wanted May to be conscious of her," to recognize her capacity for mothering, but she also "wanted May to help her to understand herself" (214). However, Alice cannot find understanding either within herself or from May. She pushes May away from her and leaves the room, undressing in her bedroom in the darkness that "knew her" and "loved her" (216). Only in the darkness, where her body is in view of no one, can she find comfort – but even this comfort is tortured. As realized by May's revulsion toward her nonmaternal body, Alice can "no longer bear the company of this unknown thing" (216).

The lack of Alice's capacity to transform her body into a site of nurturance is the primary sign of her difference. Juxtaposed against the frail body of Winnie, Alice's body defies the feminine and thus social norms and practices. However, Alice cannot find this dissent empowering while the dissent itself is condemned by society. As long as the status of single women continues to be a stigma, Alice will continue to be shunted aside by her family and by society at large. However, as Winnie's character represents, following the script of motherhood and of womanhood does not guarantee fulfillment either. Both women's bodies are abject, though in different ways, showing that women cannot reach complete agency whether they

attempt to perform their prescribed roles as mother-women or if they attempt to perform roles outside of these standards, while defined by a singular role that is policed so publicly and so heavily.

Scott's critique of the impossibility of women's roles as mothers under the limits of patriarchy as shown through the juxtaposition of Winnie and Alice provides readers with a text that answers Kristeva's call for new discourses on motherhood and the maternal (and nonmaternal) body freed from the bounds of impossible ideals. However, we can trace a similar call through Harriet Jacobs's and Kate Chopin's texts as well. Each author through her characters critiques the bounds of socially accepted maternal practices, although each is informed by separate concerns of race, class, and historical context. Although the bodies of the women in each of these texts is abjected to some degree, and each has varying degrees of success in escaping this abjection, the message remains the same – mothering practices and women's sense of subjectivity will continue to suffer if women are subject to standards of mothering that conflict with the exercising of their agency.

Conclusion

As these three texts show, discourses on motherhood can vary over time and space and can depend on race, class, and social context. However, by examining the texts side by side we can trace a common thread that runs through all three: both the maternal body and the practice of motherhood, when subject to the scrutiny and control of dominant modes of discourse, can fail to provide fulfillment for either the mother or the child. When motherhood is a burden rather than a choice, women's bodies become abjected sources of entrapment. Motherhood, then, becomes an obstacle to these women's senses of subjectivity and the acting out of their desires, rather than a stepping stone to agency over their own reproductive systems.

As we have seen, Linda Brent's maternity emphasizes a radical break from the white middle-class motherhood that Chopin's and Scott's protagonists practice. The restrictions placed upon Linda's body as that of an enslaved black woman are clearly much more limiting than those on Edna or Winnie; however, Brent's strategic use of her maternal body to negotiate the paradoxes inherent to her position allows her ultimately (although not perfectly) to subvert those constraints. Because Brent, due to stereotypes of black women's lack maternal feeling and of the lasciviousness of the black female body, is not subject to the same True Womanhood standards as her white counterparts – although this doesn't mean that she isn't judged for not fulfilling them – she is able to rise above them and find satisfaction and happiness in her role as a mother. However, Edna and Winnie are subject to True Womanhood ideals, as this project suggests, and it is primarily this that prohibits them from finding fulfillment as wives and mothers. Whereas at least one of Linda's children is in part a result of the exercising of her agency through desire, making children for Linda a *choice*, the role that choice plays in the cases of Winnie and Edna is

either broken down or virtually nonexistent. What results is a critique of current systems of control that seek to restrict mothers' bodies and their mothering practices.

Despite these critiques, this is not to say that Chopin and Scott condemn the practice of motherhood itself. There is no evidence in the text to support this; in fact, Chopin's portrayal of Adele's happy marriage and relationship with her children suggests that finding fulfillment in a primarily maternal role is possible. What these writers do find problematic is a *prescriptive* motherhood, one that seeks to group all women under this singular definition of what a woman "is" and allows no room for women who wish to seek fulfillment outside of marriage and motherhood – seen most evidently in Scott's characterization of Alice. The *jouissance* that Kristeva describes as a part of her feminine ethics inherent in the relationship between mother and child is achievable but only outside of the realm of the symbolic hegemony that seeks to contain the maternal body and its functions. The abject maternal "proves subversive only if it resonates with the repressed, the unconscious, and the outside-of-language" (Caputi 47).

