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The Judgement of Southern Motherhood in Works by Doris Betts, Gail Godwin, Dorothy Allison, and Kaye Gibbons

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THE JUDGEMENT OF SOUTHERN MOTHERHOOD IN WORKS BY DORIS
BETTS, GAIL GODWIN, DOROTHY ALLISON, AND KAYE GIBBONS

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DEDICATION

To Kedar,

for bringing love and laughter to the journey.

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It is my own experience of motherhood that informs this project. William and Walter, I love you two with all my heart.

My mother has been with me every step of the way on this interesting journey into higher education. Thanks, Mom, for all your love and support.

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation considers depictions of mothers in the works of four southern women writers published between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. During this period there was a conservative backlash to the progressive second-wave feminist movement. The tensions that women experienced between the ideas of feminism and the traditions in the South that women should aspire to motherhood above all other enterprises and should enact motherhood as selfless servants to their children and husbands are apparent in the fictional works examined in this study.

I consider texts by Doris Betts, Gail Godwin, Dorothy Allison, and Kaye Gibbons to explore a collage of women's experiences with southern motherhood through the mothers, both successful and unsuccessful in their motherhood enactments, that these authors imagine in their fiction. These four authors examine white motherhood from a variety of standpoints including social class, working versus non-working mothers, mothers who flee, and mothers who let their children suffer through their ambivalence toward the motherhood project. The texts also consider the power of the community to police the actions of the mother, including the determination of the acceptability for a woman to defer childrearing to an alternative parent.

The mothers imagined by Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons find motherhood to be a space that can empower women with the thrill of creating life and nurturing a

child or, just as easily, crush them with the weight of unwanted expectations and responsibilities. These four authors, considered together, indicate complexity in women's attitudes toward the institution of motherhood during this historical period that is far from the monolithic idea of southern motherhood informed by the heteronormative traditions of the American South.

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INTRODUCTION

During the 1960s and 1970s, progressive ideas from the second-wave feminist movement about the roles of women in society permeated American culture, yet, many communities in the South were unaffected by the work done by second-wave feminists. Roles for southern women remained rooted in nostalgia for ideologies that dominated American culture through the Cold War, privileging a stay-at-home, angel-in-the-house mother as the pinnacle of achievement for privileged, white women in the 1980s. As a child of southern parents growing up in the 1970s and 1980s in the suburbs of Atlanta with a working father and stay-at-home mother, I experienced this first-hand not only in my own house, but also in the households of my friends and family. The women I knew as a child did not work outside the home. Instead, they were the Brownie leaders, Pack mothers, Sunday School teachers, Room Mothers, and P.T.A. moms. In the world of my childhood in the middle-class, white, southern suburb where I lived, it was as if the second-wave feminist movement never occurred. My white suburban community remained steeped in traditions that dictated a woman should stay at home and raise her children. I vividly remember my aunts discussing my cousin's wife in hushed, disapproving tones because she wanted to have a career instead of devoting herself solely to mothering her children. Feminism was a dirty word that was not considered an appropriate topic of conversation in polite company.

The counter-culture movements were spectacles populated by people who were not welcome in the middle-class circles I inhabited as a child. I still remember my family

taking our houseguests to drive through the street of communes in Atlanta where the hippies lived. It was considered a noteworthy spectacle, and the line of traffic constantly waiting their turn to view the street let me know that we were not the only gawkers. After our sight-seeing trips through the communes, we returned to our safe and secure suburban home smug in the idea that we were somehow above the dangerous ideas embraced by the counter-culture movements. As children, my peers and I were prevented from exploring ideologies that upset the version of hearth and home valued by our conservative southern society through the lack of information and resources to understand the theories driving these evolving, new ideas.

The social environment of my childhood was mired in family traditions that solidified during the post-World War II period and emphasized the value of a heteronormative, nuclear family with a stay-at-home mother and working father. With its history of privileging the family, the communities of the South eagerly enforced this conservative ideology. In her introduction to *Maternal Body and Voice*, Paula Gallant Eckard, who explores maternal depictions of three southern women writers, acknowledges “the enormous impact that southern history and culture have had on women’s lives” (12). The women from my childhood rejected the ideas of second-wave feminists such as Betty Freidan and Germaine Greer. Instead, they clung to an old order of traditions which insisted that all their attention be directed to their children and husbands. Possibilities to find fulfillment beyond their roles as wives and mothers were closed to them. In my Atlanta suburb, the ideologies of the second-wave feminist movement that promoted women to explore occupations beyond childrearing and homemaking were silenced. It was difficult for me to understand why these women who

comprised my world as a child would not embrace new freedoms and increased access to all the world had to offer, but fiction written by southern women during this time provides vantage points to understand the motivations for women to accept traditional roles as homemakers in lieu of careers or interests outside the home. Exploring this tension between new possibilities for women presented during the second-wave feminist movement and the conservative ideals of traditional family values that gained traction during the 1980s is at the heart of this project. My dissertation considers the voices of four southern women writers who explore motherhood in the South from a variety of perspectives during this historical moment.

The feminist ideas that a woman could develop a presence in the community outside the home and define herself by her own interests in lieu of proving her worth by providing comforts to her husband and children were a revolutionary departure from southern traditional ideas about a woman's place in the family that kept women confined to affairs of homemaking and childrearing. I consider works by Doris Betts, Gail Godwin, Dorothy Allison, and Kaye Gibbons to explore the ways women responded to motherhood and the community's standards for mothering practice from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. These four authors consider white motherhood from a variety of standpoints including social class, working versus non-working mothers, mothers who flee, and mothers who let their children suffer due to their ambivalence toward the mothering project. These authors interrogate motherhood from the point of view of the child, the family, the community, and even the mother herself.

The expectations surrounding white motherhood is often used as a means to control the behavior of women in southern society. The works of this study demonstrate

that the southern traditional ideals about the institution of motherhood of the white middle class are so demanding and so unpalatable, that even the women in the white, privileged middle class cannot easily maintain the charade of perfect, traditional motherhood. The struggle that the fictional women of this study encounter as they attempt to mother suggests that motherhood is an arduous task that is difficult even for the most advantaged in society. Society plies the institution of motherhood with such lofty expectations that women are predetermined to fail.

The communities of the South are notable in their strong desire to enforce enactment of southern traditions on all members. Nagueyalti Warren and Sally Wolff in their preface to *Southern Mothers*, a collection of critical works considering literature that features southern motherhood across two centuries, note, “The literary portrayal of southern motherhood brings into focus the peculiarities of southern attitude and tradition that do not exist elsewhere” (3). They continue, “Racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice—all human failings—are not peculiar to the south, but they have become a tightly woven part of southern society” (Warren and Wolff 4). My study focuses on a shorter historical period and specifically considers the expectations for mothers expressed by their children and their communities during the conservative backlash to the second-wave feminist movement. I am interested in understanding the roles that mothers play in perpetuating these human failings of “racism, sexism and other forms of prejudice” as identified by Warren and Wolff, as well as the possibility of harnessing the power of motherhood to overcome these failings.

The mothers imagined by Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons find motherhood to be a space that can empower women with the thrill of creating life and nurturing a

child or, just as easily, crush them with the weight of unwanted expectations and responsibilities. Exploring these fictional texts offers a collection of mothers that suggest motherhood defies a simple, monolithic definition. The four authors, considered together, indicate complexity in women's attitudes toward the institution of motherhood which are far from sacrificial southern motherhood informed by southern heteronormative traditions.

The lesson I learned in my childhood was that feminism was not a topic to be discussed among the polite company of southern society. Fiction, however, gives voice to the unspoken interior lives of women who outwardly appear to be in compliance with community expectations. The fiction of Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons uses characterization, point of view, inner dialogue, and life narratives to demonstrate the limited choices that are available for women and women's responses to these constraints. Eudora Welty, a southern literary forebearer to these writers demonstrates the history in the South of the lack of choices for women in "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" from her 1941 collection, *A Curtain of Green*. Lily's choices are to be committed to Ellisville Institute for the Feeble Minded of Mississippi or to marry the xylophone player from the traveling tent show. In the end, it really doesn't matter which she chooses as the town is eager to cheer for either of their authorized choices with equal enthusiasm and without any concern for what Lily wishes for herself. Like Lily Daw, the fictional women explored here are restricted by their communities, but through the power of fiction, we have access to their personal thoughts and motivations to better understand how these narrow choices affect their attitudes and mothering performance. Gail Godwin explains the community expectations she observed for southern women in "The Southern Belle"

for *Ms. Magazine* (1975). She writes, “A girl growing up in the South becomes aware of certain ideals of womanhood at an early age. These ideals almost seep through the environment itself and they have not changed much in the past two hundred years. They have to do with grace, elegance, modesty (and purity), tact, hospitality and duty (to others, not yourself)” (Godwin “Belle” 51). Godwin presents these as restraints that prevent women from sharing their innermost thoughts and personalities with the outside world. Fiction provides a forum for the veil that Godwin describes to be lifted and women’s true and varied reactions and frustrations to their positions as mothers to be voiced.

Through narrative, the authors explore motherhood from a variety of standpoints. Betts uses the realm of fiction to provide correction to her female characters who display ambivalence toward the motherhood project; Godwin demonstrates the gilded cage of motherhood that controls women of the middle class through the promise of security that ensures their compliance to their expected roles within the community; Allison demonstrates the collapse of effective motherhood in impoverished households; and, Gibbons imagines maternal communities that enrich and engage women through her novels. Taken together, these works consider the contradictions of motherhood in a time and place of renewed conservatism that isolated southern women from the ideas of second-wave feminism.

The authors explore themes of maternal failure, ambivalence toward children, community surveillance of mothers, abandoning mothers, and reassigning motherhood responsibilities to another adult. In the second half of the study, Allison and Gibbons consider the effects of poverty on the motherhood project and how mothers and children

who lack access to resources suffer while their communities disregard the harm caused by that suffering. The four authors also offer visions of women who are successful in carving out a more individualized form of mothering performance in women-centered communities outside of the prescribed vision of traditional motherhood. In these moments, the literature points to ways for women to succeed in motherhood outside of community norms.

The fantasy of whiteness representing purity, superiority, perfection, and power in the South informs the perception of southern white motherhood as a desirable pinnacle of selfless sacrifice for women. This southern fantasy of white motherhood creates unachievable expectations for mothers that make the maternal role unlivable, even for the women who seem phenotypically and familiarly to belong to this category. Historian Nell Irvin Painter, in *The History of White People*, explores the deleterious nature of the white fantasy. She writes, “Back in the twentieth century, white people were assumed to be rich or at least middle-class, as well as more beautiful, powerful, and smart. As citizens and scholars, they said what needed to be known and monopolized the study of other people with themselves hardly being marked or scrutinized in return” (Painter 387). This study considers the effects of the white fantasy on the project of motherhood in the American South and answers Painter’s call for deeper scrutiny of the façade of white superiority. Warren and Wolff write, “Until women from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds speak fully and without hesitation, motherhood and the issues common to women cannot be fully elaborated” (3). I hope this research will engage with other studies exploring additional racial, ethnic, and religious views regarding mothering to help generate a more robust vision of motherhood that accounts for a wide variety of

lived experiences. Betts, in the introduction to *Southern Women Writers* says, “In the future, when one and ten and many and, at last, nearly all women have told the truth about their lives, it may be that while part of that truth will indeed split open the world, another part may heal or at least try to do so” (Inge 8). Gibbons alludes to the importance of this exchange of ideas among women in *A Cure for Dreams*. Marjorie Polly, the third generation of Randolph women, recalls her infancy surrounded by women. She writes, “*But I wasn’t sleeping, not for the sounds of the women talking*” (Gibbons *Cure* 171). Gibbons ends the novel demonstrating that it is the power of women of different races and socio-economic backgrounds talking about their experiences that can alter the trajectory of our futures. My research considers a sampling of ideas about white motherhood in southern communities that will contribute to and encourage deeper exploration of the obstacles and successes that women of all races and socio-economic situations face in their enactments of motherhood.

The ideas which informed traditional views of motherhood explored in the fiction of this study stemmed from a broader, national view of motherhood and womanhood that developed in conjunction with the post-World War II economic boom across America and the need to get women out of the work force and back into the home to open up positions for male veterans returning from Europe. Situational comedies appearing in serial on prime-time television served as didactic models for the perfect, American, 1950s wife and mother. Shows such as *Ozzie and Harriett* (1952), *Father Knows Best* (1954), and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957) featured stay-at-home mothers whose only task was homemaking and caring for her children. These wives of professional men performed their mothering and homemaking without complaint and often with heels on their feet,

pearls around their necks, and a large, lip-stick smile painted on their faces. In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz writes of this period in America:

The 1950s was a pro-family period if there ever was one. Rates of divorce and illegitimacy were tiny compared to today [1992]; marriage was almost universally praised; the family was everywhere hailed as the most basic institution in society; and a massive baby boom, among all classes and ethnic groups, made America a “child-centered” society. (23)

The communities of the South followed this American trend. Southern values of the post-WWII era are based on the principles that marriages are heteronormative, women’s work should solely revolve around homemaking and childrearing, and men should provide the fiscal resources for the family. These values place emphasis on the family over all other enterprises and are reinforced by this broader pro-family view across America that Coontz describes.

In the communities that the fictional women of this study inhabit, these pro-family notions are the bedrock of traditional southern motherhood and are the standards by which women are judged. In Godwin’s *A Southern Family*, Theo Quick voices the ideas he has acquired as the son of a middle-class, southern family. He is frustrated that his ex-wife as well as his new girlfriend are determined to have interests beyond him and the family. He says, “Women don’t want to give anymore, they just want to take” (Godwin *Southern* 32). Theo has been trained to expect a woman’s compliance to a man’s every wish, but his reality has exposed quite different behavior from women. Julia, a long-time family friend of the Quicks surprisingly agrees with Theo. The omniscient narrator reveals her inner response, “Self-sacrifice, for instance, had become a

ridiculously outmoded concept. The practitioner of it tended to be laughed at or pitied rather than held up as an example of goodness” (Godwin *Southern* 33). Yet, Julia values self-sacrifice for the family and has enacted that in her own life decisions. Jodi Vandenberg-Daves in *Modern Motherhood* writes that marriage and motherhood were linked to “female normalcy as well as to psychological, physical, and sexual health” (176). Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons demonstrate the expectations that the southern communities hold for women which echo Vandenberg-Daves’ claim about American motherhood. These authors also consider the penalties that the communities inflict on non-compliant mothers when these norms are not enacted in the community-endorsed, prescribed manner.

Across America, the second-wave feminist movement challenged traditional values of a stay-at-home mom, two children, and a working father. Vandenburg-Daves writes, “By the middle of the 1960s, feminism’s Second Wave had enlivened the perspectives of maternalists, while also developing an unprecedented critique of the institution of motherhood itself. For the first time, feminists portrayed motherhood as a very problematic piece of the pedestal on which the unliberated American woman was placed” (223). Vandenburg-Daves highlights the uneasy relationship between second-wave feminism and motherhood across the United States. Feminists found motherhood and the expectations and responsibilities surrounding the institution of motherhood at odds with their vision for women to have freedom to explore life on their own terms. In the American South, the deeply held belief in the power of the heteronormative nuclear family heightened the pressure on southern women to comply with the community’s ideals of mothering standards and to reject ideas such as feminism that would derail a

woman's complete commitment to hearth and home. The southern women writers of this study critique the importance of motherhood in a woman's developing sense of self using the backdrop of southern communities to demonstrate the points of tension women experience between motherhood and the pursuit of other interests outside the family. The nostalgia for the proper womanly role idealized during the Cold War Era held an appeal that was difficult for southern, middle-class women of the 1980s to reject completely. The fiction of this study grapples with the intersection of these competing ideologies and often demonstrates that there are dire consequences for neglecting motherhood for self-fulfilling projects outside the household.

Women in the South were affected by ideas which were being discussed on the national stage about a woman's place within society. While the second-wave feminist movement did gain traction across the nation, there also remained a national push for a traditional enactment of womanhood and motherhood that called for women to find fulfillment in the home as wives and mothers. In *Divided We Stand*, historian Marjorie J. Spruill considers the tensions between second-wave feminism and traditional family values surrounding the attempt to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. These tensions created turmoil in the lives of individual women attempting to reconcile these ideologies. Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons consider the unrest Spruill identifies on the national level from a multitude of angles within southern communities. Spruill claims, "There were two women's movements in the 1970s: a women's rights movement that enjoyed tremendous success, especially early in the decade, and a conservative women's movement that formed in opposition and grew stronger as the decade continued" (1). The authors studied here were all influenced by both the women's rights movement and the

conservative women's movement. Their writing considers this national debate through a southern lens and explores ways that individual southern women attempt to reconcile these incompatible ideologies in their lives as well as the harm inflicted on women by the demands from these competing scripts dictating the proper behavior for a woman. The history of conservatism and devotion to family in the white middle class of the South only amplified the divisions Spruill describes.

This national revival of conservative notions of family was fueled by nostalgia for an earlier, golden time that was encapsulated in the fantasy of the innocence of the 1950s. Shari L. Thurer in *The Myths of Motherhood* notes that this 1980s cycle of conservatism was influenced by “[a] wave of cultural nostalgia [that] swept Ronald Reagan into the White House and precipitated a vigorous attempt to turn back the clock and reinstate the traditional family. . . people wanted to restore a lost ‘golden’ past of family, flag, neighborhood, and work” (289). Women were expected to strive for these conservative standards and were disciplined through mom-bashing focused on women who strayed from the norms. Thurer writes, “[n]ew heights of mother bashing by the media were reached in the 1980s and 1990s” (292). Women were expected to perform perfect motherhood or risk becoming the objects of public scorn. Thurer notes, “there is no getting around the fact that ambition is not a maternal trait. Motherhood and ambition are still largely seen as opposing forces. . . . For many women, perhaps most, motherhood versus personal ambition represents the heart of the feminine dilemma” (287). Through fiction, the authors of this study consider this national trend with a southern twist and expose the myth of the golden time that Thurer describes through a focused look at

southern women who attempt motherhood as working mothers, stay-at-home mothers, absent mothers, single mothers, and impoverished mothers.

The fiction of Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons reflects the unrest that southern women experienced in facing the tensions between the nostalgia for a golden past and the reality of the difficulties inherent in the form of motherhood that was idealized by nostalgia. Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976) also explores the tensions that these two opposing ideologies create for women. Rich claims, "We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood" (11). For Rich, there are two forms of motherhood, "the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (13). Rich encourages new consideration of the possibilities that motherhood might present a woman if she is able to separate her mothering activities from the institution of motherhood. For these fictional southern women who rely on tradition to maintain their privilege and status in the community, following Rich's lead presents complications that are important to understand in order to fully appreciate how they experience motherhood.

Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons also explore the concept of who is ultimately responsible for a child after birth. Southern society assumes that a mother will selflessly sacrifice her own health, wishes, and desires for the wellbeing of her offspring. Yet, every author provides at least one example of a mother who rejects these expectations. Betts, in *Souls Raised from the Dead* demonstrates the community's disgust with Mary's mother, Christine, through the dialogue and thoughts of the community

surrounding Mary. Her grandfather, Dandy, says to her father, “How’s Christine? I hear she’s able to write letters again. What’s she want this time?” (Betts *Souls* 12). Dandy believes Christine’s desertion of her daughter and husband is a marker of her extreme selfishness which derives from her lower-class upbringing. He continues, “I’m forgetting Christine with every breath, that little trash. That product of trash” (Betts *Souls* 12).

Dandy assumes that Christine’s actions are the result of her upbringing and not the effects of the pressures on women to conform to the middle-class ideals of sacrificial motherhood. Nancy C.M. Hartsock in “The Feminist Standpoint: Toward a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism” speaks to the role of the mother in raising a child, “the fact that women and not men *bear* children is not (yet) a social choice, but that women and not men rear children in a society structured by compulsory heterosexuality and male dominance is clearly a societal choice” (355). Hartsock interrogates the societal assumption that all women want to mother the children they bear and asserts that male-domination has assigned the task to women to keep women in subjugated positions. In this project, the authors explore the results of southern mothers who break from this tradition to pursue options outside of motherhood. These fictional women often meet with disaster or struggle to reinsert themselves into society in terms that are permissible as selfless and devoted mothers.

Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons also consider how women in southern spaces are affected by the hostility of their communities to any deviation from approved motherhood scripts through the narration and plot dilemmas of their fiction. These plot dilemmas demonstrate the competing and often contradictory scripts that are intended to shape women’s lives in the South during the 1980s and 1990s. Betts’s Christine in *Souls*

Raised From the Dead must decide if she owes her daughter a second life-giving sacrifice by donating her kidney to her ailing daughter. Godwin's Ruth from *Father Melancholy's Daughter* exemplifies a middle-class woman who is so torn by the demands of the community versus her own desires that she flees the daughter that she loves to escape the critique of the community that she detests. Allison's Delia from *Cavedweller* explores a mother who abandons her children to the scorn of the community and then returns to reclaim her position as mother while combating the ill-will of community members who find her undeserving of reunion with her daughters. Whereas, Gibbons, in *Ellen Foster*, considers a mother so abused by her spouse that committing suicide and leaving her daughter to fend for herself is the only path she can envision to freedom from her oppressive homelife. In considering these tortured mothers, the authors point to the need for a more humane version of motherhood that allows a woman freedom to pursue her own interests and motherhood simultaneously. The difficulty in enacting the motherhood project is the common theme connecting these fictional works, which build on the foundation created by earlier southern women writers who explore motherhood.

In 1949, Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream* describes a baseline for considering the women in the fictional texts of the 1980s by critiquing the misery of white mothers and the participation of white, middle-class mothers in the South in teaching racism to the next generation. Smith says, "The mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their 'place'" (27). Smith determines that the societal forces that played on white women's insecurity in their familial roles is a cause of their acceptance of racism and the inculcation of racism in their children. She focuses on the unhappiness southern mothers faced due to the many

restrictions on their opportunities to pursue interests outside the home. Smith writes of these mothers, “Their own dreams destroyed, they destroyed in cruelty their children’s dreams and their men’s aspirations. It was a compulsive thing. Rarely were they aware of the hate compelling them to do it. Most of them felt they were doing ‘right’” (150). Yet, Smith asserts that these women were using the limited power they had as mothers to employ the same form of control that stifled their own actions to control their families. Smith says, “They [southern mothers] did not see themselves in the ungracious role of exacting of their family the same obedience to the same Authority which had exacted so much of them” (150). The white, middle-class women Smith observes were trapped in their roles as mothers due to the lack of viable alternatives available to them as adult women in the American South. Long before Betty Friedan penned *The Feminine Mystique* and pointed to the “problem that has no name,” Smith critiqued the boredom and lack of opportunity for women to do anything but mother and the negative ways that the boredom of these women manifested in their families and communities.

Flannery O’Connor, another literary forebearer to the writers of this study, observes the failure of motherhood in the privileged class in “The River” from *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955). The narrator focuses on the point of view of the child, Harry Ashfield, whose dissatisfaction with the lack of attention he receives at home causes him to seek alternatives. Under the care of his babysitter, Mrs. Connin, he reveals to the preacher posed to Baptize him that his mother is not sick instead, “She hasn’t got up yet. . . She has a hangover” (O’Connor 41). When Mrs. Connin and Harry return to the Ashfield’s apartment, she searches out Harry’s mother, “That would be her, Mrs. Connin decided, in the black britches—long black satin britches and barefoot sandals and red

toenails. . . . She didn't get up" (O'Connor 42). Mrs. Connin judges Mrs. Ashfield harshly for shirking the role of a caring and nurturing mother to her young son. Ultimately, Harry also judges his mother as inadequate when he steals fare from her purse and runs away to the river where he ultimately drowns. O'Connor, in her comments about the story, also judges Mrs. Ashfield harshly saying that Harry "comes to a good end. He's been saved from those nutty parents, a fate worse than death" (qtd. in Behrendt 144). Betts, however, has a different view of the story saying she would rather, "pull that boy out of the river and go give him a haircut and something to eat" (Evans 25). Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons engage with the ideas of their literary forebearers through the themes of motherhood explored in their fiction. These writers engage with the ideas of O'Connor by employing point-of-view from a child's perspective to consider the efficacy of the mother. Like Harry, many of the children in the fiction studied here return harsh judgments of their mothers. The glimpses into their interior thoughts provides perspective on how children are inculcated with the ideals of motherhood at very young ages. Children can be the strictest judges of their mother's behavior.

Following in the footsteps of O'Connor, Betts's Mary, Godwin's Margaret, Allison's Bone, and Gibbons' Ellen all narrate their stories of childhood and the difficulties they encounter due to inadequate mothering from the standpoint of the child who has certain expectations about the duties of a mother. Feminist philosopher, Sara Ruddick, considers what, exactly, a woman owes her offspring as well as what a child expects from a mother. She says, "Children 'demand' their lives be preserved and their growth fostered. . . . Maternal practice is governed by (at least) three interests in satisfying these demands for preservation, growth, and acceptability" (Ruddick 98).

Mary, Margaret, Bone, and Ellen are all products of failed motherhood by Ruddick's standards. They lack in at least one of the three areas that Ruddick identifies as a mother's duty to her child: preservation, growth, and acceptability. In all four cases, the mothers are framed in the texts as negligent and the children suffer as a result of their mother's inattention. Ann Snitow, a feminist theorist, in "Feminism and Motherhood" writes of Ruddick's work saying, "it provides one of the best descriptions feminism has of why women are so deeply committed to the mothering experience, even under very oppressive conditions" (297). The fiction of Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons provides insight into women's rejection of motherhood because the expectations of society far exceed a woman's capacity to deliver motherhood in these prescribed ways.

The works of writers such as Welty, Smith, and O'Connor set the stage to understand the difficulties the writers of the 1980s demonstrate for performing motherhood in the South. In fact, the fiction of these later writers indicates that the motherhood ideal is an impossible one doomed to fail. Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons imagine the difficult scenarios that mothers face and then explore the causation of maternal failure. The communities consider failure as any mothering enactment that does not meet the traditional values that dictate a selfless, sacrificial mother who is devoted to childrearing in lieu of any other activity. Fiction allows insight into the toxicity in these expectations and the propensity for mothers to fail. Failure is realized in many forms; ambivalence of a mother to her children, abandoning mothers, and unauthorized (by the community) reliance on non-biological mothers to nurture the child. Often, the catalysts that contribute to failure include the harsh surveillance and judgment of the community regarding mothering performance and a woman's desire to place her

own needs above those of her children. However, the authors also offer glimpses at mothering successes when the relationship between mother and child is beneficial to both. It is through these images of successful motherhood that the authors offer a hopeful future for both mother and child to experience mothering as an empowering enterprise instead of the troubled endeavor that Welty, Smith, and O'Connor describe.

Perhaps what southern society fears most from mothers is what Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons demonstrate to be widely prevalent feelings for a woman, maternal ambivalence. For a mother to simultaneously hate and love her child is unacceptable in a community that expects selfless mother devotion as the norm and anything less than that as deviant behavior that needs correction. It is the tension between the reality of maternal ambivalence and the fear of its existence that informs the maternal depictions in the fiction studied here. Even before her child is born, Betts's Gwen from "Still Life with Fruit" is trepidatious about motherhood. She fears her unborn child is consuming her identity as a person and an artist. She is so unsettled by these conflicting feelings that she lacks the ability to voice her feelings of ambivalence to anyone and instead suffers in silence. In Godwin's *A Southern Family*, Snow loves her son, but is unwilling to sacrifice her happiness by remaining in a loveless marriage where her every action is controlled. Godwin softens the blow of Snow's motherhood desertion by explaining her actions as that of the lower classes and not the way a member of the middle class would behave. Allison's Anney in *Bastard Out of Carolina* is even more difficult to understand. She clearly loves Bone and attempts to nurture her, but her concern for her daughter does not override her desire to remain in her marriage to Bone's abuser. Through Anney, Allison interrogates how poverty contributes to maternal ambivalence.

Another type of ambivalence is also at play in these works, authorial ambivalence. In the first two chapters, Betts and Godwin reveal their own ambivalence toward the motherhood project. Betts, who writes so convincingly and excitedly about her personal experiences as a mother and wife to her long-time friend, Louise Abbot, uses fiction to delve into a darker version of motherhood where Gwen, the pregnant artist in “Still Life with Fruit” is filled with dread at the impending birth of her child. Gwen imagines that her child is consuming what still exists of her selfhood. Meanwhile, Godwin explores a highly normative and narrow form of motherhood as the only means for familial continuation in the privileged, middle-class society of the South. Godwin views this version of motherhood as unfavorable to personal growth. There is a shift in the second half of the project as both Allison and Gibbons acknowledge the difficulties and pain of motherhood, particularly for mothers who lack adequate resources to care for their children, but both authors also imagine motherhood as a route to empowerment.

The abandoning mother is also explored by these authors as behavior so deviant that it is beyond forgiveness. Betts offers the example of Christine in *Souls Raised from the Dead* as a cautionary tale of what abandonment can mean for a child. Mary dies, and Christine is left as a tearful voice rejected by her own mother on the other end of Frank’s phone line. Godwin flips the scenario with Ruth in *Father Melancholy’s Daughter* where abandonment results in Ruth’s death and Margaret’s lifetime search to understand how her mother could leave her. For Allison, Anney’s abandonment of Bone results in Bone’s inability to forgive the mother that she worships. Bone is able to forgive her mother for keeping Bone in harm’s way by forcing her to live with her abuser, but child abandonment presents more than Bone can bear to forgive.

Reliance on other adults to nurture the child is also socially unacceptable for the fictional women in this study. Christine and Ruth leave their daughters with adoring fathers while Anney leaves Bone with a loving aunt. Despite the unconditional love for the child demonstrated by these alternative caregivers who take up the yoke of parenting willingly and enthusiastically, the absence of the birth mother, who is considered obligated to raise her child regardless of circumstance, is unacceptable to the child, family, and community involved. Gibbons revises the vision held by the other authors of this study and offers a sympathetic view of mother alternatives as Ellen in *Ellen Foster* begins her quest for a replacement mother after her birth mother commits suicide. Ellen's "new mama," who hosts foster children, is kind and loving, and Ellen judges her to be a perfect replacement even while her privileged cousin smirks at the unconventional household of the foster family.

The surveillance of the community contributes to mothering failures by enforcing a script of selfless motherhood that is impossible for the mothers to enact. Betts's middle-class community of Chapel Hill has little patience for Christine's desires to work outside the home. Christine feels trapped in motherhood and is not afforded a way to succeed as a mother who wishes to also develop interests beyond motherhood. Ruth is also under the constant watchful eye of her husband's congregation in Godwin's *Father Melancholy's Daughter* which leaves her feeling so confined that she views desertion as her only option. Allison demonstrates that a determined woman can prevail over community judgement through Delia in *Cavedweller*. Delia's small Georgia community despises her for leaving her children when she runs for her life from her abusive husband. Yet, Delia's singlemindedness to reinstate herself as a mother to her daughters eventually overrides

the community judgement, and she is ultimately accepted back into that society. Delia's ability to prevail against community judgement fuels a hopeful reading of Gibbons' women that live on the fringes of acceptable society but find routes to successful enactments of motherhood that meet the needs of both mother and child.

The chapters consider a series of fiction ranging from the late 1970s to the early 1990s for each of the four writers. My research considers the evolution of each author's thoughts and impressions about motherhood during this period where tensions existed between the push for women to adopt conservative ideals that privileged a heteronormative family with a stay-at-home mother and the views of the feminist movement to look outside the home for fulfillment. Doris Betts, whose works are considered in the first chapter, lived her adult life in Pittsboro, North Carolina just outside of Chapel Hill. Betts was a writer, college professor, community activist, wife, and mother. Her archival papers contain a rich correspondence between herself and Louise Abbot, a close friend who she met while attending classes at the University of North Carolina, that span over fifty years. These exchanges, along with Betts's unpublished speeches and writings, offer a vision of Betts's thoughts that informed her writing from the 1970s to the 1990s. While Betts was a prolific writer, this study considers three works that center on explorations of motherhood performance. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (1973), the first of Betts's works explored here, marks a shift in Betts's thinking from her earlier fiction which centered on an academic viewpoint based on proven realities to a mystical outlook grounded in the conservative religious ideals of her childhood. This chapter also considers *Souls Raised from the Dead* (1994) and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* (1997). Taken together, these works trace Betts's evolving ideas about motherhood and

feminism. Betts, as are other authors of this study, is particularly interested in the effects of the community on a mother's behavior. In her collection of short stories, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Betts demonstrates frustration with women like Gwen who are reluctant about their entrance into motherhood. Betts also imagines Christine, a mother so flawed that there is no redemption for her actions in *Souls Raised from the Dead*. However, over time, her works show possibilities for women to find fulfillment in motherhood performance by imagining new and personalized ways to enact mothering. For instance, Luna experiences outlaw mothering as an adoptive mother in *The Sharp Teeth of Love*.

Maternal ambivalence is at the crux of Betts's fiction. For Betts, maternal ambivalence encompasses the tension between motherhood and work; motherhood and self-definition; and motherhood and feminism. Betts's letters and interviews from the period indicate a strong belief that mothering should be privileged over any other activity, leaving little sympathy for a woman who experiences ambivalence toward her duty to her children. The fictional mothers in this grouping of Betts's later-career works demonstrate the strains that exist between the emotional pull on a woman to surrender selfhood to motherhood and the feminist ideologies that prioritize a woman's self-building over all other enterprises. Betts's fictional works provide evidence of the southern mythologies of a perfect stay-at-home mother that fueled the politicizing of motherhood and splintered women's support of the second-wave feminist agenda. Her writing is, in many ways, didactic. The mothers in her fiction often serve as warnings of the harm that can come to a child if a woman succumbs to motherhood ambivalence. The evolution of Betts's thinking on motherhood and feminism offers insights into the thinking of southern mothers following the second-wave feminist movement that made them initially cautious

to adopt feminist ideals during the conservative backlash to second-wave feminism and informs understanding of the origins of intensive and competitive mothering played out in contemporary culture.

In the second chapter of this study, selected works of Gail Godwin focused on mothers and families are considered. The three novels explored in this chapter, *A Mother and Two Daughters* (1982), *A Southern Family* (1987), and *Father Melancholy's Daughter* (1991) are focused on white, middle-class professionals of the South. While Betts offers little patience for motherhood ambivalence, Godwin is more sympathetic. Thurer says of Godwin's writing from this period, "We are beginning to see a new kind of mother in novels – the mentor, the one who guides her children to independent adulthood. She is no angel, however. She makes mistakes; she is not fully fulfilled by her experience; she is ambivalent about her children. In sum, she is real" (299). Godwin, unlike Betts, is not a mother herself. Yet, she writes convincingly of the difficulties of becoming a mother for white, middle-class women. Her mothers, such as Nell from *A Mother and Two Daughters*, are caught between the dictates of southern manners and their desires for a personalized life-experience that is unencumbered by outside expectations. The privileged women that Godwin imagines in her novels are often hindered by the fluidity of old traditions surrounding motherhood. Godwin's mothers are required to gage constantly and adjust to popular opinion within their social circles. Her mothers fail to find the contentment that Betts expresses about her personal mothering experiences in her letters to Louise Abbot. Perhaps this is because, as Thurer suggests, Godwin's mothers never give themselves wholly over to motherhood. Instead, they attempt to preserve an identity that is independent from their roles as wives and mothers.

While on the surface it seems Godwin's mothers have all the advantages to engage in carefree and rewarding versions of motherhood, Godwin unveils the gilded cage of motherhood which ensnares these women into compliance with traditional and sometimes crippling ideals of southern motherhood perfection through the lure of a secure position in middle-class society. Godwin's mothers provide a less rosy picture of the outcomes of the mythology of the traditional nuclear family and a woman's role within that structure on the women of the white middle-class. Within this myth, white, middle-class women find that their sole occupation is enacting perfected motherhood, yet, the expectations for this role shift depending on who is critiquing the woman making perfected motherhood an impossible enterprise. Since proper performance of white, middle-class motherhood was the standard for considering the success or failure of all women's mothering performances during the period considered here, Godwin's depictions of middle-class mothers imply that the traditionally defined enterprise of motherhood is so flawed, that even the standard bearers of the system have difficulties in enacting mothering that benefits both mother and child. Godwin's middle-class women face an uncomfortable pull between two diametrically opposed forces. On the one hand, the women see benefit in the security of a "good" marriage and upholding southern traditions, on the other hand, they mourn their loss of independence and control over the trajectory of their lives. Godwin's mothers have limited success in reconciling tradition with their personal needs for self-expression exposing the difficulties that adherence to southern mothering ideals presents for women, their families, and their communities.

The third chapter explores the mothers of Dorothy Allison's works who occupy a very different social strata from the mothers considered by Betts and Godwin. Allison's

imagined mothers are impoverished or just barely earning a living wage. These women live in small working-class towns in South Carolina and Georgia. Of the authors considered in this study, Allison's works take the most profound shift during this historical period. Allison's early fiction provides insights into mothering in poverty and explores how middle-class ideals of motherhood contribute to the marginalization of impoverished mothers. Her works, *Trash* (1988) and *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) are told from the point of view of the child and represent her fiction prior to becoming a mother herself. Allison's most recent novel, *Cavedweller* (1998), demonstrates a shift in her writing from the vantage point of the child to that of the mother. Allison experienced a change in her attitude about mothering when she became a mother to her son, Wolf, who was born shortly after *Bastard Out of Carolina* was published. Like Betts, Allison is also interested in the mystical connections to motherhood and her children that a woman experiences upon becoming a mother. In *Cavedweller*, Allison introduces the mystical element to motherhood that informed her own shift in priorities from work and activism to attentions to her son. Her personal surprise at her surrender to motherhood revealed in interviews is noteworthy, and her change in tone informs her later fiction.

Allison's early works hold a mother responsible for providing her child security and love and imply that this is difficult, if not impossible, for the mother, especially the impoverished women Allison imagines, to deliver. In fact, the children in these early works are disposable children. They are not valued by their mothers, nor does the community value these children of poverty. No one intervenes to protect the welfare of these children living in dangerous and abusive situations. In her early works, a mother's love and protection is something that the child demands and deserves, but rarely

achieves. However, in *Cavedweller*, motherlove and devotion become the singular driving motivation in the mother's life. In a departure from Allison's earlier fictional mothers, Delia is determined to give her children her focused attention regardless of their responses to it. Delia's quest, and her success in earning both forgiveness and acceptance from her children and community demonstrate the redemptive qualities that Allison found in her own mothering experiences. In this cluster of fictional works, Allison ends with a triumphant mother, who against all odds, gains reconciliation and personal satisfaction in her enactment of motherhood. This hopeful ending to this grouping of her fiction demonstrates Allison's belief that motherhood, in and of itself, can be an empowering experience for women and informs a hopeful reading of Gibbons' fictional mothers.

The selected works of Kaye Gibbons during this time period point to ways for motherhood to be a woman-centered and empowering experience for women. Gibbons' fiction suggests that the societal ideals for perfected motherhood that were expected of the mothers in Betts's and Godwin's fiction are too restrictive to allow a woman to self-build while mothering. In the three works considered here, *Ellen Foster* (1987), *A Cure for Dreams* (1991), and *Charms for the Easy Life* (1993), Gibbons explores paths to empowered motherhood that Betts and Godwin leave unexamined. The mothers Gibbons envisions are empowered by their disregard for masculine-imagined tropes controlling the behavior of women. Gibbons demonstrates that empowerment for both mother and child is possible through strong matriarchal networks that transcend societal rules for maternal behavior. These women-centric networks ignore southern motherhood ideology focused on the woman's submission to a male head-of-household and allow women to

create alternative and supportive family structures and communities that nurture each woman's unique talents. In Gibbons' works studied here, men are absent from the households which allows mothers and daughters to define themselves in alternative, feminine-centric terms unencumbered by the pressures to perform to male expectations. Gibbons' novels consider how mothers and their daughters respond when the masculine presence is removed from the home and women are allowed to upend traditional motherhood with new ways to mother that empower both the woman and her offspring.

Unlike Godwin's fiction which is ruled by the dictates of respectable southern, middle-class society, the women of Gibbons' novels live on the fringe of tradition and chart creative and individual paths for their enactments of motherhood that are freer than the experiences of Godwin's mothers. The matriarchal figures in Gibbons' works do not conform to the ideals of a traditional southern lady and mother that rule the communities that Godwin imagines. Gibbons' mothers reject motherhood that would require them to dedicate all their time and energy to homemaking and childrearing. Gibbons' women also reject the dominant southern ideals that a strong male figure is needed to legitimize their household. While the middle-class communities surrounding Gibbons' matriarchs are focused on establishing barriers of entry to respectability, Gibbons' mothers have little concern over gaining the respect of the middle-class. Instead, they exploit their outsider status to enrich their matriarchal powers in their unconventional and female-centric homes.

The southern women writers, Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons, challenge community-held ideals of southern motherhood by imagining how the tensions women experience both externally from society, their families, and their children and internally

through their personal expectations of the feelings motherhood should elicit and their desires for strong mothering performance affect the relationship between mother and child. These writers demonstrate the complexities of motherhood. Their fictional works establish the damaging effects of contradictory social scripts on women's lives. The struggle to perform sacrificial motherhood and self-building simultaneously can be so alienating for women that their only sense of relief is to scrap the entire motherhood project in mid-stride. However, each author proves that motherhood is not a responsibility that is easily rejected. Both women and children suffer when a mother feels so tortured by the contradictory demands made on her that she becomes ambivalent toward the motherhood project, or, even more damaging, she abandons her children. The outcomes of ambivalence and abandonment are costly to woman and child.

In communities across the southern region of the United States, some women have been reluctant to voice their trepidations about motherhood. Betts, Godwin, Allison, and Gibbons give voice to women's varied responses to the expectations that they should blindly accept the duties associated with motherhood that are dictated by southern society. Their fictional mothers explore the inner turmoil that women experience while participating in southern communities. Studying groupings of their writings following the second-wave feminist movement allows for the evolution of their considerations of motherhood to be explored. Putting the voices of these writers together to listen to the ways they enter into conversation with one another about the southern motherhood project allows for a more robust vision of the difficulties that women experienced in the 1980s and beyond in their roles as mothers.

CHAPTER 1

DORIS BETTS FROM RELUCTANT MOTHERHOOD TO EMPOWERED MOTHERING

Doris Betts defined herself through many, sometimes conflicting, identities such as wife, mother, daughter, writer, professional, city leader, and educator. Her writing, both in her unpublished personal letters and speeches and her published fictional works, demonstrates the unease women experience in assuming many different roles in their families and society while they reconcile what she found to be conflicting ideologies of motherhood and feminism. Her works, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (1973), *Souls Raised from the Dead* (1994), and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* (1997) trace Betts's evolving ideas about motherhood and feminism, and, over time, they show possibilities to find fulfillment in motherhood. In addition to Betts's fictional works, she also left a rich collection of private writings including letters to her close friend, Louise Abbot, and manuscripts of unpublished speeches where she speaks candidly of her personal relationship with motherhood as the mother of three children. Taken together, these works of fiction and nonfiction demonstrate Betts's desire to mesh what she considers very different and sometimes oppositional projects: the traditions of southern motherhood involving a heteronormative marriage and a woman devoted to home and children and new ideas about the possibilities of mothering beyond this traditional script resulting from the second-wave feminist movement in the United States. The evolution of Betts's thinking on motherhood and feminism offers insights into the thinking of southern

mothers from the 1970s to the early 1990s that made them cautious to adopt feminist ideals during the conservative backlash to second-wave feminism and informs understanding of the origins of intensive and competitive mothering played out in contemporary culture.

Betts's early fictional critiques of motherhood are informed by anxiety over maternal ambivalence. Contemporary scholarship has identified a mothering experience that sociologist Ivana Brown describes as "maternal ambivalence" in her essay for *21st Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*. While Brown does not consider literary representations of motherhood during the period Betts was publishing, her ideas provide insight into how Betts's characters negotiate the tensions of both wanting to mother and wishing for opportunities beyond motherhood. Brown suggests that maternal ambivalence is a common and healthy emotion for women to experience. While, at the intersection of her private letters and her published novels and stories, Betts questions the efficacy of a mother who is ambivalent about the project of childrearing. Brown writes that maternal ambivalence is "the coexistence of conflicting and opposing thoughts or feelings; in the case of mothers, these are usually described as a coexistence of love and hatred" (122). For Betts, maternal ambivalence also encompasses the tension between motherhood and work; motherhood and self-definition; and motherhood and feminism.

In her correspondences and interviews, Betts indicates a strong belief that mothering should be privileged over any other activity, leaving no room for a woman to question her duty to the project of childrearing once she gives birth. Yet, contemporary motherhood researchers such as philosopher Sarah LaChance Adams in *Mad Mothers*,

Bad Mothers, & What a “Good” Mother Would Do: The Ethics of Ambivalence claim that maternal ambivalence is common and is “the result of valid conflicts that exist between mothers’ and children’s interests” (5). In *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *Souls Raised from the Dead*, Betts explores the conflicting emotions that mothers experience, but offers little sympathy for the negative feelings that mothers have toward their children and the practice of motherhood. Brown acknowledges that maternal ambivalence is often ignored; “Being a mother is conventionally associated with happiness. For many mothers, however, mothering is filled with conflict, anxiety, and ambivalence. Yet maternal ambivalence often remains unacknowledged” (121). Betts’s fictional mothers such as Gwen and Lillian from *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and Christine from *Souls Raised from the Dead* demonstrate the negative repercussions that their maternal ambivalence has on their children. These mothers often fail to meet the standards that their families and communities have set for an adequate enactment of motherhood. Even while the lack of community support usurps successful mothering, Betts’s maternal characters are judged harshly by their families and community which furthers their alienation from the project of motherhood.