The resonances of the concerns that Jacobs's, Chopin's, and Scott's texts put forth still sound in the twenty-first century. Although women have come a long way in shedding the influence of prescriptive motherhood, many women (mothers and nonmothers alike) remain subject to public policing of their bodies and their mothering practices; the phenomenon is not as overt, but rather insidious, built into discourses ranging from media to medicine. Women's reproductive choices are still subject to regulation by the law, by public discourse, and even by other women. If they do choose to have children, they still cannot escape this scrutiny as how they parent their children is under constant watch. Many of these discourses would have us believe that mothers are either neglecting their children or are helicopter parents. If they don't breastfeed, they are denying their children essential health benefits and bonding experiences, but

if they breastfeed in public view, they are obscene. If they don't immediately lose their baby weight, they are lazy, but if it comes off too quickly, they have body image issues. Rows of bookshelves are filled with parenting guides that purport to contain the keys to how to raise successful and happy children; if children "fail," it is because their mothers have failed. In this environment, mothers often find it impossible to win.

Although the women's movement of the 1970s brought victories for women's reproduction rights, not least of all Roe v. Wade and the legalization of birth control for all women, it seems almost as if that progress has been halted, if not reversed, in the past several years. The introduction of fetal personhood bills in several states seeks to undo the advances that Roe v. Wade made barely forty years ago. In addition, the United States remains one of the last industrialized countries to offer paid family leave. Elisabeth Badinter explores the regression of modern forms of motherhood in *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*, arguing that in pushing back against their feminist mothers who "were always rushed off their feet and struggled to juggle the demands of work and family" and becoming discouraged by continued discrimination in the workplace, modern women are swinging to the opposite extreme, becoming "receptive to the new order of the day": maternal instinct, biological essentialism, and "children first" (30). These "naturalist" conceptualizations of motherhood are at odds with the "culturalist" proponents, as Badinter sums up: "An underground war is now being fought … between people who claim to act as 'advocates' for the defense of children (against mothers' ignorance? negligence?) and women who refuse to see their hard-won freedoms eroded" (31). Whether this pushback has been caused by the economic slump, the "assault of naturalism" (Badinter 27) and essentialism, or the near-impossibility of the promised "having it all" due to the shortcomings of family leave policies, the result is the same. The self-

effacing rhetoric that pervaded nineteenth-century discourses of motherhood is being resurrected in everything from the media to how-to guides on parenting to idle chatter at the playground. Beginning with the public and institutional policing of women who smoke or drink, this regulating has extended to breastfeeding, which has become a "defining feature in a philosophy in which motherhood determines women's status and their role in society" (Badinter 67), and other "best practices" of motherhood. A good mother, much like Chopin's mother-women, always puts the needs of her child first, even (perhaps especially) at the expense of her own – a sacrifice is made to seem only natural (Badinter 67).

However, much like the critiques of Jacobs, Chopin, and Scott in their novels, Bandinter is not without hope. Badinter urges women to reject naturalist conceptualizations of motherhood that seek to define women strictly by their biology and that resort to biological roles to define their cultural ones. Instead, Badinter advocates a practice of motherhood that allows for individualism and pleasure, recognizing that motherhood is both "an incomparable experience of giving life and receiving love" and a "daily diet of frustration and stress, self-sacrifice and conflict, along with feelings of failure and guilt" (168). Allowing for this individualism and a non-prescriptive practice of motherhood would result in greater freedom and less guilt for women who do choose to become mothers and removes the stigma that still exists against women who choose not to. In order to do so, the discourse surrounding motherhood must be changed; instead of the one-size-fits-all maternality that runs rampant through the media and daily conversation, women must recognize that different ways of mothering are not only acceptable but expected. It is only through doing so that the *jouissance* that Kristeva describes as accompanying maternity can be brought forth at its fullest and most profound.

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