Betts’s personal experience as a mother informs her impatience with women who question the mothering script. In her unpublished letters, Betts indicates that motherhood supersedes her other obligations and work. In her letters to Abbot, she often describes the happiness and satisfaction she experiences as a mother, but it is not until her final published novel, *The Sharp Teeth of Love*, that Betts demonstrates in her fiction how motherhood can be a liberating enterprise for a woman and can offer the foundation for a woman to engage in productive self-building. In this novel, Betts imagines a character,

Luna, who embraces unexpected motherhood and finds it enriches her life. This depiction of fulfilling motherhood is a departure from the ambivalent mothers in her prior works.

Betts's writing is, in many ways, didactic. It often serves as a warning of the harm that can come to a child if a woman succumbs to her feelings of emotional distance from her offspring. Through this grouping of Betts's fiction, the strains that exist between the emotional pull on a woman to give over selfhood to motherhood and the feminist ideologies that prioritize a woman's self-building over all other enterprises is explored. These works suggest that motherhood and feminist ideologies cannot easily coexist for a mother. Despite the fact that many women experience this paradox, it is widely left unexplored. Feminist theorist and political scientist, Jennifer Nedelsky, alludes to her own unease with enjoying motherhood while valuing feminism. In "Dilemmas of Passion, Privilege, and Isolation: Reflections on Mothering in a White, Middle-Class Nuclear Family," she says, "Next to falling in love with my husband, having my two children is the best thing that ever happened to me. As a woman who came of age in the sixties and became active as a feminist in 1970, it seems embarrassing, even shocking, to write such a sentence in a public, feminist essay" (304). While Betts was initially reluctant to accept feminism because it appeared to her an affront to the life she chose as a wife and mother, Nedelsky was reluctant to accept that being a part of a nuclear family could be fulfilling to her. Betts's hesitancy to adopt the ideals of second-wave feminism is related to Nedelsky's articulation of the conflict between motherhood and feminism. Nedelsky writes, "In my early days as a feminist, much scorn and opprobrium was heaped on marriage and the nuclear family—and with good reason" (304). Betts's fiction demonstrates how the politicizing of motherhood splintered women's support of the

second-wave feminist agenda. Her writing highlights the anxieties that informed dissent among women beginning in the 1970s over motherhood and provides historical context for the continued friction that the mother question raises among women.

Betts's discomfort with women's dual roles as mothers and feminists reflected the rising conflict between the two ideologies in the national political arena. The conservative women's movement that developed in the early 1970s in opposition to second-wave feminism sheds insight into the competing ideologies at play in Betts's fiction. In 1972, Phyllis Schlafly in her *Phyllis Schlafly Report* writes, "Women's lib is a total assault on the role of the American woman as wife and mother, and on the family as the basic unit of society" (qtd in Spruill, 71). Historian Marjorie J. Spruill in *Divided We Stand*, charts the rise of the conservative women's movement that acted as a counterpoint to the second-wave feminist movement. Spruill reports, "It took years, Connie Marshner [a conservative Catholic woman who began the letter writing against the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971] later recalled to figure out that all over the country there were little clusters of evangelical and fundamentalist Moms' groups who were 'unstructured' but 'in touch with each other' and just beginning to be aware of the danger posed by feminism" (74). Rosemary Thomson, another leader in the movement to halt the work of the second-wave women's movement, "blamed 'women's libbers' for leading women astray at great cost to themselves, their families, and the nation" (Spruill 72). The tension that developed across the country between second-wave feminist ideals and conservative views that women should be devoted to home and childrearing is reflected in the work of Betts. Her work is focused on communities in North Carolina and mothers who responded to this national conundrum in their everyday lives.

In interviews and her personal writings, Betts was very candid about the tension she experienced balancing childrearing and family with her career. Elizabeth Evans, Betts's biographer, writes, "Betts knows that deep in his heart, her husband wishes she had followed his mother's pattern [practicing home economics while her husband worked]. Instead, Betts has pursued a many-faceted career and knows well that women can't be everything" (24). Betts's texts of this study demonstrate her impatience with women who refuse to accept the limitations that motherhood will place on their lives. Her letters also reflect this tension. She indicates that she compromised on housekeeping and entertaining in order to write, yet she was unwilling to economize on time devoted to mothering her children. In her own life, Betts had to make important decisions on how to spend her time. While her children were at home, motherhood often pre-empted other pursuits, including her career.

In her letters to Louise Abbot, Betts struggles to reconcile her ideas about feminism with her performance of motherhood. In 1958 as a young mother with some publishing success, Betts discusses a new magazine, *Eve*, in a letter to Abbot. She writes, "[i]t is a woman s [sic] magazine without a single recipe but with items of interest to INTELLIGENT women (I fear it leans toward feminism at spots, which doesn t [sic] interest me worth a woot; Viva La Difference)." In a later correspondence, Betts tells Abbot, "By not 'fighting for women's rights' I seem to receive them; who's flakey here?" (Doris Betts to Louise Abbot, January 1967). Betts's letters indicate her reticence to fully embrace feminism because she sees it operating in opposition to her enjoyment of her husband and family. This echoes the ideology of Phyllis Schlafly spearheaded in her countermovement to second-wave feminism, that a woman must make a choice between

home and career but cannot effectively perform them simultaneously. Betts finds her own desires to mother are at odds with her perceptions of the women's movement. In a 1973 interview, Anne Marie Riener says, "Betts supports women's liberation, but she is 'not one who joins groups and protests.' She commented that women her age (41) who were willing past victims of their husbands, have only now chosen to complain. She emphasized, 'I do not like this kind of woman in conscious-raising groups'" (n.p.). Betts's frustration with women who are reluctant to perform childrearing duties informs the early fiction considered in this study.

In her correspondence with Abbot, Betts also grapples with the place of a heterosexual marriage within the ideology of second-wave feminism. Betts writes to Abbot of a mutual friend, June, who has attacked Betts's priorities as wife and mother. She writes, "This is June's chief topic of conversation [feminism] (I find her very convincing; she persuades me; maybe this is what leads her to see me as hypocrite) but as time has passed what has evidently happened is that I was talking abstract, and she personal. She really has some serious Battle of the Sexes going; mine, at worst, is a cease-fire and at best is pretty darn good" (Doris Betts to Louise Abbot, January 1967). Betts uses her wifely and maternal contentment to oppose June's idea of feminism. Much of her fiction explores whether feminism and contented mothers can co-exist. Betts continues to Abbot:

Yet, it's true that when I try to express what seems to be "good" in my marriage, it sounds like *McCall's Magazine*. That everything balances. Sure, Lowry makes major decisions, especially financial ones – but he makes them after such joint consultation that the seam is invisible. Sure, I pamper him in some ways – carry

him coffee, stuff like that; and in so doing make an effort to balance-off the areas of wifhood in which I am a dismal failure: cooking, for instance, and housekeeping. (Doris Betts to Louise Abbot, January 1967)

At this point in Betts's life, she lives between two worlds. She values her position as a privileged southern mother and finds her acceptance of these patriarchal ideals incongruous with feminism. Betts subscribes to traditional notions of motherhood featuring the man as the chief earner and decision maker and the woman as the home support crew. As a young mother, Betts sees no need for feminist rhetoric to upset her peaceful home life. Even so, Betts did pursue a career outside of the home which presented her with an uneasy contradiction to the early ideas she expresses about a woman's duty to her children.

Betts favored her identity as a mother over her career as a writer, educator, and scholar in her correspondence with Abbot. Many times, she interrupts her letter writing to Louise with explanations such as, "Must stop and fix the husband and child some lunch" (Doris Betts to Louise Abbot 1954). In another letter the same year Betts writes, "LewEllyn [her daughter] is SCREECHING at me DORIS DORIS DORIS and I must stop as my thoughts are going off in all directions like cotton candy" (Doris Betts to Louise Abbot Summer 1954). Even in writing to a friend, Betts privileges the needs of her daughter over her own need for adult, female companionship. In her conversation with Marti Greene, Betts provides some insight into how motherhood affected her writing:

Most women who write are not writing for posterity. They are not as persuaded that posterity is worth more than this life right now, in being able to love and be

loved and have children and take pride in attempting more things than one. So I have spread myself out, and sometimes I regret that. Most of the time, I don't. Everything I have done that wasn't directly about writing has taught me something also about writing fiction. (n.p.)

Betts's views on work reflect the tensions between working and stay-at-home mothers which were accelerating in the 1980s in the white middle-class. The dilemma for the white women during this period of economic prosperity in the United States was that in a two-parent, middle-class household, a working mother was not necessary to maintain the financial security of the family. Therefore, women's careers were often trivialized and considered secondary to the male provider.

The works considered here represent Betts's writing after an important paradigm shift. Mid-career, Betts's writing shifted from work centered on knowledge production among the beleaguered working class of the Carolinas to an exploration of the mystic and religious in the lives of her characters. Her earlier works such as *Tall Houses in Winter* (1957), *The Scarlet Thread* (1965), and *The Astronomer and Other Stories* (1966), focus on the other ways of knowing employed by those outside of the academy whereas her later works such as *Heading West* (1981), *Souls Raised from the Dead* (1994), and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* (1997) explore the role of religion or belief in the mystical in the lives of her characters. Betts, in her 1982 speech "Faith and Intellect," speaks of her move from investigating intellectualism to religion:

What changed me is a long private story; I will only say that it took many years, that is there was no sudden mountaintop experience, that it came to climax at a helpless moment when my intellect alone had tried everything and given up. . . .

The point is I did not come back [to faith] by intellect. Intellect alone was not what I was using when I first fell in love, nor when I first saw my newborn child. Though it is an essential second half of faith, the intellect *came* second, dotting i's and crossing t's. (Betts "Faith")

The texts of this study reflect her philosophical change. Shortly after the publication of *The Sharp Teeth of Love*, Betts, in her 2000 interview with Greene, revises some of the ideas in her letters with Abbot from the 1970s. The release of those letters upon Betts's death and the surprising contrast their content makes with her 2000 interview permits insight on just how much her lived experience as a working mother is refracted in her fiction. Betts tells Greene that "[p]rayer for my own children" brought about her move to faith. She was raised in a religious household, but she rebelled against the religious doctrine of her upbringing from the age of twenty to thirty-five (n.p.). Betts' short story collection, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (1973) has been identified as the collection that bridges the two prevalent ideologies of her works and segues to work in the 1980s and 1990s focused on the role of faith in the lives of her characters. In a 1973 interview with the *Greensboro Daily News*, Betts says of the stories in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, "I think they turn a corner. They've bent time a little more; they've bent, or questioned, reality a little more. I need an indication of change or growth; that's the only thing that keeps a writer writing" ("Doris Betts on Writing" n.p.). In her private life, Betts returned to religion due to her concerns for her children, demonstrating how motherhood operates in her life as a gateway to a belief in the mystic. In the fictional works considered here, there are tensions between mothering as a process of mystical knowing and motherhood

as a social practice that is evaluated within both the framework of the church and the larger community.

Upon Betts's shift back to the church in her private life, interrogating the role of the church in the practice of motherhood began to inform her fiction. In the historical moment when Betts was writing, society was also grappling with the place of religion in the progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Religion served as the one of the splinter points between two groups of women over the ERA amendment in 1977. Women who led the drive to prevent passage of the amendment aligned themselves with strong religious ideologies. Spruill reports, "religious conservatives – evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, conservative Catholics, and to a lesser extent Orthodox Jews who insisted on sharp divisions in the roles of men and women and feared government intervention—were the main force behind the battle against the ERA" (90). Implicit in this division of men's and women's duties is the idea that it is god-ordained for women to occupy the home in subservient roles of wife and mother while the dominant men's domain was the workplace. Spruill continues, "Religion was at the core of the anti-ERA movement. Though it was not as clear to observers in the 1970s as it was later to scholars, active participation in churches was the greatest common denominator among ERA opponents and a far greater indicator than class or levels of education" (90). The split between women in the United States over the passage of an amendment that seemed poised to benefit all women raises questions about the likelihood of motherhood, feminism, and faith to peacefully co-exist in the women's movement at large. During the period of this study, Betts's writing reveals a growing sense that a strong religious grounding is the basis for good mothering, and the lack of this connection between faith

and motherhood within the second-wave feminist movement alienates women with strong ties to religion and mothering performance that conform to traditional ideology of a heteronormative marriage; working father; and stay-at-home, devoted mother.

Beasts of the Southern Wild: Reluctant Mothers

Many of the short stories in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* interrogate women who are reluctant mothers and finds these women lacking. In “Still Life with Fruit,” Gwen’s pregnancy makes her a transitional figure as she moves from woman to mother. The story centers on Gwen’s pregnancy and ends with the birth of her child. The ending of the story is a twist on the typical motherhood plot where entry into motherhood is a celebratory moment. Instead, the ending is ambiguous showing the double-edged sword of motherhood as something to be simultaneously celebrated and mourned. Gwen is a reluctant mother who spends her pregnancy concerned that motherhood will end her creative ability as a painter. This story treats Gwen’s maternal ambivalence and patriarchal distancing with some sympathy. Betts writes of Gwen, “Two months ago, however, she’d decided not to try natural childbirth, mainly because the doctor who advocated it was male. She was drifting then away from everything male” (*Beasts* 98). However, Betts seemed self-conscious about this characterization, hastening to criticize her protagonist in a 1980 interview about the story: “I think of Gwen as a rather spoiled and immature young woman, so I was tickled when *Ms. Magazine* and everybody else used it as a women’s-lib story. I’m with Gwen on some things, but it seems to me what the ending says is, ‘Now honey, it’s time you grew up’” (Scandling 103). While Betts writes convincingly of the tensions that women experience in route to becoming mothers, in her interview, she expresses little sympathy for these feelings. As a working mother,

Betts is sympathetic to Gwen's dilemma, but her lived experience is that motherhood alters priorities, so a woman can no longer be concerned with simply her own future, but instead must always consider the needs of her children as she looks to the future. Betts's insights as a fiction writer seem to be at odds with the political position she expresses in this interview. Her fiction writing is sympathetic to Gwen and explores the difficulty for mothers in traditional marriages to engage in motherhood without reservation, but her rhetoric implies that Gwen's reluctance to embrace motherhood is a sign of immaturity.

The ambiguous ending of Gwen's story acknowledges the personal conflicts women face upon becoming mothers and belies Betts's strong statements regarding Gwen's reluctant entry into motherhood. Betts writes, "Gwen touched her throat to make sure no other hand had grabbed it. Something crawled under her skin, like the spider who webbed her eyelids tightening all lines. In both her eyes, the spider spilled her hot, wet eggs—those on the right for bitterness, and those on the left for joy" (Betts *Beasts* 119). The spider metaphor embodies Gwen's concern throughout the story that her baby is consuming her. While uncommon among mammals, matrophagy, the act of offspring eating their mother, is fairly common among Araneae. For instance, the *dieaea ergandros* spiderlings attack the mother's legs, sucking blood from her for nourishment. When she becomes too weak to move, the young inject her with venom and attack her as they would attack prey (Kelly n.p.). The spider imagery suggests that Gwen's fear could be realized and becoming a mother will be the equivalent of erasure through the consumption of the mother by the child. Betts's conclusion appears sympathetic to the double bind Gwen will face as she reluctantly takes up the yoke of motherhood. These moments of compassion are important counterpoints to Betts's didactic non-fiction

writing of mothers and demonstrate Betts's understanding and concern for women facing the complications of mothering and pursuing creative expression simultaneously.

Motherhood and organized religion are intertwined in this story as the action occurs at a Catholic hospital staffed with nuns. Gwen is as reluctant to embrace religion as she is to embrace motherhood. She finds herself questioning her patient position thinking, "Maybe if Gwen were Catholic, the sister's face would seem kinder, even blessed" (Betts *Beasts* 98). While Gwen ponders routes to acceptance in this religious space, her roommate, Ramona Plumpton, vocally opposes Catholic ideology. Ramona explains her presence within this Catholic community; "This is the best hospital in town, though, and I'm a Baptist. The food's good and it's the cleanest. No staph infections. . . . I hear, though, they'll save the baby first, no matter what. That puts it down to a fifty-fifty chance in my book" (Betts *Beasts* 107). Ramona, who nearly died during the birth of her fourth child, "was pleased to announce she had just had her tubes tied. 'And these old Roman biddies hate it. Anybody that screws ought to get caught at it—that's their motto'" (Betts *Beasts* 107). Ramona believes she is empowered through revolting against the prevailing religious doctrine at the hospital that would exert control over her body.

While Ramona verbally rejoices in her blatant disregard for the religious practices that surround her, "the Roman biddy who happened to be helping Gwen into bed did not even turn, although her face blotched an uneven red. Her cheeks ripened their anger" (Betts *Beasts* 107). By setting her story in this Catholic environment, Betts showcases that it is not only childbirth that causes a woman to lose control over her body. She points to the existence of religious doctrine that preempts a woman's control generating sympathy for Ramona's desire to regain control. Yet, Ramona's obvious pleasure in

making the religious of the hospital uncomfortable by flaunting her tubal ligation alienates the women dedicated to carework at the hospital. The nurse tells Gwen, “I wouldn’t talk too much, Mrs. Gower. I’d get my rest” (Betts *Beasts* 107). Instead of a discourse between the nun and Ramona, there is only, anger, shaming, and a lack of mutual respect for their respective feelings about the issue of birth control and a woman’s right to have authority over her reproductive system. The sparring over who controls a woman’s body is complicated with the overlay of religious doctrine that demands a woman relinquish control. Yet, the abrasiveness displayed by Ramona is ineffectual in convincingly supporting this feminist cause and confuses the reader’s sympathies.

Gwen’s reluctance to embrace motherhood is informed by her fear that motherhood has the power to erase the non-mother, artist self that is the cornerstone of her identity. Betts gives insight into the inner conflict Gwen experiences about motherhood by exploring the surprising emotions she encounters as she prepares for childbirth. Gwen is not a starry-eyed mother who accepts the notion that motherhood is the ideal all women should achieve. The semi-omniscient narrator reveals Gwen’s unvoiced thoughts, “The baby has eaten me” (Betts *Beasts* 98). Gwen sees the birth of her child as a moment where her personal identity is at stake. As an artist, she values her creativity, yet she finds, “she had not thought clearly since that first sperm hit the egg and blew fuses all the way upstairs. Even her paintings showed it. Haphazard smears on canvas, with no design at all” (Betts *Beasts* 100). Gwen’s internal struggle to find a path to unite her bifurcated identity so she can be both a mother and an artist seems futile to her as she prepares for childbirth. Gwen believes motherhood will consume her artistic identity.

Gwen is concerned with loss of her physical body as well. She thinks, “she had been shrinking. The baby ate her. Now the baby’s container was huge but Gwen, invisible, had no body to live in” (Betts *Beasts* 102-3). With the loss of body, also comes the loss of name. Upon becoming a mother, a woman’s name is stamped out as the ubiquitous mom, mama, mommy, or mother replaces the name that represents her unique identity. After her son is born, the nurse asks if she has picked out a name; “‘No,’ Gwen lied. *She* needed the new name. *She* was the one who would never be the same” (Betts *Beasts* 118). She attempts to demonstrate her identity loss in her art; “She had also done a few charcoal sketches of herself nude and pregnant, with no face at all under the wild black hair, or with a face rounded to a single, staring eye” (Betts *Beasts* 105). Despite her attempt to symbolically explain her loss, she cannot verbally express her fears. This parallels Betts who uses her fiction to explore negative emotions about motherhood but remains upbeat about her lived experience in letters and interviews.

While Gwen offers a view of a woman reluctant to enter motherhood, Betts explores effects of reluctant motherhood on the child through Lillian, Coker’s mother, from “The Spider Gardens of Madagascar.” Coker has developed strong ideas about productive mothering and has judged Lillian as an incapable mother, thus unworthy of his love or respect. Children expect to be the center of their mother’s worlds, but the scripts they adopt about good mothering are informed by social traditions designed to curb women to compliance. Coker’s attitude toward his mother is full of contradictions. He wants her to fulfill a role of mothering that allows him to feel loved and protected, but he resents her behavior when she attempts to exhibit these emotions. The story depicts Lillian as a woman plagued with depression and discontented with her life. The semi-

omniscient narrator reveals in the closing lines, “Someday soon, Coker was going to have to decide where he would turn her [a black widow spider] and her children loose—in Lillian’s room or his” (Betts *Beasts* 162). Coker finds his life with his mother so untenable that he contemplates either killing her or committing suicide. This story harkens back to the idea of matrophagy introduced at the close of “Still Life with Fruit.” He has judged his mother incapable of providing the nurturing he craves, and, like young spiderlings, he will either consume her or die himself.

Coker and his mother are locked in a power struggle both demanding submission of the other, but neither succeeding. He continually attempts to alienate himself from Lillian. When he returns home from school, his grandmother must remind him to visit his mother who is bedridden from the car accident. Coker uses small acts of aggression to punish his mother for her failures at nurturing. For instance, one afternoon, he reluctantly stops by her room, but, “Outside his mother’s bedroom, he crammed his mouth full [of peanut butter crackers], knocked, and rushed in with his cheeks puffed out like bladders. His mother lay in the very center of the king-sized bed, her eyes glittering, her broken jaw wired shut” (Betts *Beasts* 146). Coker punishes what he considers Lillian’s poor performance as a mother through a series of micro-aggressions such as refusing to engage her in conversation by stuffing his mouth with peanut butter crackers.

As with “Still Life with Fruit,” the ending of “The Spider Gardens of Madagascar” is ambiguous. Betts does not reveal if Coker acts on his desire to murder his mother or commit suicide. The reader must also speculate if Lillian’s reluctant motherhood is a result of her mental instability which we know has been present her entire life. Before his death, Coker’s father admonishes him that her instability and

ineffectiveness as a mother “isn’t her fault either” (Betts *Beasts* 154). However, Coker is unwilling to accept mental instability as an adequate excuse for reluctant mothering. Through Lillian, Betts insinuates that reluctant motherhood is a symptom of depression and mental illness, and that Coker’s father who is written as a kind and understanding man correctly extends compassion toward Lillian despite her weaknesses as a wife and mother.

Souls Raised from the Dead: Abandonment of Motherhood

The reluctant mothers of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* are a study of ambivalence that provide insight into Christine’s ambivalent motherhood in *Souls Raised from Dead*. Christine refuses to conform to the motherhood tenets of middle-class respectability including selfless devotion to her child. To ensure that no misguided sympathy can be placed with Christine for shirking her maternal responsibilities, Betts writes her as so self-involved that a feminist reading of her desire to pursue a separate identity for herself through a career is impossible. Ultimately, Christine’s refusal to donate a kidney to her desperately ill daughter leads to the child’s death. In Betts’s moralizing style, Christine serves as a warning that maternal selfishness and mother abandonment harms children. However, Frank, her ex-husband, ultimately extends kindness to Christine by listening to the pain she experiences when Mary dies. Through Frank, Betts offers an alternative to ostracizing mothers who do not conform to community expectations.

The society in which Christine lives assumes that a mother’s love and desire to protect her child naturally follows once a woman gives birth. Her community assumes that Christine is somehow lacking and wrong not to willingly give of herself anything that Mary needs. Robert Harling’s widely popular film about a group of southern women

who are steely in their ability to withstand life's difficulties, *Steel Magnolias* (1987), provides an example of the script that Christine's community expects of her when her daughter requires an organ donation. In Harling's screen play, Shelby, the married daughter of M'Lynn, needs a kidney transplant, and M'Lynn is ready to selflessly offer her own kidney to her daughter. She says, "I'm happy. Look at the opportunity I have. Most mothers only get the chance to give their child life once. I get a chance to do it twice. I think it's neat. . . . I've got two kidneys and I only need one" (Harling 62). Christine's version of motherhood considers an alternative reaction to a child's need and forces further consideration of where the duty of a woman to a child ends or if it really ever ends. Adams, in her study of maternal ambivalence, claims, "In some cases it is impossible for both mother and child to get what they want and/or need. They interfere with each another, and their feelings are discordant" (36). The situation with Christine and Mary necessarily pits Christine's needs against Mary's needs forcing both a winner and a loser in the dilemma of Mary's illness.

Christine's decision to avoid donating a kidney to her daughter fuels a debate for what, exactly, a woman owes a child after giving birth. Betts, in an interview with Susan Ketchin, relates Christine's refusal to come to her daughter's aid to child abuse. Ketchin and Betts discuss her uncollected short story which appears in Ketchin's *The Christ-Haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction*, "This is the Only Time I'll Tell It." Coley, the narrator, speaks of the abuse Silver suffered at the hands of her father as a baby. Betts writes that Zelene finds Tom Jamison "sticking the baby headfirst down a bucket" ("This" 232). When Jamison leaves prison, he returns to town in search of Zelene. Coley murders him before he can interfere with Silver saying, "Babies should not

be beaten; I do not care Who made this world” (Betts “This” 238). Betts tells Ketchin, “That little story [“This is the Only Time I’ll Tell It”] has a lot to do with the novel [*Souls Raised from the Dead*] because both are about doing something inexcusable to a child” (Ketchin 259). In the interview with Ketchin, Betts conflates Christine’s inaction to intercede with a kidney donation to benefit her daughter with a cruel beating and attempted murder of a baby. The novel offers no redemption for Christine. While Betts tells Ketchin that her immediate reaction to child abuse is to respond in violence like Coley, she believes the “novel is trying to reveal a different and, I think, a better reaction” (Ketchin 259). Frank, Mary’s father, demonstrates this gentler reaction as he becomes the patient listener to his ex-wife’s nightly phone calls. He responds to Christine’s transgressions as a mother with a form of kindness as opposed to Coley’s violence.

The women in Christine’s community are brutal in their judgement of her performance of motherhood. Instead of motherhood offering a means for women to come together in support of one another, it is a battleground where a woman’s worth is determined by her perceived ability to mother. In this community, the manner in which a woman performs as a mother is a marker for determining her value and social status. Tacey, Frank’s mother, has found her former daughter-in-law deficient in her skills as a mother, and therefore, Tacey views Christine as lacking in value to the family and community. The omniscient narrator tells Tacey’s opinion of Christine’s family, “the Broomes fell below them all—below Average, below Common, below Tacky. The Broomes were *trashy*. . . . It was no wonder that for Christine, who had been so unexpectedly neat about her own person and surroundings, the trashiness had to seek

some other outlet” (Betts *Souls* 41). In Tacey’s mind, Christine’s lack of social standing is the contributing factor in her inability to mother to Tacey’s standards. Christine’s mothering is the “other outlet” for her “trashiness” to manifest. Mothering Mary following Tacey’s specifications could be a route to middle-class respectability for her daughter-in-law, but Christine’s refusal to comply with Tacey’s ideals reinforces class warfare between the two. Tacey expects Christine to be a devoted and selfless wife and mother to her grandchild following the same motherhood script that Tacey used in raising Frank. The maternal script expected by Tacey and members of her social class leaves Christine with a singular option - to perform as directed or to be ostracized.

Georgia Broome, Christine’s mother, has been subjected to Tacey Thompson’s brand of class privilege all of her life. She views Christine’s motherhood as a pathway to middle-class respectability for the family making her vested in Christine’s mothering performance. She tells Christine, “[t]hem Thompsons have always thought us Broomes was trash. Don’t you go proving them right, you hear me?” (Betts *Souls* 253). Georgia understands that mothers of the respectable middle class are expected to act selflessly with their children. Hesitating to offer a potentially life-saving organ to a child is certainly not part of the middle-class mothering script. Tired of the Thompson’s ability to belittle the circumstances of the Broomes, Georgia is driven to attempt to convince Christine to donate her kidney in order to allow the Broome family to ascend to middle-class respectability. However, Georgia also endorses the notion of sacrificial motherhood, which is sacred to the middle-class, telling her daughter, “You’re not a natural mother, that’s all there is to it” (Betts *Souls* 253). A “natural mother” would not hesitate to try to

save her child. Since Christine cannot easily perform this selfless act, she is denied social approval from both her working-class parents and the Thompson's middle-class society.

Tacey's snobbery towards the Broomes juxtaposed with her deeply held religious faith is a window into Betts's evolving ideas about the practices of conservative Christian faiths in the South and how this brand of southern religion influences enactments of motherhood. Religious theorist, Paula M. Cooley, in her essay "'Ordinary Mother' as an Oxymoron," appearing in *Mothering Troubles*, does not offer a literary critique of Betts's novel, yet the essay does offer insights into the experiences of mothers during the 1980s. Cooley's work, which was published just after the release of Betts's last novel, *The Sharp Teeth of Love*, describes the influence of the religious right, "a loose coalition of politically conservative groups comprising predominately Protestant Christians," as playing one of the "central roles in the formation of the individual identities of women as mothers and in the social construal of motherhood" (230-1). Tacey places great value and finds great comfort in her faith, but at the same time, her religious views don't prevent her from judging the Broomes in sometimes petty ways. In Betts's interview with Ketchin, she says, "Churchgoers seemed such hypocrites when I was an adolescent; now they seem remarkable, all things considered" (257). Betts notes her "wish to somehow do justice to good people like the ones I know in my church. Many of them are leading courageous lives, lives that are not big, but how big do you have to be to bear what they bear. . . . there's something very potent in goodness" (Ketchin 257). The complexity of Tacey as a mother, a matriarchal figure, and a religious woman demonstrates Betts's attempts in fiction to show the courageous and complicated lives of women committed to their churches and their families. While Frank drives the streets at night unable to sleep

after the death of his daughter, the lights are out in Tacey's home, and she is able to find rest. Tacey's ability to accept her granddaughter's death attests to the power of her religious faith. Frank, who attempts to evade the call to faith through his nighttime prowling, avoids accepting Tacey's faith and remains a restless wanderer as a result.

Despite Tacey's strong religious footing, she cannot accept her daughter-in-law as an equal due to her perception of Christine as a flawed human. The flaw which Christine cannot overcome and that makes her into a societal scapegoat is her lack of a strong moral center, which, for Tacey, comes with a strong faith in Christian religion. George Hovis in *Vale of Humility* offers a literary criticism of the novel that proposes that Christine has replaced religious beliefs with beauty and the sale of beauty products. Christine offers a counterpoint to Tacey who showcases the distinct need for religion to make sense of the world and to guide mothering performance. Hovis writes, "Christine seeks to convert not only her radio audience, but also her daughter, to the belief that self worth depends utterly on the perceptions of others and on one's place within a hierarchy constituted not so much by wealth or birth as by differences of physical beauty" (50). Betts has a tendency to write her physically attractive characters as those who lack moral principles, such as her depiction of Christine or Steven in *The Sharp Teeth of Love*. She tells Greene, "We all have our besetting sins: I have a bias against beautiful people, because they didn't earn it, . . . beauty can be a curse. It does often prevent full development of the interior person. . . . I like people who are somehow flawed. That's original sin made physical" (n.p.). Betts connects her disdain for attractive people with her ideas about religion. Christine operates as a horrible warning throughout the novel of the perversity of pursuing physical attractiveness over human and spiritual relationships.

Without the moral center of pursuing a religious meaning in life, Christine is a failed mother who misplaces her faith in the superficiality of beauty.

Mary has been inculcated by her community to desire a certain set of behaviors from her mother. She craves the affection of her absent mother and is willing to provide openings for Christine to participate in her life despite the presence of her loving father who is completely committed to Mary's every need. During the post-World War II baby boom, Dr. Benjamin Spock published *Baby and Child Care* which established him as the leading childrearing expert. His wildly popular childrearing manuals provided parents trusted advice on raising their children throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Spock offers insight into situations like Mary's desire for her mother saying, "parental lovingness is absolutely essential, and its influence is on the favorable side as long as it is a sensible and balanced love. It is also true that parental neglect, in the sense of indifference to the child's welfare, is always detrimental" (*Raising* 144). That the prevalent attitude toward Christine in the novel is endorsed by a popular childrearing expert of the time lends weight to Mary's desires for motherly actions from Christine.

Mary's great want for a very present, loving mother is ignored by Christine who attempts to transfer her motherhood responsibilities to Frank. Through Christine, Betts explores whether mothercare is transferable. Betts considers if a father is an adequate substitute for a mother, and she finds that despite Frank's devotion to Mary, the young daughter still wants her mother. Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick in her landmark feminist tract on motherhood, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, where she asserts that the actions of performing as a mother shape the thinking of the mother as much as the thinking of the child, asserts that:

Anyone who commits her or himself to responding to children's demands, and makes the work of response a conservable part of her or his life, is a mother. . . . Consequently, it is not difficult to imagine men taking up mothering as easily and successfully as women—or conversely, women as easily declining to mother as men. . . . A birthgiver may transfer to others the maternal responsibility of caring for the infant she has created. (xii)

Yet, in the case of Christine and Mary, it is not a simple transference of power, suggesting a flaw in Ruddick's logic. In choosing Frank as a surrogate mother, Christine leaves her daughter with the individual most vested in her safety and growth. Yet, Christine's abandonment of the traditional nuclear family is unacceptable to her daughter and community and leads to Mary's death.

Mary wants to control Christine by conjuring a very scripted idea of motherhood perfection that she attempts to overlay on her mother. Mary's ideas of Christine involve "dreams [where] she [Christine] lived out a perfect mother's role" (Betts *Souls* 187). Part of Mary's fantasy about her mother is to remember times prior to Christine's abrupt departure from the family. Mary "remembered Saturday morning the three of them got up early and drove to Kitty Hawk for the weekend and her parents were laughing" (Betts *Souls* 187-8). While Mary views these times as idyllic, Christine remembers them as unpleasant: "To Christine, pregnancy and birth had been tortures endured and repressed. But denial had not worked; in time the bridegroom as well as the baby daughter who had seemed so cute and talcum sweet turned into two great sucking blobs of constant need" (Betts *Souls* 253). Christine's mental image of her immediate family is reminiscent of the feelings of being consumed that Gwen experiences in "Still Life with Fruit," particularly

the spider imagery that Betts employs at the close of Gwen's story. In Christine's version of family memories, she is the servant who must constantly meet the demands of difficult-to-please masters. Christine goes beyond what Adams considers maternal ambivalence, the condition faced by mothers who wish to both nurture and reject their children. Adams argues, "ethical ambivalence is morally productive insofar as it helps one to recognize the alterity of others, attend to the particularities of situation, and negotiate one's own needs and desires with those of other people" (Adams 5). Yet, Betts proposes an instance where the moral productivity of ambivalence is in question through the disaster that occurs when a woman rejects the entire motherhood project by making Christine the key for Mary's recovery from her potentially fatal kidney disease.

Mary's ideas of perfect motherhood center on the small and mundane things an involved mother might do for a child. Mary dreams, "that Christine had become her Girl Scout-troop leader and her fourth-grade helper mother, and her Damascus Sunday-school teacher and a P.T.A. refreshment mother as well as the pretty front-seat mother who periodically would lean back to touch the slumberer and whisper, 'Isn't Mary wonderful? Frank? Isn't she?'" (Betts *Souls* 188). Mary's desires have their roots in a long southern tradition of expectations for the selfless performance of motherhood. Mary believes her society's notion of perfect motherhood consisting of a selfless mother performing for her children in a script that consumes all of her time and energy. Betts presents the quandary of whose needs are most important – those of the mother or those of the child.

Jill serves as an important counterpoint to Christine. She represents an alternative to abandoning motherwork by responsibly placing her child from an unexpected pregnancy with an adoptive family. Yet, Jill concurs with her society's opinion about

Christine as an organ donor; “She’ll [Christine] will do it [organ transplant donor] when the time comes, Frank, anybody would” (Betts *Souls* 153). In light of Jill’s decision to place her child from an unplanned pregnancy with an adoptive family, it is interesting that she believes another woman should make sacrifices for her child beyond giving birth. In fact, Jill is so ashamed of her past pregnancy and its outcome that she chooses not to share this part of her past with Frank. Despite her rhetorical response to the situation between Mary and Christine, in practice Jill has placed her personal desires to attend veterinary school over motherhood. Through the character of Jill, Betts shows the boundaries that are permissible for a mother to avoid motherwork within this southern society. For Betts, Jill is a character worthy of empathy because she responsibly gave her child up for adoption. Jill’s pain at the child that is lost to her generates reader sympathy. The narrator reveals, “She had wrapped that memory [of her surrendered child] in exuded crust the way an oyster wraps sand, but she was not getting any pearls for all her effort” (Betts *Souls* 129). Her personal anguish at her decision generates compassion for her character. Whereas, Christine, who left the pre-teen Mary to pursue a career selling makeup, is difficult to support with readerly concern.

In *Souls Raised from the Dead*, Betts writes Christine as an anti-mother. Her behavior is so abhorrent that no one is willing to accept her. Tacey finds her repugnant and a product of her working-class upbringing. Mary finds her lacking in the traits of a perfect mother who leads the Girl Scouts and Sunday school lessons. While Jill believes any mother should sacrifice for her child even while she was unwilling to give up her dream of attending veterinary school in order to raise her own child. Only Frank, who is devastated by the loss of his precious daughter, is willing to offer Christine a sympathetic

ear as the novel closes. Betts appears to champion Frank's response to the impossible situation of a sick and dying child while questioning the motivations of the women in the novel in their attempts to control the enactment of motherhood by their peers. The women of the Chapel Hill community are unwilling to forgive maternal deviance, and, instead of offering Christine sympathy and support, their vitriol toward her pushes her farther away from the community and her daughter making them accomplices in Christine's maternal abandonment.

The Sharp Teeth of Love: Fulfilling Motherhood

In her final published novel, *The Sharp Teeth of Love*, Betts imagines Luna, an unlikely, but successful mother who finds motherhood to be a fulfilling enterprise that allows her to grow as an individual. Unlike Betts's earlier mothers, Luna experiences an awakening through motherhood that contributes to her sense of identity rather than detracting from it. In a revisionist text on motherhood offering a more hopeful vision for mothers than the early second-wave feminists held toward motherhood, historian Lauri Umansky, a contemporary of Betts, writes in *Motherhood Reconceived* that early second-wave feminists focused on motherhood as a "compromise of a woman's independence." Yet, Umansky explains the feminist focus is not always on the negative aspects of motherhood: "feminists have focused on motherhood as a positive force. Motherhood minus 'patriarchy,' theorists have claimed, holds the truly spectacular potential to bond women to each other and to nature, to foster a liberating knowledge of self, to release the very creativity and generativity that the institution of 'motherhood' in our culture denies women" (3). Luna is able to escape the patriarchal views of motherhood as described by Umansky through her independent living in the natural landscape of the West and to reap

the benefits of mothering that are more aligned with Betts's personal beliefs and experiences that motherhood can indeed empower a woman. Betts's melding of the unconventional with the heteronormative and Christian ideas that inform ideas of traditional motherhood in the novel demonstrates her late-career broadening of the definition of motherhood, which in her early fictions is tightly tied to domesticity.

Before her western awakening, the men in Luna's life expect her to perform the duties of southern womanhood through her subjugation to both her father and fiancé. Luna attempts to comply. Instead of a child erasing her identity like the mothers of Betts's earlier works, Luna faces erasure by her father and fiancé. Through Luna, Betts demonstrates that motherhood is not the only point where a woman in the South is expected to submit to outside control. For Luna, experiencing and rejecting the control of these men empower her to take control of her entrance into motherhood. Major Stone is a demanding father who views his daughter as simply as a status symbol reflecting his own authority. From sending his daughter to "fat girls' camp in Vermont" to attempting to force her marriage to Steven, who Luna has decided she no longer wishes to marry, Major Stone works to regulate Luna and remove opportunities for her to exert independence (Betts *Sharp* 249). In this way Stone represents a higher authority similar to the Catholic nun who acts as a nurse to Gwen during the delivery of her child.

Early in the novel, her fiancé, Steven introduces another form of control into Luna's life beyond the patriarchal control of her father. He discounts her career as an artist and capitalizes on his handsome appearance to feed Luna's feelings of inferiority to his physical beauty, intelligence, and determination. Betts writes, "Steven had knocked on her door; with his looks, she would never have tried to attract him on her own" (Betts

Sharp 38). He convinces Luna to begrudgingly leave her southern home and the career she has built as an artist to become his faculty wife at UC Riverside. As the two journey westward on their road trip to California, Luna's beleaguered independence is inspired to reassert itself. She begins to see Steven as a leech to her physically, mentally, and financially echoing the idea of consumption that Gwen experiences in "Still Life with Fruit" and Christine's imagery of her husband and child as "sucking blobs" in *Souls Raised from the Dead*. However, Luna flips this pattern of consumption, and it is through motherhood that she ends the control of her father and Steven and regains her desire to eat and her satisfaction with herself and her life. In a switch from her early writings about mothers, Betts shows that motherhood feeds Luna rather than consumes her.

Like Luna's father, Steven's presence negatively affects her physical health. She realizes as they drive west, "[s]he had lost weight since Steven moved in. Even he complained sometimes that her hipbones made him feel he was lying on coat hangers" (Betts *Sharp* 34). Luna considers asking "Steven why he had gained the pounds she had been gradually shedding" (Betts *Sharp* 34). Unlike Betts's early protagonists, Luna is not consumed by her child but instead by her lover. This sets the stage for a child to reverse the trend of being consumed that Luna experiences. Luna is only able to realize Steven's consumption of her body as she leaves the South. Martha Greene Eads in her critical analysis of the novel, "Sex, Money, and Food as Spiritual Signposts in Doris Betts's *Sharp Teeth of Love*" for *Christianity and Literature*, says of Steven, "Steven's swelling as Luna shrinks signifies his parasitism and her own submission to it" (37). For Luna, the West provides a new prospective on her worldview. Eads observes, "Certainly, Luna has tried since college to find a sense of her self, and only in ditching the fiancé who is as

controlling as her father is she able to launch that search in earnest” (39). Once Luna divests of these two controlling men and situates herself in the western landscape, she is able to gain weight and independence. Luna’s growth prepares her to enter into motherhood as a route toward identity-building that she has yet to realize.

In this grouping of Betts’s fiction, mothers fear that stepping into motherhood is a surrender of independence, but in *The Sharp Teeth of Love*, Luna breaks with Betts’s earlier mothers. She does not experience pregnancy and the anxiety over being consumed by her offspring. Instead, Luna is an accidental and adoptive mother. She and Sam form a bond at a Nevada campsite that turns to love and awakens maternal feelings for the welfare of another human being in Luna. When the park ranger informs Luna her time is up in her campsite, she asks Sam, “So where shall we go?” (Betts *Sharp* 123). Sam is surprised to be included in her moving plans, and Luna tells him “I told you I wouldn’t leave you. . . . we get along OK, don’t we? So let’s don’t leave each other yet” (Betts *Sharp* 123-4). Luna is experiencing a maternal connection to Sam, who desperately needs a source of comfort and refuge in his life. She is gradually melding Sam’s needs with her own. Betts’s final novel reveals a new side of motherhood that affords a woman the opportunity to form an independent identity as a mother in contrast to Betts’s earlier southern mothers who struggle with the loss of identity that can accompany southern motherhood. In this novel, Betts offers an evolved stance from the earlier fiction in this grouping that suggests motherhood can be a route to forming independence and self-identity.

Luna’s motherhood has an unconventional origin. Sam’s obvious hunger and need for shelter awaken in Luna the need to provide sustenance to the young boy as well as

protection and ultimately love. Sam first appears at Luna's campsite hunting for food. The first time she sees him, he is described as "[s]hort. Thin. Putting jam with a tablespoon on bread. Human. If haircut and pants meant anything, a boy-person" (Betts *Sharp* 93). Luna begins to buy food for the young boy, and through food, Sam slowly begins to trust her. Their relationship begins through consumption, but in Luna's case, she has authority over the consumption, a sharp contrast to Gwen and Christine. Luna begins to fulfill a need for Sam beyond food and becomes involved with him as a nurturing mother. Luna is at peace with her slip into motherhood as opposed to Gwen and Christine who buckle against the restraints it places on their lives.

In *Souls Raised from the Dead*, Betts questions the efficacy of surrogate motherhood by insinuating Frank's care for Mary is not enough for the young girl. She revisits her stance in *The Sharp Teeth of Love* and shows that surrogate motherhood can be effectual as in the case of Sam and Luna. Upon meeting Paul, Luna presents herself as a mother. She says, "I left my, my son at a campsite by the lake and thought this was it" (Betts *Sharp* 131-2). Luna hesitates before making the assertion about her relationship with Sam, but in reality, she is putting voice to what has already occurred between her and the boy. She has assumed the role of mother, and he has entrusted her to prioritize his wellbeing along with her own. As Paul's camp slowly merges with her and Sam's camp, she realizes, "the mere sight of them [Sam and Paul]—of the three of us, really; damaged goods—cheered me up completely" (Betts *Sharp* 137). These three characters, described as "damaged goods," offer a revision from the mothering ideal that Betts espouses elsewhere which is focused on selfless perfection. In the Nevada wilderness, the three are able to form a very unlikely surrogate family on the principles of mutual love, the sharing

of food, and genuine concern for the welfare of each other. This untraditional family that feeds important needs for each of its members would be much more difficult to form under the constraints of Luna's Chapel Hill which lacks the wildness and privacy of the Western terrain to house unorthodoxy in forming family structure. The West serves as a symbol of a new maternal frontier that offers Luna relief from the surveillance of her southern community.

Luna, unlike Betts's other mothers, is excited to consider Sam's needs alongside her own as she plans for their future. Her role as mother to Sam drives her decision-making process. As she and Paul contemplate the outlook for their relationship, she tells Paul, "I don't want to start over. I want to start new" (Betts *Sharp* 280). The unconventional formation of this family offers a new beginning for each of them which is a departure from Betts's earlier works that endorsed traditional family formations and decried women who could not thrive in those circumstances. She asks Paul, "You think I couldn't manage to raise Sam all by myself?" (Betts *Sharp* 280). Paul, who is also emotionally invested in Sam and Luna replies, "Is that best for Sam? To say nothing of you and me?" (Betts *Sharp* 280). Luna responds to Paul's questioning by acquiescing to his desire to form a family of woman, man, and child. Even with her newfound freedom, Luna returns to a heteronormative family structure which Betts seems to endorse as the standard to nurture successful mothering and childrearing. However, the origins of Luna's motherhood demonstrate that unconventional surrogate motherhood can enrich the lives of mother and child. This revised motherhood origin story indicates Betts's evolution to accepting versions of motherhood whose beginnings do not meet the

expected traditional script for southern mothers, yet these new versions of motherhood create bonds that improve the quality of life for both mother and child.

Motherhood overtakes Luna as a pleasant surprise. When Sam and Luna move together to Desolate Wilderness, Luna becomes concerned that Sam is nervous about the other campers and hikers in the area. When she questions him, he retorts, “[d]on’t be a mama” (Betts *Sharp* 127). In this first moment where motherhood is applied to their relationship by Sam, Luna tells her thoughts, “[i]t was as if my chest blushed from the ribs out with the surprising warmth that brought” (Betts *Sharp* 127-8). In this exchange, Luna recognizes that she has become a mother figure to the young boy. Her realization of the connection between the two results in a bodily reaction in Luna. Her reaction comes from the heart and the breasts – an emotional and physical center for motherhood in a woman. In her pull away from tradition by running from her “perfect” fiancé and father, Luna also appears to escape the complications of motherhood experienced by other women in Betts’s oeuvre. In a complete turn from Betts’s other mothers appearing in this study, Luna finds motherhood makes her swell with pride and provides her with a sense of purpose to redirect her life toward independence instead of reliance on her fiancé and father. Luna acts independently and unconventionally as she slips into the role of motherhood. She is worried by Sam’s slight frame and obvious hunger, so she creates ways to attract him to her camp so she can feed him. She also begins purchasing small gifts of clothes and magazines for the child. They both enjoy the solitude of the mountain and the peacefulness of nature to nurture their budding relationship as mother and child. All the while, the anorexic Luna eats with Sam and regains a healthy body shape indicating the positive benefits of their mother/son relationship for her.

Luna is experiencing what feminist poet, Adrienne Rich calls outlaw motherhood. Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, describes the excitement of living in the country for a summer away from an adult male and the judgments of neighbors. She writes, “I felt wide awake, elated; we [her children and her] had broken together all the rules of bedtime, the night rules, rules I myself thought I had to observe in the city or become a ‘bad mother.’ We were conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood; I felt enormously in charge of my life” (Rich 195). Luna embodies Rich’s concept of mother outlaw as she begins to mother the young runaway, Sam, in a space beyond the prying eyes of family and neighbors.

The boldness of the mother outlaw is championed by feminist mothering theorists. Andrea O’Reilly in *Mother Outlaws* expands on Rich’s idea of a mother outside of tradition, “women who mother in the institution of motherhood are regarded as ‘good’ mothers, while women who mother outside or against the institution of motherhood are viewed as ‘bad’ mothers. . . . Rich argues that [for] mothers . . . [to] achieve empowered mothering [they] must be ‘bad’ mothers, or more precisely, ‘mother outlaws’” (2). It is in the West, away from the confining social traditions of the South, that Betts imagines a character that can simultaneously mother and enact the freeing concepts of feminist ideology. Luna becomes a mother to Sam without the aid of a man, and, like Rich, in her wilderness campsite, Luna is not ruled by society’s ideas of what good mothering entails. Instead, she and Sam allow their relationship to develop free of preconceived, societal notions of what a mother/child relationship should be. Betts’s final published novel demonstrates the evolution of her thinking about the place for feminism alongside mothering, and she offers Luna as an example of the possibilities outlaw mothering can

hold for a young woman, who has been treated up to that point as an accessory by the men in her life.

Luna finds that motherhood is an outlet for her to express her independence and to gain the courage to thwart the further attempts of her father as well as her former fiancé to once again gain control over her life. In the aftermath of Sam's kidnapping and rescue, Major Stone arrives at the hospital where Luna has been admitted. He assesses Luna's situation and determines that her unconventional new relationships to Paul and Sam do not meet his criteria for a respectable path for his daughter. Luna tells Paul, "he [Major Stone] called you a leech. You and Sam both" (Betts *Sharp* 279). Stone attempts to control Luna by calling Steven to Nevada to reclaim Luna as his fiancé. When Luna learns that the three men, Paul, Steven and Major Stone, met to discuss her over breakfast, she exerts her newfound independence and power. She banishes all three men from her room, sending Steven back to Riverside and Major Stone surrendering his control over her and returning to his new wife. Only Paul is willing to wait out Luna's anger and repair his relationship with her. He shouts at her, "I'm not going away!" (Betts *Sharp* 277). His willingness to endure her wrath and to discuss their future softens Luna's anger. Through the Midwesterner, Paul, Betts shows an alternative to the controlling men from Luna's life in the South.

In *The Sharp Teeth of Love*, Betts privileges a reimagining of the traditional form of motherhood and asserts that it can be empowering for Luna. It is Paul's mother, Erika Cowan, with her strong faith and midwestern farm values who realizes Sam must be saved from the government bureaucracy surrounding his position as an abused child. She decides to whisk him away from Nevada in a flight back to her Wisconsin farm hoping

that Paul and Luna will follow. Compared to Betts's other, flawed mothers from this grouping of her works, Erika Cohen is an example of a strong mother who fiercely loves her child, Paul, and is willing to risk even breaking the law in an attempt to help her grown son gain custody of the child he loves. Luna leaves with Paul to follow Mrs. Cowan back to Wisconsin to settle into a traditional (yet unconventional in its origins) life with Sam and Paul. Luna tells her mother, "I think I can keep on loving Paul. . . . I think now that love isn't something that happens to you. It's something you decide to do" (Betts *Sharp* 327). Luna and Paul discuss marriage plans that conform to southern tradition of a church wedding. Luna says, "I guess we'll get married in your home church? Could we do a Catholic ceremony, too?" (Betts *Sharp* 335). She also considers having additional children with Paul and pictures life as they raise Sam as well as children from their union. Luna and Paul's relationship has an unconventional start and an unconventional component – they both fell in love with the young runaway, Sam, who needed caring adults in his life. Luna, who recognizes the risks in this rewrite of the family but assumes them willingly, tells Paul as they head to Wisconsin, "Honey. . . we *are* gambling" (Betts *Souls* 334). Luna realizes that once they leave the western wilderness, they will enter a more conventional life that differs from the freedom they experienced at the genesis of their relationship, but with their firm foundation, Betts places the odds in their favor.

In her growing role as mother, Luna wrests control away from the other forces in her life, notably her father and Steven, yet is willing to settle into the trappings of a conventional, two-parent, heteronormative family under more equalitarian terms with Paul. This evolved outlook on motherhood by Betts is cautiously optimistic for mothers

and an allowance by Betts that women can and should attempt to define their own terms for mothering. When Paul tells her if she doesn't like Wisconsin, he will move with her anywhere, she retorts, "I plan to like it. And surely Sam will" (Betts *Sharp* 332). Luna is empowered through making choices instead of having choices made for her pointing to a foundation for a strong relationship between her and Paul and plenty of opportunity to shape a form of outlaw mothering that will meet the needs of her and Sam.

The novel ends with Paul and Luna driving toward Wisconsin together. Paul wants to ensure that they share the same sense of humor and shows Luna a cartoon that he finds funny. The novel closes with "Luna laughed" (Betts *Souls* 326). This closing moment, demonstrating the happiness of sharing between a man and woman, infers Betts's intent that mothering and a heteronormative relationship can be positive experiences for women. Luna must still navigate the strong personalities of her future mother-in-law and husband in order to perform mothering as an empowering endeavor. In many ways she is still the outlaw mother that came into being in the Nevada desert. Luna interrupts the narrative written for her by her father and fiancé through establishing herself independently of the men, yet, ultimately, motherhood draws her back to a more conventional life.

These three works spanning the 1970s to the 1990s demonstrate a progression in Betts's consideration of motherhood. Her work in this time period is deeply influenced by her own enriching experiences as a mother and her reawakening to a contemplative, religious life. Through her writing, Betts considers her personal struggle to integrate feminist ideology into her traditional perceptions of motherhood. At the heart of Betts's work is her belief that mothering is not an ancillary activity but must be the primary focus

of a woman's life. She demonstrates little patience for Gwen and Lillian in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* who are more concerned with their own needs than they are involved with the health and welfare of their offspring. Christine operates as a warning of the dire consequences that occur when a woman pursues an independent life. However, Betts ultimately relents on her stance that only a birth mother can provide a child the nurturing he needs to grow. In *Souls Raised from the Dead*, Betts will not allow Frank to be a surrogate mother to Mary, despite his deep love for his child. Only Christine can provide that service to their child, and her withholding of herself ends in tragedy. In *The Sharp Teeth of Love*, Luna can be an effective surrogate mother to Sam. Under her loving attentions, Sam begins to blossom. However, Betts only allows this unorthodox relationship to develop outside the southern communities that so carefully monitored and judged Christine. In her final published novel, Betts allows an expanded definition of the traditional family ideal that is centered on love and mutual respect.

CHAPTER 2

GAIL GODWIN AND THE GILDED CAGE OF MIDDLE-CLASS, WHITE MOTHERS

While Doris Betts focuses her writing on both the southern working and middle classes, Gail Godwin is firmly focused on white, middle-class professionals of the South in novels such as *A Mother and Two Daughters* (1982), *A Southern Family* (1987), and *Father Melancholy's Daughter* (1991). The mothers of her novels confront Friedan's "problem that has no name" and react to the sometimes-stifling constraints of motherhood in very personal and individual ways. Anne Cheney's chapter in *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation* considers the clash between feminism and tradition in Godwin's works. She writes, "Godwin has often been called a feminist writer, a label she dislikes. . . . In truth, the changes in Godwin's portrayals of women have been an accurate barometer of feminist concerns in this country from the late 1950s to the present [1990]" (Cheney 213). Cheney is correct that Godwin, in the novels considered here, depicts the concerns that white, middle-class women face as they attempt to reconcile traditional notions of motherhood performance with second-wave feminism and "women's liberation," which often called for women to break out of the home to experience true self-building.¹ Marilynn J. Smith in her examination of the role of the

¹ For instance, in *A Mother and Two Daughters*, Cate's difficulty reconciling ending her pregnancy with the traditional nuclear family ideals of her partner, Jernigan who wants to marry her and raise the child together in a traditional nuclear home or the unease Ruth, in *Father Melancholy's Daughter*, feels – as reported by Madelyn – in abandoning her duties as a mother and pursuing life as an individual unencumbered by the responsibilities of motherhood.

South in Godwin's novels notes, "In most of Godwin's stories and novels, the heroines are to some extent at odds with the desire for fulfilling their lives and yet maintaining the security of old traditions which are forever changing but nevertheless provide ready answers. The old traditions for these women . . . is one of illusions: fashion, refinement, correctness, and perfection" (107-8). Godwin and Betts offer different responses to motherhood in this same historical moment expressed through their fiction. Godwin, while not a mother herself, writes convincingly of the shortcomings of becoming a mother for white, middle-class women. The privileged women who populate Godwin's novels are often hindered by the fluidity of old traditions surrounding motherhood, which requires these women to gage constantly and adjust to popular opinion within their social circles. Godwin's mothers fail to find the contentment that Betts expresses about her personal mothering experiences in her letters to Louise Abbot.

For a middle-class, white woman in this grouping of Godwin's novels, motherhood is a gilded cage. These women enter into a contract with the white men they marry exchanging their independence for financial security and social standing in the community. Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* says of this middle-class situation, "I had no idea what *I* wanted, what I could or could not choose. I only knew that to have a child was to assume adult womanhood to the full, to prove myself, to be 'like other women'" (25). Like Rich, Godwin's women enter into this transaction of free carework for the family in exchange for financial security and social standing without clear ideas of what they want. The community surrounding these women expect them to set aside their own needs and desires to be always available to respond to the demands of their children. Rich argues:

The mother-child relationship is the essential human relationship. In the creation of the patriarchal family, violence is done to the fundamental human unity. It is not simply that woman in her full meaning and capacity is domesticated and confined within strictly defined limits. Even safely caged in a single aspect of her being - the maternal - she remains an object of mistrust, suspicion, misogyny in both overt and insidious terms. (127).

Godwin considers the damage to both mother and child in the patriarchal, privileged, white families that her mother-child dyads inhabit.

Godwin's concept that the project of motherhood in the South prevents women from acting as independent agents in total control of their own destinies echoes the work of Betts. In *Souls Raised from the Dead*, Christine experiences the feelings of entrapment which offers her the luxury and security of a middle-class lifestyle, but in payment, she must perform motherhood in a predetermined manner which Tacey, her mother-in-law, feels inclined to judge. Similarly, Gwen from Betts's "Still Life with Fruit" is under scrutiny by the authorial voice of Betts because of her reluctant attitude toward the birth of her first child. Betts made clear in interviews concerning the story that she found Gwen to be immature and believed she needed to show a higher level of maturity and responsibility toward her newborn child. Betts and Godwin are in conversation with one another over the conflicted feelings about motherhood that women experience.

While on the surface it seems that these woman have all the advantages to engage in carefree and rewarding versions of motherhood, Godwin unveils the cage of motherhood which ensnares these women into compliance through the bonds they have with their children and the lure of a secure position in middle-class society. The

fetishization of the nuclear family as the only legitimate structure to nurture a child from infancy to adulthood arose during the Cold War era. In *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Taylor May makes the case that the nuclear family became a Cold War status symbol. She says:

The legendary family of the 1950s, complete with appliances, station wagons, backyard barbecues, and tricycles scattered on the sidewalks, represented something new. It was not, as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of “traditional” family life with roots deep in the past. Rather, it was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members’ personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life. (May 11)

Godwin’s fiction demonstrates that women are not considered one of the family members that May indicates will be fulfilled in this consumer-driven home. May continues that the men and women heading nuclear families “believed that affluence, consumer goods, satisfying sex, and children would strengthen their families, enabling them to steer clear of potential disruptions. In pursuing their quest for the ‘good life,’ they adhered to traditional gender roles and prized marital stability” (12). Godwin’s mothers provide a less rosy picture of the outcomes of this vision of the American Dream on the women of the white middle-class whose sole occupation became enacting perfected motherhood. Since proper performance of white, middle-class motherhood was the standard for considering the success or failure of all women’s mothering performances during the historical period considered here, Godwin’s depictions of middle-class mothers imply that the traditionally defined enterprise of motherhood is so flawed, that even the standard bearers of the system have difficulties in enacting mothering that benefits both mother

and child. Godwin's texts explore the social obstacles that hinder successful motherhood performance.

Intensive mothering is expected of Godwin's women by their husbands, children, and communities, and they are judged by their ability to perform selfless motherhood. Sharon Hays, in her seminal motherhood studies research, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), coins the term "intensive mothering." She reveals that intensive mothers support the idea that, "[c]onstant nurture, if that is what the child needs, is therefore the child's right—even if it means the mother must temporarily put her own life on hold" (111). Godwin's novels track the individual responses of middle-class mothers to intensive mothering demands, even when those demands are detrimental to the woman. She is interested in how mothers are affected by the expectations of the southern culture which are a central part of their socialization as southern women. In "The Southern Belle" Godwin writes, "I know of no other place in this country other than the South where a girl growing up has an image of womanhood already cut out for her, stitched securely by the practiced hands of traditions, available for her to slip into, ready-made, and henceforward 'pass' as a 'lovely person'" (49). Godwin's novels interrogate members of elite, white southern culture as the purveyors of women's collusion in the continued tradition that Godwin describes in "The Southern Belle." Smith notes that while Godwin presents a more feminist outlook over time in her novels, her characters "are clearly concerned with the effects of a genteel Southern upbringing. Such effects are not totally rejected since the heroines nostalgically look to the place and people of their origins" (104). Godwin's middle-class women face an uncomfortable pull between two diametrically opposed forces. On the one hand, the women see benefit in the security of a

“good” marriage and upholding southern traditions, on the other hand, they mourn their loss of independence and control over the trajectory of their lives. Tara Powell in *The Intellectual in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature* points to the struggles faced by Godwin’s mothers; “a significant aspect of many of Godwin’s characters’ struggles is the interplay between the modern expectations of educated women and ideal of southern womanhood inculcated by the upbringing almost all of them share” (185). Godwin’s mothers have limited success in reconciling tradition with their personal needs for self-expression. In having her mothers fail, Godwin points to a system that appears rigged to prevent a woman from experiencing motherhood as a successful enterprise. In the worlds Godwin imagines, women are prevented from experiencing empowerment through motherhood thus reinforcing their status as secondary members of society. It is the younger generation, the daughters of the old guard, that challenge this system that predetermines maternal failure to find paths to dual successes as both mothers and empowered, contributing members of their communities.

The Manners of Middle-Class, White Motherhood

There often exists an unevenness in the societal expectations for women in the South depending on their social status and the whims of a society willing to bend the rules for certain members. Nell, the matriarch of *A Mother and Two Daughters*, struggles to define herself through the lens of what appears to her to be an everchanging set of guidelines. Her struggles are related to her position as an outsider to the privileged society that only allowed her admittance due to her husband’s social standing. Susan S. Kissel in *Moving On* says, “Female socialization, particularly in the American South, has undermined women’s adult lives by requiring their subjugation to family” (126). Nell has

reluctantly participated in this subjugation in return for financial security and social standing. Years of experience have allowed her insight to the manners dictating behavior, yet her outsider stance, even after a long marriage to her attorney husband, often leave her at odds with the society she entered as a young bride. The first chapter of the novel, which reinterprets the novel of manners to a contemporary setting, is entitled “The Old Guard.” Nell is surrounded by women who uphold these southern traditions without question, yet Nell remains a sometimes-reluctant member of this community. Jane Hill notes:

Nell is in many ways an outsider in the old guard of Mountain City. Her entree to that very closed society is her marriage to Leonard. Before that, she was not only an orphan, lacking the bloodline to belong, but also a working woman. . . . Given automatic access through her marriage, she has the outside observer’s power even as she participates in the group and the ironic stance that often comes as a by-product of such power. (68)

Nell’s insider/outsider status lessens her desire to enact and enforce the rigid rules of southern society both in her own life and the lives of her daughters. Anne Cheney in “Gail Godwin and Her Novels” appearing in *Southern Women Writers* explains, “The South, especially North Carolina, becomes a repository of solid values, love, perhaps stagnation” (233). Nell is the hesitant standard bearer in her family of the values prized by her southern society, yet she is also frustrated by her feelings of stagnation and her inability to wholeheartedly submit to the expectations of her husband, daughters, and community.

Nell, who became a mother just before the start of World War II, constantly negotiates the demands of traditional Cold War mothering with her feelings of being an outsider to the affluent southern society she inhabits with her husband. Theodora, a childhood friend of Nell's husband, is Nell's nemesis. It is Theodora who opines on Nell's performance of middle-class traditions, as well as Nell's success as a mother by her constant evaluation of Nell's daughters' value to their community. Nell's responses to Theodora are important in understanding the sphere of influence Theodora has over Nell's mothering performance. When Theodora imposes on Nell and Leonard to take home Azalea, her black servant, after a holiday party, Nell attempts to reconcile her anger to society's expectations that she will oblige the reigning societal queen, Theodora. Godwin writes, "It was hardly on their way [Azalea's home], being in the opposite direction. 'I suppose we could,' said Nell, and it was in this sort of response that she revealed she was not truly one of them. One of them would have replied, eyes flashing social daggers, 'Why, it would be a pleasure!'" (*Mother* 17). Nell has difficulty engaging in the social chess match expected by Theodora and her peers, yet Nell considers Theodora to exemplify good taste in the affluent southern society they both occupy. Throughout the novel, Nell recognizes the insincerity of the southern façade, but she is so entrapped by the security offered in exchange for her compliance, that she refuses to exert her will to live life on her own terms beyond the demands placed on her by the affluent southern society she occupies. Leonard's death and her financial security following it could allow her to set a new trajectory for her life, but instead, she marries yet another member of the old guard and continues with the charade.

Cate, Nell's daughter also operates under the watchful eye of her godmother, Theodora. Like Betts's Tacey, Theodora is prone to making harsh judgments regarding the other women in her community. Nell wonders of Theodora's influence: "What gives people power? Maybe simply their willingness to take it" (Godwin *Mother 7*). Cate, Nell's oldest daughter, has fallen prey to Theodora's sphere of influence. Theodora refuses to continue as Cate's godmother after the two disagree over the way Cate chooses to live her adult life. Cate tells Nell, "Well, after she told me how I was confusing the mess of the world with the far greater mess of my own life, and how I would end up either in jail or the insane asylum, I merely pointed out that over sixty years of having to be right had atrophied the part of her mind that could respond to the truth" (Godwin *Mother 7*). Theodora voices her objections about Cate's life to Nell:

"I'm all for tough, independent womanhood, you know me, but there's a limit to the traces anybody can kick over. I don't care how privileged or intelligent she is. . . . Nobody can live on the edge of possibility forever, especially not women. Lord knows it's not fair, but a middle-aged woman with no *base* attracts more pity and censure than her male counterpart." Cate's unspoken name hovered between them. (Godwin *Mother 17*)

While Nell is uneasy with Theodora's expectations for Cate, she is also frustrated with her daughter for not fulfilling her role in society the way that Nell has been forced to do in order to keep the peace with her husband and his social network. Godwin writes, "Nell could not quite forgive Cate for not making more of an effort to blend gracefully into the landscape and keep her unruly instincts to herself" (*Mother 8*). Despite Nell's ambivalence to Mountain City society, she still wishes her oldest daughter to maintain the

façade of good taste by at least pretending to uphold the values espoused by the upper middle-class in their small town, while at the same time Nell is drawn to Cate's freedom to live life outside the scrutiny of Theodora and her ilk. Kathryn Lee Seidel in her study of motherhood in Godwin's novels notes that Godwin, "identif[ies] mothers as the main purveyors of information about southern culture and as advocates who teach their daughters to conform to that culture" (287). Cate's refusal to conform is a failure of Nell's ability to indoctrinate her daughter to the expectations of southern society.

Like Nell, Lily Quick operates as the matriarch in *A Southern Family*. She also exemplifies the tensions a woman faces in her attempt to perform the conflicting roles expected of her by family and community. In Lily's private musings, she considers her daughter's, Clare's, desires for her to "wrest back control of her life from Ralph [her second husband]." Lily thinks, "Clare, after all, was the only one of her children with actual memories of the old Lily who came home from an office smelling of newspaper ink and who wrote all the checks" (Godwin *Southern* 199). Lily's career as a newspaper reporter ended when she married Ralph Quick. When Lily considers Clare, she understands Clare's belief that working and economic control represent freedom for a woman and that marriage and childrearing hamper a woman's ability to have control over her life. In her 1992 work, "Nurture and Work in the Middle Class: Imagery from Women's Magazines," Kathryn Keller writes about women like Lily, "[c]aught between economic desires and an inability to reject fully a traditional image of the family, women often vacillate between the old [stay-at-home mother] and the new [working mother] lifestyle" (578). Lily reflects, "I was never as independent as she [Clare] would have me be. . . . She wouldn't have been, either, if she had been brought up in my time. Neither of

us, now that I think about it, has been exactly revolutionary” (Godwin *Southern* 199).

Lily points to the pressures of society on women during her time as a young, single mother in the 1950s as an excuse for her lack of action toward an emancipated selfhood. As with Nell, her self-awareness of her situation and her lack of motivation to change the trajectory of her unhappy existence despite having the power to do so, makes Lily such a flawed character that it is difficult to muster much sympathy for her privileged, yet controlled life. Keller says, “In the 1950s, although women may have worked for many reasons, the majority of accounts offered in the [women’s] magazines were excuses rather than justifications. One excuse was that married mothers worked because the family did not have an adequate male ‘good-provider’” (579). Lily was allowed to pursue her career for just this reason.

Once Lily finds a “good-provider” in the form of Ralph Quick, she quits her job and conforms to the role of a traditional, stay-at-home mother. Keller finds, “the value of mother’s sacrifice for the children remained a potent one and clashed with [the] sixties justification that work was a woman’s right” (580). While Lily pines about her unrealized writing talent, she falls in line with expectations that raising her children must pre-empt any other desire she holds. Betts’s Gwen from “Still Life with Fruit” faces this same quandary with the birth of her son. She believes the child will erase her talents and skills as an artist. While Gwen is just beginning her experience as a mother, Lily is experienced in the brand of middle-class motherhood that Gwen will encounter and offers validation of Gwen’s fears. Once she remarries and has more children, Lily puts her full focus on raising her family. There is not a creative space for her to continue as a writer. Lily, in a moment of self-reflection, thinks, “She had watched herself metamorphose from a

woman used to earning a living and making decisions for herself and others into a female 'dependent' in thrall to an increasing number of small, debasing tyrannies that had succeeded at last in sapping all her ambition to overcome them" (Godwin *Southern* 167-8). Godwin's choice of descriptors emphasizes Lily's new passivity after her marriage. She is no longer the assured working woman of her newspaper days. Instead, she has metamorphosized into something distasteful. She is dependent in contrast to the independence she left behind for the perceived security of marriage. As a married woman and mother, she must undergo "debasing tyrannies" that deprive her of her ambition. In short, Lily is a changed woman, but the change represents regression instead of progression toward self-empowerment. Lily knows that she can earn a living and support her family using her skills as a writer, yet, she is so entrenched in the idea of marriage and maintaining the façade of a traditional household that she will not act upon her desire to alter the trajectory of her life despite the education and privilege that would allow her to make this change.

Despite Lily's outer show of perfection, the damage inflicted on her by her troubled role in southern society is always simmering just below the surface of her interactions. Her bitterness and maltreatment of those around her, especially her daughter-in-law, Snow, once again challenges readerly sympathy for this mother who allows herself to be trapped in the gilded cage of financial security and social importance within her community through marriage and motherhood. Lily's animosity toward her son's wife, whom she believes was a poor choice for Theo due to Snow's lack of social currency echoes Betts's treatment of Tacey and her harsh judgement of her daughter-in-law Christine. For Lily, her hostility toward her daughter-in-law constantly boils beneath

the surface of her interactions with Snow. She tells the attorney hired to manage the battle between the Quicks and Snow for custody of her grandson, Jason, her feelings about the term “mother”: “It has become a loathsome word to me. . . ever since I have heard it applied to Snow Mullins.” The attorney quickly retorts, “If you’ll permit me to offer a little advice, Mrs. Quick, that sort of attitude won’t do much to predispose the judge in your favor” (Godwin *Southern* 190). He tells the Quicks that “mother” is a sacred concept in the U.S. court system. While Lily is intent on upholding the definition of mother as a white woman of acceptable social class, the courts are little concerned with Snow’s pedigree and more concerned with her status as the biological mother of Jason. Lily’s attitude towards Snow reveals her prejudices and bigotry.

Snow is the foil to upholding the sanctity of middle-class motherhood. She repeatedly notes the Quick’s desire to erase her existence so that her lack of pedigree does not soil their façade of middle-class respectability. Snow, in considering the custody trial relates, “It was like they was trying to *erase me* so the Queen Mother [Lily Quick] and Ralph Quick could just shake everybody’s hands and go out of that courtroom and raise my child” (Godwin *Southern* 227). Related to the idea of erasure, is Snow’s feeling that the family, “just mostly wanted me to *reflect* them” (Godwin *Southern* 236). Lily Quick, particularly, wants Snow to “dress like them and talk like them and go to their snob churches and sit around with them in that stuffy house and act like it was the most wonderful things in the world to be Theo’s wife” (Godwin *Southern* 236). Snow understands that Lily finds her distasteful due to her lack of education and inability to adopt the markers of privileged social class. Lily is bent on creating her own version of an acceptable wife for Theo by erasing and overwriting the aspects of Snow that she finds

incongruous with her idea of social acceptability. Lily insists on enacting the social customs which she has personally found limiting to her own growth as an individual to gain control over Snow. For the Quicks, privileged white women are the only capable purveyors of proper motherhood. Lily refuses to extend freedom from social order that she craved as a young mother to her daughter-in-law.

Through Snow, Godwin interrogates the privileged, white, southern markers of motherhood and finds them to be both superficial and deleterious. Snow tells the legal-aid appointed to her by the court about her experiences with the Quicks: “they [the Quicks] wanted me to have *their* interests. I mean whenever she [Lily] isn’t embroidering or visiting those old people or going to church, she’s got her nose in some book.” Snow defends herself from Lily’s expectations saying, “I had things to do. . . . Like our laundry and our shopping and keeping house. I had a *baby*. That’s an interest, isn’t it?” (Godwin *Southern* 237). Snow exhibits an understanding of motherhood and a critique of privileged white motherhood that members of the Quicks’ society are incapable of accomplishing. Snow complicates Lily’s definition of good motherhood by displaying a deep understanding of her child and his needs that are unexplored by those orbiting in the Quicks’ social circle. Jason would not be served by Snow visiting a nursing home or spending hours doing volunteer work at church. At the same time, Snow exhibits what Lily’s society deems as inappropriate behavior for good mothers. When Snow abandons Jason and Theo in order to break free from the attempted erasure of her identity by the Quicks, she explains that she knows Theo loves Jason and will take good care of him. Snow tells Theo, “I’ve lost all my self-respect and I won’t be good to nobody till I get it back” (Godwin *Southern* 247). Theo asks her, “What about Jason? Can you just go off

and leave him like that?” (Godwin *Southern* 247). Theo attempts to employ mothering responsibility to control Snow’s actions, but Snow tells him, “He’s always with you, anyway” (Godwin *Southern* 247). Snow is willing to act upon her need to establish an identity independent of her child in contrast to Lily who allowed society to control her behavior and prevent her pursuit of independent identity building. Snow’s belief that Theo is an adequate substitute for her as a mother does not extend to Theo’s parents after his death. Yet, the Quicks and their social circle view Snow’s abandonment as a marker of an ineffectual and incapable mother. Snow says of her motherhood position as defined by the Quicks, “I was just ‘the vessel,’ as Theo enjoyed telling me towards the end” (Godwin *Southern* 250). The reader’s tolerance for the Quicks’ prescription of motherhood is strained as Snow’s innermost thoughts reveal the flaws hidden behind the Quicks’ armor of social standing.

Almost a decade after the publication of *A Mother and Two Daughters* and four years following *A Southern Family*, Godwin published *Father Melancholy’s Daughter* (1991) told in first person narration by the protagonist, Margaret Gower. When Margaret was six years old, Ruth, Margaret’s mother, leaves with a friend from her past, Madelyn, and never returns. Like Betts in *Souls Raised from the Dead* (1994), Godwin explores the impact of an absent mother on her daughter. Betts’s protagonist, Christine, is completely ostracized from her community for her motherhood abandonment. Ruth’s departure is more subtle, and the community is less vocal in their disdain for her departure. However, like Mary, Margaret pines for her mother’s love and attention. She cannot make sense of why her own mother would place personal needs over Margaret’s needs for motherlove and attention. While writing the novel, Godwin says, “what I am doing, it seems, in

getting these two women together [Ruth and Madelyn], even though it destroys the father and splits the child down the middle, is getting something important back together: two warring sides of the same woman” (“My Mother” n. p.). This novel offers a sharp contrast to the very present, yet flawed mothers found in Godwin’s earlier, Reagan-Era novels considered in this study.

Unlike the menacing and unhappy presence of Nell and Lily in Godwin’s earlier novels, Ruth is absent from this work and only revealed through her daughter’s narration and memories that Margaret shares with her father. Margaret is consumed with the question of why a woman would leave her family, but as a child, she fails to see the many answers to Ruth’s desertion embedded in the stories Margaret tells of their life in Romulus. Margaret’s private recollections of her mother in the years leading up to the moment she flees reveal the requirements from the restrictive social circle of Romulus, Virginia that dictate Ruth’s behavior. As a church-wife, Ruth is under constant scrutiny from the community. Just before Ruth’s departure, she discusses a dress with Margaret that her daughter wants to buy but that has many buttons. Margaret remembers Ruth’s response, “‘Well, just remember, I’m not doing it for you [buttoning the buttons]. I’ve got enough buttons of my own to worry about.’ My mother [Ruth] had this way of talking. She would say something that sounded simple and harmless in her light, melodic drawl, but underneath you often got the feeling she was saying something quite different at the same time” (Godwin *Father* 8). Ruth’s “buttons” include the restrictive church society, her husband’s constant withdrawal into the “black curtain” of his depression, and the pressures of being the consumed mother who allows herself to be defined by her child. In her essay on the Southern Belle, Godwin notes that a southern woman must “acquire the

art of indirect speech that will help her keep her life running smoothly. The Southern woman . . . achieves her aims without ever resorting to the unhappy pejorative” (52). Ruth demonstrates this style of double talk in this exchange with her daughter. Her avoidance of painful truths is a means to insulate Margaret and her father from their contribution to Ruth’s inability to gain the subjectivity she desires due to her roles as mother and church wife. Godwin introduces an alternative for miserable yet ever-present mothers such as Nell and Lily by showing a mother who flees the restrictions of middle-class southern society. Yet, Ruth’s position as a runaway mother mars any of her mothering successes.

The New Generation of Mothers

In Godwin’s novels, the younger generation of women begin to redefine long-held ideas in the community about women’s roles in society. These young women have observed the ways society dictates expectations for their mothers and the damage these expectations have caused their foremothers. They are also experienced in the demands that the older generation makes upon them to uphold the womanly traditions of the South. In response to these observations, the women of the younger generation begin to consider ways to sidestep traditional mothering expectations and to invent new and more fulfilling enactments of womanhood.

Cate also struggles between the two conflicting ideologies and many times enacts the ideas of independent womanhood while haunted by her traditional upbringing. Smith says of Godwin’s heroines, “Although they philosophically reject the ways of the Old South, they are not emotionally ready or able to cut the tie totally” (104). Cate’s ideas about motherhood highlight her troubled position as a southern daughter and educated

working woman. Linda C. Pelzer writes of the novel, “Godwin’s heroines confront community, family, and their own opposing other selves to achieve their own sense of individuality and self-worth. Their successes and failures are measured against the visions and versions of self that people the novel” (155). Jernigan, Cate’s love interest challenges Cate’s non-traditional life decisions. On her first date with Jernigan, he asks Cate if she can come to terms with the idea of never having children. Cate replies, “‘Yes. I think I can.’ But after all these years, she still expected the sky to come crashing down on her in punishment every time she said she didn’t want children. ‘I think I have come to terms with being the exception’” (Godwin *Mother* 110). It is engrained into Cate’s psyche from the society that surrounded her during her formative years headed by the forceful Theodora, that a woman’s role in society is to procreate and raise children. Despite her education and independence, Cate experiences guilt in claiming that childlessness is her preference and a choice she consciously makes. Her identification that childlessness marks her as an exception shows just how deeply the notion that women must become mothers is ingrained in the women that populate the novel.

Jernigan attempts to further the indoctrination of Cate with southern motherhood values through his parable of a woman who does not want to bear responsibility for her own children. He tells Cate about his oldest son’s mother, Manuela: “Now, Jody’s mother was something else. She was a very beautiful woman, a Brazilian. I think she married me for security and to get to America. I was the one who talked her into having a child. Scared to death it would ruin her figure. Well it didn’t, but she was never crazy about Jody. There are women like that; don’t like their own kids. I had to learn that from Manuela” (Godwin *Mother* 110). Like Frank in Betts’s *Souls Raised from the Dead*,

Godwin considers Jernigan a man who performs both fathering and surrogate mothering for his offspring. While Cate wants to pursue her career without the complications of children, her acknowledgment that Jernigan's situation is unique and exceptional indicates that she still holds the traditional ideologies of her childhood that a woman should be responsible for raising her children. Cate's stance on Jernigan's exceptionalism reflects the community's opinion of Frank in Betts's novel. Not only does Cate's mother and society of Mountain City pressure Cate to behave in a predictable, traditional role for women by marrying and reproducing, but her new lover, Jernigan, also espouses the traditional ideology that procreation is a woman's purpose, and children are a contract that binds a woman into motherhood service.

Cate's unwanted pregnancy and her response to it highlight the interplay of opposing philosophies of motherhood that she must navigate to determine the course of her life. Keller, in her study of periodicals from the time period, reports, "the middle class does not have the confidence to fully reject its traditional family values" (577). Even the highly educated and independently minded Cate is subject to the draw of tradition. Her visit to the gynecologist to confirm the pregnancy is fraught with moral opposition to her desire to have an abortion. The Catholic doctor who has six children himself tells Cate, "I wouldn't wait too long, . . . His brain waves can already be measured, you know" (Godwin *Mother* 190). Cate recognizes, "It was the one thing he thought could get to me" (Godwin *Mother* 190). While the doctor has religious motivations for dissuading Cate from carrying out the abortion, he realizes Cate does not share belief in his religious doctrine, and he must appeal to her intellect. Even though she knows she wants the

abortion, she is still affected by her doctor's attempt to prevent her from exercising reproductive freedom.

Cate does not want to interrogate her pregnancy further by sharing it with Jernigan and is determined to keep her pregnancy and abortion a secret. She knows that Jernigan holds many traditional values about family, which echo those of her Mountain City family and friends who would not support her decision to abort the fetus. She is so conflicted over her decision that she does not want to introduce opposing viewpoints to it. Yet, her resolve evaporates when Jernigan returns from his business trip and brings dinner to her apartment. Cate cannot hide her kaleidoscope of feelings and ultimately tells him, "contrary to what you said about there being something missing in me, something's been added. I *am* different. I'm pregnant" (Godwin *Mother* 207). In this moment of Cate wants to be understood as a mother by Jernigan. Cate's revelation to Jernigan of her pregnancy exposes the contradictory ideologies she is attempting to reconcile about her role as a woman. Jernigan, "gave her a look that set her vibrating with ambivalence: she wanted to lean against him, lapse wearily into his care; she also wanted to press down on the handle of the door and leap from the Jeep" (Godwin *Mother* 215). Her simultaneous desire to be both under the protective care of her lover who believes his responsibility is to care for his family at all costs and to be independent of Jernigan and their possible child in order to forge ahead with her life on her own terms continues to haunt Cate.

Cate's sister, Lydia, in *A Mother and Two Daughters*, explores new horizons as a divorced woman and mother of teen-aged boys. Upon her return to college, Lydia befriends her professor, Renee, a black woman. Godwin reinforces the idea of the incompatibility of mothering and the intellect through Renee, and she demonstrates an

alternative to the mothering dilemma that is ultimately adopted by Renee's white counterparts in the novel through the community of caring adults that assist in the raising of Liza Bee. During their first meeting together, Lydia sees a picture of a young woman she mistakes for Renee's younger sister. Renee corrects her:

No, that's Camilla, my daughter. . . .She's at school in England. Mamma raised her, so I could get on with my education and all. In fact, a kind of sad thing happened when poor little Camilla was about three. I was home from Wellesley and Camilla came and jumped into my lap—she was so glad to see me—and put her little face against mine and called me her sister. (Godwin *Mother* 143-4)

Despite considering her daughter as “poor little Camilla,” Renee offers no excuses and indicates no regret at being relegated to sister to her child while the young Camilla calls Renee's mother “Mamma.”

Renee puts into practice the concept of othermothering. Patricia Hill Collins in “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships” coins the term “othermothers” to identify women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities (47). Renee's style of mothering demonstrates that alternatives exist to the Lydia's performance of intensive mothering. However, it is difficult for Lydia to imagine alternatives due to middle-class, white fetishization of motherhood that governs Lydia's attitudes about raising her own children.

Godwin describes her own mother in the same terms that Renee describes her relationship with Camilla in her essay, “My Mother, the Writer: Master of a Thousand Disguises.” Godwin writes that during her childhood, her mother “was more like a magical older sister . . . in those impressionable days when the soft clay of my personality

was being sculpted” (“My Mother” n.p.). Like Camilla’s grandmother, Godwin’s grandmother “performed the tasks associated with motherhood while Kathleen Godwin [her mother] went out in all weathers to breadwin for us like a man” (Godwin “My Mother” n.p.). Renee explains the success in her decision about her daughter’s upbringing; “She’s a product of Mamma’s raising; it shows all over her. And that’s an advantage. Mamma is a lady if there ever was one; me, I have my lapses. Camilla’s at the top of her class over in England. And she likes me a lot. She writes me things in her letters that she won’t tell Mamma. So maybe I got the best of both worlds, after all” (Godwin *Mother* 144). Like Cate and Lydia, Renee wants to feed her intellect. All three women realize the difficulty in attempting intellectual freedom while practicing mothering and each devises a means to avoid the distraction of children while pursuing their intellectual lives. Very pointedly, none of Godwin’s white characters in *A Mother and Two Daughters* attempt intellectual lives in tandem with mothering. These are projects that must exist in isolation from one another in the white, affluent, middle-class social circles of the American South. In the novel, Renee pioneers an alternative mothering method that serves as the example for a way to successfully rear a child and preserve a woman’s intellect and self-building. In a sign of their new understanding of the possibilities for a community effort devoted to childrearing, Nell and her family practice this method of othermothering through their participation in Liza Bee’s upbringing.

Godwin continues her exploration of the role of the community in taming women to conform from the vantage point of a middle-class church community in *Father Melancholy’s Daughter*. The community of the church offers a level of contentment and

a sense of self and purpose to both Margaret and her father, but to Ruth, the community of women who keep her under surveillance is a site of oppression. As Margaret relates her memories of her mother she says, “Miriam Stacy, a drab, self-righteous old maid who lived with her mother, was the person who had told my mother she looked more like a college girl than a rector’s wife and had caused Ruth to pull her hair back with a tortoiseshell clip” (Godwin *Father* 28). Ruth must suppress her free spirit – even to the point of how she wears her hair – in order to accommodate a vision of wife and mother held by the community. In private, Ruth can parody the women who torment her, but in public, she must conform.

Ruth’s rebellion against her society begins in small ways and sometimes involved her daughter and husband. On their last morning together walking to the school bus stop, Margaret recounts as her mother and she pass the parking lot of Walter’s church, St. Cuthbert’s, “‘Lucky biddies,’ murmured Ruth to me without breaking her stride. ‘Smells and bells even on a Wednesday. Your daddy sure spoils them’” (Godwin *Father* 27-8). Ruth’s resentment toward these controlling women is impossible for her to mask from her daughter. Margaret also details the game she played with her mother on other Wednesday mornings: “It was a highly subversive game: you had to show you knew whose car each was by revealing something, not necessarily flattering, about the owner, or by imitating the way that person talked” (Godwin *Father* 28). Margaret remembers this “secret war of insolence against this steadfast handful of ladies” with her mother “leading [her] willingly into rebellion against Daddy’s Wednesday flock” (Godwin *Father* 28). As a child, Margaret is satisfied that these silly moments shared with her mother are enough to free Ruth from the oppression she feels under the constant scrutiny

of these controlling women. However, these descriptions reveal the true anger her mother feels toward these women who wish to control her.

Godwin uses Elaine Major, an important figure in Gower's congregation, to convey the censorious thoughts of the community about women who want to break away from this mothering mold. The Major has little time for women who want more than church and family. Margaret imagines The Major's inner musings, "It's a puh-fectly simple mattuh of *planning*, that's all. If you *plan* your day, there's no reason in the *wuhld* to complain there's not enough time for everything you want to do. I was widowed early and I raised two wonderful boys single-handedly and en-tuh-tained my friends and performed my church and community wuhk and puh-fected my tennis game and still found time for my rich and rewarding spiritual life before I had ever *huhd* of Women's lib" (Godwin *Father* 30). For The Major, "Women's lib" is explicitly the enemy of motherhood, community, and a "rich and rewarding spiritual life." For Ruth, maintaining Elaine's vision of a perfect woman balancing church, family, and community, is oppressive. Even Ruth's command performance on the tennis court with Elaine is so unpleasant that it leaves Ruth frustrated and angry for the rest of the day. There is no space in this doctrine for Ruth to find fulfillment; instead she is charged with fulfilling everyone else's needs and told to be happy to have the privilege to serve. To seek freedom from these suffocating demands, to embrace feminist ideals, is an affront to all the community holds dear. Ultimately, Ruth's only form of escape is to physically flee from Romulus.

The Complications of Motherwork with Other Pursuits

In *Father Melancholy's Daughter*, Ruth's story maps out the double binds faced by southern women who chafe in the roles of wife and mother. In *A Mother and Two Daughters*, Godwin explores the tension between tradition and liberation through a pair of foils. Lydia, Nell's youngest daughter in *A Mother and Two Daughters*, is a counterpoint to her sister, Cate. While Cate bucks tradition at every turn, Lydia thrives on accomplishing what is expected of her. In Cate's memory of their early home life, she realizes that there was a shift in her mother's personality when her father returned home from work. Cate thinks, "it had confused her and Lydia, as little girls, when their mother suddenly became smaller and smoother when Daddy came home" (Godwin *Mother* 202). Cate's response to the change in her mother was to become the "vanished mother, while Lydia, the baby, had retreated into the quiet, neat shell of herself. . . not only [keeping] Lydia from being noticed . . . but [making] Lydia resemble a small copy of the 'tamed' mother" (Godwin *Mother* 202). Lydia's adult life follows the pattern of taming herself to meet societal and familial expectations. In fact, she tames herself to such a degree that she chooses to sleep through most of her life rather than face the boredom.

Lydia creates a compartmental system to separate and cope with the influx of differing ideas regarding the way she should lead her life. Godwin writes, "[a]nd, on the whole, Lydia's system had served her well. She organized her life into neat compartments and tended to each compartment at the proper time and place. She grew accustomed to hearing herself praised for this" (*Mother* 242). Despite the praise lavished on her by her community, which expects a mother's subservience, Lydia expresses some

unease in her performance within the parameters of her life compartments. Godwin writes of Lydia:

Her compartments organized *her*. If she had labeled them in her neat handwriting, they would have read something like: MOTHER. COOK. HOSTESS. INTERESTED WIFE (“What exactly *is* a bond, Max?”). WELL-DRESSED LADY SHOPPER. AMIABLE BED PARTNER. If, frequently, when going from one compartment to the next, she sighed, or muttered in her thoughts, “Now. *That’s* over,” well. . . that didn’t mean she hadn’t done it properly, whatever she was glad was over. (*Mother* 242-3)

Lydia’s life has devolved into a laundry list of activities she must complete. Her lack of joy or sense of contribution to a greater good is apparent in her mutterings that announce her relief at the completion of a task. Her life is so joyless she begins to sleep through most of the day, arising only to mark the next activity off her list.

Keller explains Lydia’s mothering system as neotraditionalism. She writes, “‘Neotraditionalism’ was a short-hand term which implied that the woman chose to embrace the time-honored profession of motherhood exclusively. . . . The ‘neotraditionalist’ did not plan to reject the work world forever. Instead, she would return successfully to the workforce when she felt her children were old enough to do without exclusive motherhood. She planned to ‘sequence’ through her life” (Keller 586). Keller stresses that women operating under this ideology pursue motherhood and careers “sequentially not simultaneously” (586). Lydia’s system for dealing with contradictory expectations is effective as an outward appearance, but it leaves her unfulfilled and napping through much of life until she upends the status quo of the perfect wife and

mother to return to college. Lihong Xie says of the “new” post-divorce Lydia, “Whereas her past accomplishments were self-obliterating, she now aims at a balanced approach, emphasizing self-development while reaching out for the possibilities of social achievement, continuing to serve others’ needs at the same time as she carefully and ardently attends to her own” (140). Compartmentalized womanhood is Lydia’s response to the collision of her own needs with society’s expectations. In her search for identity beyond motherhood, she divorces her stable, “perfect” husband to create a life worth staying awake for. In her transition from idyllic wife and mother to independent woman, Lydia turns to higher education as a means to expand the possibilities for her life.

Lydia desires emotional and intellectual fulfillment beyond her experiences as wife and mother. As she reflects on her life she remembers that at eighteen years of age all she wanted was for “Max to propose and take her off to London” (Godwin *Mother* 116). At thirty-six, she does not regret the decisions made by her younger self: “And if she’d had it to do over again, Lydia decided, cruising toward college on the I-40, playing that tape of Leo’s which she had grown fond of, she would do it in the same order. She had married the man she had aspired to—then; she had had the children she wanted and had had them young, which was best, and now she wanted to improve her mind and do a few other things. It really did seem to her that she had a chance of getting it all in” (Godwin *Mother* 116-7). Lydia’s life is dictated by a system of payments owed. Marrying well, mothering, being a supportive and caring daughter are the payments she owes, before she believes she earns the right to pursue independent interests. Both Cate and Lydia view intellectual pursuits as a conflict with mothering. Cate avoids the conflict by avoiding motherhood, while Lydia postpones higher education to raise her two sons.

While Lydia chooses to order her life with motherhood first and a career second, Lily experiences a career prior to her second marriage and the births of her second and third children. After her first husband dies in serving in World War II, Lily supports her daughter and mother as a news reporter. Yet, she does not experience the freedom she craves because the demands of her dependents are exhausting after a day of work. She began slipping into the sanctuary of Our Lady's Church for thirty minutes of time alone between work and home. Lily contemplates, "It wasn't that she didn't love the two who awaited her at home. It was just that their need for her to be their vital center oppressed her: both her widowed mother and her fatherless little girl took it for granted that they were, and always should be, the most important concerns of her life" (Godwin *Southern* 200). Both Lily's mother and daughter expect Lily to define herself through their needs for her emotionally and financially. Lily resents her dependents and the demands they make on her time outside of her career. The carework expected of her at home is a burden to Lily. Her resentment of carework is only amplified when she marries Ralph and is expected to perform the role of fulltime wife and mother leaving behind her writing career and believing that she cannot return to it under the oppressions she perceives in her home life.

Godwin's tendency is to place motherhood in opposition to artistic or intellectual endeavors as demonstrated throughout her oeuvre, such as in *Violet Clay* where Violet's artistic work is so consuming that she can only approach it as a single, childless woman, or *The Odd Woman's* Jane Clifford who is a college professor, single and childless. Godwin follows in a tradition of southern women writers who demonstrate the incongruence between artistic expression and the demands of motherhood. Eudora Welty,

prior to the woman's movement of the 1960s and 1970s in *The Golden Apples* (1949) explores the life of Mrs. Morrison who reveals to her daughter Cassie, "'Child, I could have *sung*,' and she threw her hand from her, as though all music might as well now go jump off the bridge" (46). The demands of small-town life, the abandonment of her singing career, and the responsibilities of motherhood eventually lead to Mrs. Morrison's suicide foreshadowed in this early exchange of failed possibilities with Cassie. Welty writes of Mrs. Morrison's demise, "After being so gay and flighty always, Cassie's mother went out of the room one morning and killed herself" (*Golden* 261). Warren and Wolff write, "Mrs. Morrison does not give the appearance of a drastically depressed or suicidal woman. Closer observation, however, reveals that the emotional cues were present all along; societal demands and expectations of conformity have finally taken a fatal toll" (9). With this historical precedent for the dangers of artistic and intellectual suppression, Godwin explores the obstacles motherhood presents to artistic endeavors for women and shows the ways women have adjusted to avoid the fatal consequences described by Welty of denying artistic talent.

Like Mrs. Morrison, Lily is a frustrated artist who is unable to experience fulfillment. None of the scripts offered by society for a young woman in the 1950s afford her the opportunity for self-determination. She craves artistic expression in the form of creative writing, but the expectations and obligations she has to those around her prevent her creative explorations. When asking her priest for advice about marrying Ralph Quick, she asks, "what should I do? Should I marry him and upset Mother and break Clare's heart? Or should I send him on his way and devote myself completely to them? I feel like such an oddity. I'm somebody's daughter and somebody's mother, but I have trouble

believing I was ever actually somebody's wife. Oh, I wish you would help me decide" (Godwin *Southern* 202). Lily can only visualize three options for herself: mother, daughter, and wife. Despite her training and work as a writer, she does not visualize that as a viable option for her future. The narratives for a woman's role in society have limited Lily's vision of herself. She cannot dream of herself as independent of the ties she finds oppressive or as the artist she aspires to become.

Lily's unrealized dreams of writing and publishing fiction are a source of her feelings of discontent with her life. When Lily is questioned about the book she had begun in her early years of marriage to Ralph, she says that she quit writing when Clare went to live with her father's family. Lily considers her daughter's abandonment as a mothering failure which also ends Lily's foray into creative expression. Lily reveals that when she found the draft of her early manuscript several years later, "I hated what I read. I couldn't stand it. All those self-consciously lovely words trying to cover up my lack of experience about anything true in the world. . . . All those hot house-variety sentiments about people and things that never existed, that *couldn't* exist" (Godwin *Southern* 169). This admission by Lily that her life has been so sheltered that she lacks true understanding of the world reveals the shortcomings of traditional southern treatment of women – women are so sheltered in the middle-class, white cocoon that they have limited vision of the world beyond home and family. This has led Lily to believe her life experience is too hollow to inform a strong writing project. Yet, Godwin's choice to focus her own writing on women such as Lily validates Lily's fictional lived experience. Lily confesses that she was so disgusted by her artistic endeavor that she threw the draft away, symbolically throwing away her ability for artistic expression with it. Lily never

returned to writing as an outlet for her creative nature, and instead, attempts to fulfill the roles of mother and wife as prescribed by the traditional southern society she inhabits while becoming increasingly bitter and angry.

Ruth, in *Father Melancholy's Daughter*, serves as another of Godwin's failed artists. Despite the prevalent rhetoric of freedom to explore selfhood from the feminist movement that should have benefitted a woman like Ruth, her struggle to explore her artistic talents is thwarted by the conservative southern society that views feminist thinking as poisonous for women and detrimental to the southern social structure, thus fueling Ruth's desire for escape. Ruth exemplifies the tensions in reconciling artistic expression with motherhood. Ruth does not wait for her motherhood task to reach completion signaled by the point Margaret leaves for college or marriage as Lydia is willing to do. Nor does she allow society to continue to prescribe and monitor her actions. Instead, she chooses to escape the confines of Romulus when Margaret is six years old to pursue the opportunity for artistic growth and explorations of selfhood. Madelyn, the accomplice for Ruth's escape offers an alternative vision for Ruth to follow. Madelyn's analysis of Ruth's life during the visit to the Gower home is laced with negative judgments and sarcasm. Upon seeing the dinner Ruth has prepared Madelyn says, "And look how *pretty* you've made everything.' But even when she was giving compliments, Madelyn Farley's voice retained its mocking edge" (Godwin *Father* 18). In this exchange "pretty" is an insult as opposed to a compliment. Madelyn is free from southern scrutiny in her apartment in New York. She is also free from societal expectations for womanly performance since she has avoided marriage and motherhood.

Thus, Madelyn can define herself as an independent being free to explore her art through her mythic “Hot Wand” and stands as an example for Ruth of alternative life paths.

In contrast to Madelyn, Ruth’s creativity is confined to beautifying the home and being an entertaining wife, mother, and hostess. Madelyn introduces the notion that art is self-expression while craft is servitude to others. Walter Gower continually praises his wife for her creative talent. She entertains him with her parodies of church members and is engaged in creating beauty in their home. When Madelyn is directed by Walter to appreciate Ruth’s watercolors of two churches created on their Charleston honeymoon, Madelyn hardly casts a glance on the uninspired work. She exclaims, “Well of course they’re *lovely*. . . . Everything she does is *lovely*, but I hardly think that’s the point. *Lovely* is the art of pleasing others. Art is about pleasing yourself” (Godwin *Father* 24). This ideology sheds light on the motivation for Godwin’s heroines to pursue artistic expression. Madelyn’s appearance at the Gower home coincides with Ruth’s desire to escape loveliness and experience pleasing herself. Art is the medium through which she can explore identity building and establish herself autonomously from her husband and child.

Interestingly, art is also the defense that Walter and Margaret cling to in order to explain Ruth’s actions and to ward off the harsh judgment of the community toward her abandonment of family. They implicitly agree that true art and motherhood cannot co-exist. While Ruth was still in Romulus, Walter would often muse about Ruth’s many talents. A typical retort from Ruth to his musings would be, “Oh yes [I could have been a famous actress]. And a famous painter and a famous everything. According to you, Walter, people would think I am throwing my life away merely being here with the two

of you” (Godwin *Father* 44). While Ruth offers this as a deflection to Walter’s regular worry that she is wasting her talents as his wife, the truth of the statement is that Ruth is beginning to wonder if she is indeed wasting her talents while playing the role of wife and mother. Neither Walter nor Ruth believe she can nurture and develop her true artistic talents while performing as rector’s wife and mother.

The Absent Mother

Father Melancholy’s Daughter is a departure for Godwin from the miserable maternal figures like Nell and Lily who remain entrapped in the gilded cage of social acceptance to Ruth who takes flight from what appears to be an untenable situation for her. As with Betts’s Mary, we see the effects of abandonment that weigh heavily on Margaret throughout her childhood and young adulthood. The novel begins, “Although I did not know it then, my life of unpremeditated childhood ended on Wednesday, September 13, 1972” (Godwin *Father* 7). Margaret defines her childhood by the date of her mother’s abandonment; by her definition, she can no longer be a carefree child because an absent mother means that Margaret must adopt adult-like responsibility at a very early age. All the authors in this study seem to agree that absent mothers force adult responsibilities on their deserted children. Even on that fateful September morning, Margaret says:

I had dressed by myself because Daddy had Wednesday Mass and had gone next door to the church to ‘set up shop,’ as he called it, and Ruth, my mother, was completely taken up with an overnight guest, a woman she had known at boarding school. . . . From the moment she had arrived the evening before, sauntering

arrogantly up our walk and making her arch comments about the rectory, I had taken a dislike to Madelyn Farley. (Godwin *Father* 7)

While Margaret's story mounts evidence about Ruth's life and her motivations to leave, it is still difficult for Margaret to acknowledge her mother's role in the defection. Kerstin Westerlund-Shands, in her study of the novel, says, "the characters are each other's tormentors, too. While Father Melancholy chivalrously applauds his wife's odyssey towards a self, he has also driven her away. And the child Margaret, who desperately misses her mother, nonetheless responds with such coldness when her mother calls as to convince Ruth that her return is unnecessary. Ruth's own cruelty in abandoning husband and child is thus created and compounded with their assistance" (86). Godwin complicates our understanding of where to place anger and blame by allowing culpability of all the characters in causing the upheaval to their lives. It is easier for Margaret to dislike Madelyn Farley for corrupting her mother during an overnight visit than to recognize the oppressive nature of the church community and marriage to a man fighting depression has on Ruth.

Godwin's novel provides a more nuanced understanding of Dr. Benjamin Spock's ideas about motherhood ambivalence that could drive a woman like Ruth to flee her child. In 1974, Spock's *Raising Children in a Difficult Time: A Philosophy of Parental Leadership and High Ideals* makes reference to a child's desires and the ambivalence these desires can cause in the mother. Spock says:

When parents become convinced that they have been too submissive to children—that they have let them lead them around by the nose—they are apt to have a strong revulsion of feeling. They develop a slightly resentful, revengeful

attitude toward the children. They tend to jump on them when they ask for any privilege, whether it's out of line or legitimate. This is a natural reaction, and it may help not only the parents but the children to turn over a new leaf. (*Raising* 136)

Through Ruth, Godwin pushes against this common ideology of child-centered childrearing by demonstrating the detrimental effects these demands have on women. For Ruth, fleeing becomes her only option as she sees no outlet to "turn over a new leaf." The pressures she faces from her community, husband, and daughter leave her with no vision for a different future without a radical change.

Mother abandonment consumes Margaret's imagination and thus much of the text. Margaret reveals her unusual collection in contrast to the more traditional childhood hobbies of collecting stamps or storybook dolls. She says, "I was to become a passionate collector of stories about runaway, or absent, mothers" (Godwin *Father* 53). The preponderance of these stories some which are creations of Godwin's fiction, some from other fictional sources, and some from the historical moment in which the novel occurs suggests women were not content in their motherhood performances and some preferred to flee rather than be consumed by their children's and society's expectations for their behavior. The novel, told from Margaret's voice, is one of Margaret's collected stories of motherhood abandonment and its effects on a child. Margaret shares stories in her collection, saying of a divorced woman in her neighborhood:

Soon after the Gregory girls were born, she had realized that living with Mr. Gregory up in Rochester, where he worked for Kodak was irrelevant and meaningless, and so, one morning after he had gone to work, she packed up her

infant twins and sheep dog puppy and drove back down to her mother in Romulus. The mother had since died, and Mrs. Gregory, who called herself once more by her girlhood name, Nita Cosgrove, had moved into her late mother's room where she burned sandalwood incense and played Beatles records too loudly to suit the neighbors. (Godwin *Father* 53-4)

However, Cosgrove's defection from her husband and her traditional housewife life included her daughters. Godwin also points to the generational change that infiltrates the sleepy town of Romulus through Nita Cosgrove's enactment of the 1960s counterculture movement with her sandalwood incense and excitement over the British Invasion of the Beatles. Margaret's favorite story is from old Mrs. Stacy who tells Margaret of her aunt, "who had appeared to be a perfectly devout and happy wife and mother" (Godwin *Father* 45-5). However, one day she drops her children at a neighbor's house and goes to a quarry to drown herself. Even when Margaret later discovers this story is fiction, she still counts it as a favorite because the mother left for apparently no reason, the same conditions Margaret believes surround her own mother's disappearance. Margaret is reluctant to believe that the life she and her father led generated causation for her mother to flee. It is painful when Margaret, as a young adult, learns from Madelyn that her mother considered going back for her, but Margaret's own actions – her reluctance to even talk to her mother over the phone – led Ruth to believe she was not wanted back in her daughter's life. Despite Ruth's departure from the family, Madelyn reveals she was still conflicted about her duties as a mother.

In these three novels, Godwin exposes the difficulties for privileged white women to balance simultaneously the demands of motherhood with self-definition. The evidence

she provides through both her mothers and childless women indicates that intellect, creativity, and motherhood cannot peacefully co-exist in the white southern middle-class. As readers, we are conditioned to have empathy for the ignored child, but Godwin challenges that tendency as she exposes the oppressions that mothers from the middle-class face. Godwin redirects the reader to acknowledge the hardships for women to mother. She offers opportunities to sympathize with the mothers of her novels and allows the reader to want solutions for the difficulties that the institution of motherhood presents women. Ruth is a particularly sympathetic character because her community is unwilling to allow her space for self-building. Godwin reveals the fallacy in the belief that motherhood is simple and fulfilling for members of the middle-class who have resources, community, and family support that should simplify and encourage idealized mothering performance. In fact, this study of Godwin's mothers indicates that motherhood is incompatible with a woman's ability to pursue any form of creative and expressive self-building rather it be the pursuit of artist talents, a career, or advanced education. Alarming, every white, middle-class mother examined here must put her own interests on hold while fulfilling society's expectations for a proper motherhood performance. This becomes such a burden that women like Lydia sleep through their lives, women like Lily become so bitter that all pleasure is removed from living, and women like Ruth flee the constant onslaught of demands.

Godwin does offer an antidote to the gilded cage of motherhood through her exploration of othermothering. The power of othermothering is that biological mothers do not shoulder the full responsibility for childrearing alone. Indeed, Godwin offers the village approach to childrearing as a possibility for all women to have simultaneous

success as creative and engaged individuals and mothers. In *A Mother and Two Daughters*, she ends the novel considering Liza Bee, Lydia's ex-husband's daughter with his second wife, who is raised by the willing village of caring adults in the family including Lydia and her partner, Stanley. Lydia reflects on Liza Bee: "she was pleased that Liza was such a bright child. . . . in absent-minded moments, Lydia sometimes completely forgot that this was Lizzie's child and not her own" (Godwin *Mother* 500). Through Lydia, we learn of the many adults involved with Liza Bee's rearing; "But they were spoiling her rotten, all of them: herself, Stanley, Dickie, Leo, Mother; Renee and Camilla; and Lizzie, when she was home. Already, Liza Bee. . . at four had been to more places with more people than Lydia had been in the first eighteen years of her life" (Godwin *Mother* 500). This village approach allows Liza Bee's mother to pursue her banking career, while also enriching Liza Bee's interactions with her community and the world. Godwin's Liza Bee, with her community of othermothers, offers a remedy to the gilded cage of motherhood performance in white, middle-class southern society.

CHAPTER 3

DOROTHY ALLISON AND THE SHIFT TO TRIUMPHANT MOTHERING

While Betts and Godwin focus their writing on motherhood in the working- and middle-classes, Dorothy Allison's early fiction provides insights into mothering in poverty and explores how middle-class ideals of motherhood contribute to the marginalization of impoverished mothers. Her works, *Trash* (1988), *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), and *Cavedweller* (1998) demonstrate a shift in Allison's ideas about motherhood. In her earlier works, before Allison became a mother, she considers mothers from the point of view of children. *Trash* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* are semi-autobiographical accounts that grapple with Allison's tumultuous relationship with her mother and the abuse she suffered as a child.

However, Allison's most recent novel, *Cavedweller*, demonstrates a shift in her writing from the vantage point of the child to that of the mother. Allison experienced a change in her attitude about mothering when she became a mother to her son, Wolf, who was born shortly after *Bastard Out of Carolina* was published. In an interview with Carolyn Megan, Allison says, "I was under the impression that as a lesbian activist, I wouldn't have to understand the limitations that having a child had on the normal fold. . . . With a child every minute is used. . . . Having a child changes your energy level, seduces you. I am convinced that it is nature's way of continuation of the species. Drawn into a source of love. I can't begin to explain this in a conversation. My baby makes me so happy" (Megan 15). Allison introduces a mystical element to motherhood that informs

her shift in priorities from work and activism to attentions to her son. Her surprise at her surrender to motherhood is noteworthy, and this change in tone informs her later fiction.

The idea that a mother is responsible for providing her child security and love dominates Allison's writing. In her works, this notion begins as something that the child demands and deserves, but in *Cavedweller*, motherlove and devotion become the singular driving motivation in the mother's life. Delia is determined to give her children her focused attention regardless of their responses to it. Like Delia, the need for a mother to prioritize the needs of a child is at the center of Allison's own interactions with her son. In an interview with Owen Keehnen, she says of Wolf:

We [Allison and her wife, Alix Layman] want him to feel secure and loved since both of us missed some of that. I got some from my mother, and what little I got saved me, so I'm making damn sure he feels a strong and supportive family behind him. Also we're trying to connect him. My sister has come to visit; we're trying to develop a relationship between him and his daddy donor. We want him to feel he has a place in the world that's solid and real. (25)

Allison's approach to mothering is child-centric and indicates that her own identity and decisions are informed by maintaining the health and welfare of her son. In an interview with Susanne Dietzel, Allison says of her work on *Cavedweller*, "it's almost 600 pages. It needs a lot of tightening and my life changed in the last couple of years because I had a baby and thought that that would not be a problem. . . . But I'm also a binge writer and it is clear that I have to organize the possibility of binging to finish it" (Dietzel 52). For Allison, caring for her child is what gives her inner peace and fulfillment, and finding time to write is secondary to mothering. Thus, she approaches mothering as joyful

sacrifice. Like Betts and Godwin, she does not envision a means for a woman to simultaneously succeed at both childrearing and a life beyond the labor of carework which dictates the rhythm of a mother's day. As Godwin's Lydia suggests and Allison reinforces, these moments in a woman's life must be separated and performed in isolation of the other.

Allison is aware of the influence of southern culture on the performance of mothering. In Dietzel's interview with the author, Allison elaborates on her impressions of the controlling tropes of southern motherhood. She says:

I don't know any Southern writer who doesn't begin with mama. You know, she's like the air you breathe and it's a little dangerous because in fact there is this concept of the Southern mother in literature. To get serious attention is to give a kind of reverence; you have to write against the stereotype. And the stereotype is frightening. The stereotype is inhuman. The stereotype IS the mother who starves herself to feed her children, you know. And then the other stereotype is the mother who eats her children alive if they do not quite measure up to what she wants them to be. And you're always caught up between those two things if you're a Southern writer. (45)

Southern tradition privileges the sacrificial mother and fears the other mother to the point of deeming her monstrous. Yet, southern communities make no provisions to provide the support mother/child dyads need for success, particularly for children and their mothers who are part of at-risk communities due to food insecurity, lack of education, and abuse that all can be associated with poverty. Allison makes the case in her early fiction that communities of the South do not value impoverished mothers or their offspring.

Allison's fiction also considers just what, exactly, does a mother owe a child. A monolithic answer to this question is difficult to pinpoint. Despite the attempts of Dr. Spock, William Sears, and others to create a universal manual that defines the proper behavior for the woman engaged in childrearing, the roles of a mother and needs of the child are fluid and often undefinable. As Allison demonstrates in her works considered here, not all mothers have access to the same resources, nor are all mothers afforded equal treatment. Yet, like Supreme Court Justice Stewart's definition of hard-core pornography, we all believe we know good mothering, and bad mothering, when we see it. Sara Ruddick in *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* offers a bifurcated definition of acceptable mothering based on the needs of the child and the expectations of community. She says, "children 'demand' that their lives be preserved and their growth fostered. In addition, the primary social groups with which a mother is identified, whether by force, kinship, or choice, demand that she raise her children in a manner acceptable to them" (Ruddick 17). Ruddick synthesizes her ideology into three areas of maternal responsibility: preservation, growth, and social acceptability. Allison's works explore the difficulties for women to enact these notions while also navigating the effects of poverty compounded by the inaccessibility of social respectability. While some of her imagined mothers fail miserably in protecting their children from harm, in *Cavedweller*, Allison shifts the narrative and imagines a mother capable of overcoming all obstacles to enact motherhood on her own terms, resulting in generous outcomes for mother and children.

Informed by her personal experience of child abuse, Allison's early fiction focuses on the figure of the disposable child. The radical vulnerability of this child and her search for love vilify the mothers in the stories in *Trash* and *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

Even as Allison pathologizes the abusive mother and her failure to extend care to her child, her fiction also draws attention to the role that the community plays in condemning and isolating the mother. Rather than recognize the role that poverty and dependency plays in the mother's abusive behaviors, the community blames her as individually responsible for her financial and social failings. The snobbery of the community contributes to Bone's suffering rather than assisting in alleviating her abuse. In this way, Allison blames the southern fantasy of the ideal mother ensconced in the notions of middle-class, immersive mothering for the marginalization of impoverished mothers and their vulnerable children. For instance, Anney, Bone's mother in *Bastard out of Carolina*, concludes from this social conditioning that correct motherhood performance demands her to achieve public respectability for her daughter through an unblemished birth certificate that does not label her child a bastard. By connecting Anney's shame to the community's surveillance, Allison demonstrates that both mother and village are at fault in Bone's suffering.

In *Cavedweller*, a work completed after Allison became a mother, she pursues the same themes of abuse, maternal abandonment, and community judgement with a triumphant rather than tragic tone. Delia escapes her abusive marriage by fleeing to the west and embarking in a life as a successful singer. Yet, she is haunted by the children she left behind and returns to her small Georgia town to reestablish herself in her older daughters' lives. Here, she is greeted by the disapproval of family and community. In their eyes, she is a tainted mother. Unlike Anney, who fails to protect and nurture Bone and is driven by the need for approbation from the community, Delia pursues her relationships with her daughters against all odds and disregards the community's verdict

on her actions. Delia is the first example in this study of a woman who is able to give unconditional love to her children and feel undiminished as a result. Delia sets the stage for Gibbons' assessment of mothers who succeed in simultaneous enactments of motherhood alongside self-building. This difference in Delia from the imagined maternal figures of Betts and Godwin, who tend to suffer in their roles as mothers, may derive from Allison's experiences of queer motherhood, which provided her insights into a redemptive version of parenting free from heteronormative expectations. In *Cavedweller*, Delia provides an example of immersive mothering that is a fulfilling act of creative expression rather than the restrictive sites imagined by Betts and Godwin where creativity cannot co-exist with childrearing.

The community is complicit in the deleterious motherhood that Allison explores in *Trash* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* through their harsh judgments on the mothering skills of impoverished mothers. The community withholds support to impoverished mothers that could alter the negative outcomes for these women and children and create a more sustainable and successful form of mothering. In "Mama" from *Trash*, Allison's narrator discusses the weight of the community judgment on impoverished motherhood performance. The narrator explains what she has learned from watching her mother interact within the community; "never want something you cannot have. Never give anyone the satisfaction of denying you something you need, and for that, what you have to do is learn to need nothing" (Allison *Trash* 45). In this text, Mama is denied the position of the sentimental center of the home that is afforded to women of the more monied social classes. To deny Mama access to emotional yearnings for her children and herself is to replace the middle-class notions of sentimental motherhood with an ethos of

unfeeling. Mama no longer yearns for the things she needs such as safe childcare alternatives, a job offering a living wage, or a safe home environment free from an abusive man which would allow for her daughters to experience peaceful and nurturing childhoods. Since society forces her to divorce herself from emotions, she loses the ability to provide sentimental nourishment to her offspring that results in leaving her children vulnerable to abuse.

Not only does the community withhold support for impoverished mothers, they also demonstrate a lack of motivation to preserve the lives of impoverished children. Compared to the middle-class and working-class children of Betts and Godwin who are nurtured and protected by their families and communities, Allison shows that poverty can be deadly for children. In the collected stories of *Trash*, Allison gives voice to the child, and the child demands attention, love, safety, and security. Poverty obstructs and even eliminates the ability of the mother to deliver these to her children. Without a foundation of support from their communities, impoverished mothers cannot adequately respond to the basic needs of their offspring. These breaches in the ability of a mother to care for her children devalue the worth of the child in their families and community and reinforce class divisions.

Betts and Godwin both write about middle and working-class mothers who share a bourgeois ideal of the precious child, reinforced by small family size. With rarity comes value, and the children of these stories are considered valuable to their families and communities if not always to their mothers. As a counterpoint to the working- and middle-class situations imaged by Betts and Godwin, Allison, in *Trash*, introduces the notion of children so plentiful that their value is diminished. Implicit in Allison's work is

the fact that poverty and lack of education blocks a woman's access to knowledge, birth control, and medical care to assist in limiting family size. In Rickie Solinger's study of how politics shapes families, she notes that Reagan, who would become president in the 1980s, supported this ideology of the lack of worth of impoverished members of our American society. While governor of California in the 1970s, Ronald Reagan formed a Social Welfare Board that, "caused an uproar when it took actions suggesting that the children of poor women were simultaneously too expensive and valueless" (Solinger 187). Solinger continues, "Lacking resources, such [impoverished] women did not merit the right to choose motherhood. By 1980, motherhood was a contingent right that only good earners could choose" (191). In "River of Names," Allison reveals the poison of this prevalent societal ideology privileging white, affluent mothers in the lives of impoverished children. Her narrator attempts to create an inventory of her cousins, but finds the task too impossible saying, "My maternal great-grandmother had eleven daughters, seven sons: my grandmother, six sons, five daughters. Each one made at least six. Some made nine. Six times six, eleven times nine. They went on like multiplication tables" (Allison *Trash* 11). The children that the narrator attempts to identify are too many to name or understand as individuals. Without discernible identity the children are not valued.

The devaluation of children apparent in Allison's early fiction aligns with Patricia Yaeger's consideration of "disposable bodies" in *Dirt and Desire* (67). She explains, "To dispose is to get rid of or to throw away; it is the fate of detritus, of garbage, of objects generally thought to be unclean or dirty, debris-ridden, worthless" (Yaeger *Dirt* 71). Allison's early writing indicates the possibility of a throwaway child, a child devalued

because of the surplus of bodies combined with the lack of resources to tend to those bodies. Even the title of her collected stories, *Trash*, indicates a devaluation of the characters contained in its pages. As a survivor, Allison writes, “We were so many we were without number and, like tadpoles, if there was one less from time to time, who counted? . . . They [cousins] died and were not missed” (*Trash* 11). To compare these children of poverty to tadpoles is to imply that, like tadpoles, the children that populated Allison’s childhood are both numerous and fragile. Considering children and tadpoles together conjures up ideas of children scooping tadpoles from a shallow pond without concern for how their actions might result in the accidental death of the numerous tadpoles. Tadpoles, like Allison and her cousins, are too numerous to be revered, precious, and protected. Like Allison and her cousins, there is no mother frog present to lead the tadpoles to safety. Yaeger explains that in southern literature, “children . . . become a tragic center for exploring the effects of the political in everyday life. As the focus of adult rules and regulations, the child is a victim and seismologist who registers the costs of a classist . . . ethic” (“Hummingbird” 309). Impoverished mothers and their children suffer physical and psychic deprivation due to the lack of community support for these women and their offspring. Allison’s texts demonstrate how the strain of poverty and despair directly impact access to resources. In Allison’s novels, the effects of poverty warp a mother’s ability to develop healthy emotional attachment to her children.

In “River of Names” the children, like tadpoles, suffer from the withholding of maternal oversight which results in their deaths. An example of this type of maternal neglect informed by extreme poverty and the lack of resources to invest across multiple children, is found in Nancy Scheper-Hughes anthropological study demonstrating how

the devaluation of children is sometimes considered acceptable behavior in communities wracked by extreme poverty. In her work with impoverished mothers in Alto, Brazil, Scheper-Hughes reports her observations of mothers who had an abundance of children and few resources to provide for them:

I learned that the high expectancy of death, and the ability to face child death with stoicism and equanimity, produced patterns of nurturing that differentiated between those infants thought as thrivers and survivors and those thought of as born already ‘wanting to die.’ The survivors were nurtured, while stigmatized, doomed infants were left to die. . . . Mothers stepped back and allowed nature to take its course. (84)

Scheper-Hughes identifies this phenomenon as “mortal selective neglect” and she acknowledges its presence in impoverished American communities as well. Allison’s descriptions of “accidental” child death in “River of Names” point to selective neglect where children are not protected by their mothers from the dangers of their world. In Allison’s imagined world, like the women of Alto, Brazil, only those children who are lucky, resourceful, or smart enough to avoid accidental death without the oversight of their mothers, those that are thrivers, reach adulthood. As in Scheper-Hughes study, poverty, lack of education, and lack of access to health services is the driving force behind the throwaway children that Allison describes.

“River of Names” explains the dangers lurking for throwaway children in the rural, impoverished South. Tommy’s accidental hanging in a barn, “the one went insane—got her little brother with a tire iron; the three of them slit their arms” is the beginning of Allison’s long list of examples. There is also the young woman who

“strangled the boy she was sleeping with and got sent away; that one drank lye and died laughing soundlessly” (Allison *Trash* 11). Tommy’s accidental hanging receives the most attention from the narrator and demonstrates the hazards lurking for children who, like the children of Scheper-Hughes’ study, are left without maternal oversight to face the life-threatening dangers of the world alone. The narrator’s list of examples continues with children who died as a result of mental breakdowns. In the story, it is implicit that poverty and maternal neglect leave children vulnerable to depression and suicide.

In “River of Names,” the narrator communicates the cumulative horror of numerous child deaths against the backdrop of maternal apathy and a lack of community concern. In Scheper-Hughes study, mothers intentionally remain emotionally distant from their children to protect themselves from grief at the loss of life. Allison’s mothers perform the same type of emotional distancing, the narrator reveals, “The mystery is how many [dead cousins] no one remembers” (*Trash* 10). Allison reiterates this idea in “Mama”: “Watching my mama I learned some lessons too well. Never show that you care” (*Trash* 45). Allison exhibits that for certain mothers in American society, caring can be dangerous and childhood death is all too common.

In contrast to the lack of community engagement with the impoverished families that Allison describes, the working- and middle-class families in novels by Betts and Godwin place significant value on the preservation of children’s lives and as a result the communities condemn women who fail to fulfill the expected role of wife and mother. In Betts’s *Souls Raised from the Dead*, Frank and the entire Chapel Hill community harshly judge Christine for enacting her own version of mortal selective neglect by withholding a kidney donation from her daughter. Christine violates the community’s moral code by

allowing her daughter to die. Godwin also records the effects of a snobby community on the mothering project through the pain Ruth suffers from the catty judgements of the affluent church community in *Father Melancholy's Daughter*. Ruth feels so much pressure to conform, that she leaves her daughter, who she appears to cherish, to engage in a self-building project with her friend. In the works of all three writers, the community has power to effect mothers and their interactions with their children. Allison shows how lack of community support for impoverished women and their children can be harmful, whereas Betts and Godwin demonstrate the ill-effects of the communities who attempt to control a woman's actions through their expectations about her mothering.

Facing maternal apathy and personal vulnerability, Allison's child characters react with anger directed at the mother. In interviews, Allison describes the stories in *Trash* as a means for her to come to terms with the brutality of her childhood as well as her rage toward her mother. She tells Carolyn Megan of her fears of becoming a mother in the face of the physical abuse she suffered as a child:

There's this conviction that survivors are dangerous to kids because we learn brutality; therefore, we will visit brutality on our children. While that can be so, it isn't necessarily so. It is something you can unlearn, but you have to know you're doing it; you have to become conscious. Writing, for me, is a way of making me conscious—especially the early stories in *Trash*—I really centered in on that, trying to piece that out. (Megan 8)

Allison also tells Megan that the early stories from the collection, particularly the first three, are centered on motherhood and her anger toward her own mother. Allison says, “a lot of the stories I wrote in *Trash* are largely aimed at my mother, and those are very

mean stories. There's not a lot of compassion there, but a lot of hurt, outrage, and some deliberate cruelty. For example, I never told my mother in person that I was sterile. I told her in a short story" (Megan 46). Allison's raw anger shapes her early depictions of southern motherhood.

In "Mama" from *Trash*, the narrator demonstrates confusion and guilt over the need to be loved and protected by her mother and the feelings of anger when maternal refuge is been denied her. The tension between desire and reality in the narrator result in her confusion and anger toward her mother. In this story, the child reveres her mother's body: "Our mother's body is with us in its details. She is recreated in each of us; strength of bone and the skin curling over the thick flesh the women of our family have always worn" (Allison *Trash* 34). The narrator identifies with the traits she shares with her mother confusing her ability to maintain anger since she can read her own body as flesh she shares with her mother. Allison considers how this bodily connection tempers the anger of an abused child toward the mother who did not intercede to prevent abuse. Even while the child harbors anger to her mother, she can worship the mother's body, separating the physical from the psychic. In spite of her mother's immediate failures, her body still represents safety: "If she [Mama] were not the backbone of creation itself, then fear would overtake me. I could not allow that, would not. My child's solution was to try to cure my mother of wrinkles in hope of saving her from death itself" (Allison *Trash* 35).

For the narrator, saving her mother becomes woven with saving herself. By warding off the aging process in her mother, who is the creator of the child, the narrator imagines she is forming a protection over her own life. So, the ritual of massaging moisturizing oils

into her mother's parched skin is also an act of self-preservation for the child. While her mother's mind is responsible for the abuse suffered by the narrator, her mother's body is necessary for the child's life. It is safe for the child to worship the maternal body which is separate from the maternal mind that makes the decisions that leave the narrator with a violent abuser.

The narrator of "Mama," despite her worship of her mother's body, is haunted by her mother's decisions. Ruddick claims that preservation is a basic principle of motherhood, and Allison demonstrates how motherhood performance disintegrates when a child is knowingly exposed to harm. Allison's narrator in "Mama" is vulnerable because her mother refuses to intercede to end the abuse the child suffers at the hands of her stepfather. The narrator says, "Push it down, Don't show it. Don't tell anyone what is really going on. We are not safe, I learned from my mama. There are people in the world who are, but they are not us. Don't show your stuff to anyone. Tell no one that your stepfather beats you. The things that would happen are too terrible to name" (Allison *Trash* 37). The narrator realizes her mother places the protection of her husband from criminal charges of child abuse over the protection of her daughter. Yet, the narrator still seeks her mother's attention and approval. Even after suffering a beating from her stepfather she still finds, "enormous gratitude to be lying still with her [Mama's] hand on me and, for once, the door locked against him" (Allison *Trash* 37). The grown narrator, reflecting on her childhood, reveals a young girl who constantly tried to make her mother value her through service to her mother's body. In the narrator's memory, she is always clamoring for her mother's attention and approval. The anxiety of attempting to earn love

and mothercare by pampering her mother as a young girl erupts into perplexity for the grown narrator about her true feelings toward her mother.

In “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know,” a connected story to “Mama,” the adult child can no longer separate the psychic from the physical in her mother. The adult narrator has been victim-shamed to keep silent about the sexual abuse she suffered as a child. Her extended family will not acknowledge it happened, yet it is common knowledge. When Aunt Alma arrives as a proxy for the narrator’s mother, attempting to guilt the grown child into tending to her mother’s needs she says of the narrator’s mother, “What’d she ever ask from you? Nothing. Just gave you your life and everything she had. Worked herself ugly for you and your sister. Only thing she ever hoped for was to do the same for your children, someday to sit herself back and hold her grandchildren in her lap” (Allison *Trash* 105). In reality, the narrator’s mother asked for silence and complicity from her daughter to shield her husband from repercussions from his acts as a sexual perpetrator and abuser, and Aunt Alma is well aware of the abuse but not of the outcome which left the narrator sterile as a result of an untreated sexually transmitted disease that her stepfather exposed her to when raping her. Under Alma’s interrogation, fury erupts from the grown child enabling her to finally speak the unspeakable to her aunt. What surprises and confuses the narrator in this moment is ambivalence she feels toward her aunt. Even as she hates her aunt for attempting to protect her mother instead of protecting her as a child, the narrator says, “I looked her in the eye, loving her and hating her” (Allison *Trash* 105). The rage of the abused child is confused and diffused by this need for comfort and love from her aunt, a proxy for her mother. It is the inherent need to feel love that creates vulnerability in the adult child.

The notion of a mother that would allow her children to knowingly suffer abuse expands on the typical southern trope of grotesque mothers to women who exceed the limits of the grotesque to become monstrous mothers performing a ruptured version of motherhood. The idea of grotesque motherhood is particularly apparent in one of Allison's literary predecessor and artistic influences, Flannery O'Connor. She says of the grotesque:

We find that the writer has made alive some experience which we were not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework" (O'Connor 40).

Peggy Dunn Bailey asserts, "With her definition of the 'Southern tradition' as 'the grotesque' and her identification of literary forebears (particularly O'Connor . . .), Allison associates herself and her writing with the complex category of the Southern Gothic" (269). Allison's "River of Names" both plays homage and revises O'Connor's "The River." In O'Connor's short story, Harry is the throwaway child of middle-class parents who are too selfish to adequately tend to their child's needs. The neglected child ultimately drowns in the river. O'Connor said of the story that Harry was better off dead than subject to the ill-treatment of uninvolved parents. Allison revises her river to reflect the problems for impoverished children that are so plentiful that they are impossible to count and easy to lose. In "River of Names" Jesse, the narrator's girlfriend, offers a

traditional script of motherhood featuring the accoutrements of middle-class life which both enrages the narrator yet draws the narrator to her. Jesse tells, “about her childhood, about her father going off each day to the university, her mother who made all her dresses, her grandmother who always smelled of dill bread and vanilla. I listen with my mouth open, not believing but wanting, aching for the fairy tale she thinks is everyone’s life” (Allison *Trash* 9). These are the perfect parents that O’Connor’s Harry and Allison’s narrator long to have in place of the grotesque and monstrous mothers they experience. A project of Allison’s work is to remove the veil so that the difficulties of impoverished motherhood can be exposed to privileged and uninitiated observers like Jesse who have no experience with motherhood beyond the white, middle-class ideal.

Hate is not a typical emotion describing a mother’s response to a child in southern literature, yet in Allison’s earlier works, monstrous mothers express this singular emotion toward their children. Shirley Wilmer, the protagonist of “Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee,” from *Trash* personifies the hate-filled mother. While seething with hate toward a child seems unimaginable among the societies depicted by Betts and Godwin and detailed in Jesse’s description of the middle-class fairy tale of childhood, it follows from Allison’s depictions of impoverished motherhood that there are instances where children are so devalued that a woman only experiences hate toward them. Shirley is so consumed with hate that she is indeed the meanest woman imaginable. Allison’s narrator explains Shirley’s thought processes about her children: “She’d never wanted children anyway—not really—and hated the way her body continuously swelled and delivered. She called the children devils and worms and trash, and swore that, like worms, their natural substance was dirt and weeds” (Allison *Trash* 21). Shirley is not simply neglectful

as Allison's mothers in "River of Names." Instead she expresses outright denial of any value in her eight children. She even says of her unborn child, "I'd kill this thing, if I could" (Allison *Trash* 23). While other mothers in Allison's oeuvre are emotionally and physically unavailable to their children, sometimes leading to children's death or abuse, Shirley is an example of the mother most feared in society – a woman devoid of the emotional connection to her children that informs her desire to protect them at all costs. Instead, Shirley is a mother monster who hates her children and wishes them dead. Even Betts's selfish mother, Christine, does not want Mary to die. She just does not want Mary's needs to eclipse her own needs for autonomy. Allison's imagined mother is perhaps informed by her own survivor status. As an abused child, Allison can certainly imagine a form of maternal hatred so intense that the mother threatens the lives of her own children.

Betts and Godwin could not imagine children that did not long for their absent mothers, even in the face of neglect and desertion, but Allison offers children so traumatized by the physical and mental abuses of their mother that their response is fear and hatred toward the mother. Shirley is a mother whose motherhood performance is so corrupt that it is irredeemable. Allison writes, "Her five sons and three daughters dreamed often of their mother [Shirley], dreamed she came in to wash their faces with lye, to cut off the places where their ears stuck out, to tie down their wagging tongues, and plane down their purplish genitals. . . . They dreamed and screamed and woke each other in terror" (*Trash* 23). The children envision their mother as a harmful demon, who enacts motherhood through abuse. Even her community acknowledges the abuse, "'That woman hates her children,' the neighbors all said" (Allison *Trash* 24). Yet, no one

attempts to intercede, even Tucker, the father, does not attempt to stand between the evil of his wife and the preservation of his children. The community is so fearful of this broken form of motherhood that Shirley represents that they are too paralyzed to alter Shirley's maltreatment and hatred toward her children, allowing the abuse to continue. Likewise, the community turns a blind eye to Anney's neglect of Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

In Allison's consideration of Anney, who does not exhibit hate toward her daughter like Shirley, Anney is so ineffectual as a protector of Bone, that she does not step in to prevent the abuse Bone suffers from her stepfather, Glen. Betts makes it clear in her fiction as well as in interviews that withholding protection from a child is equivalent to abuse. In interviews, she frames Christine from *Souls Raised from the Dead* as an abusive mother which reinforces the concept that withholding protection of a child is abuse. With this understanding, not only is Glen an abuser, so also is Anney because her inaction to prevent Glen from harming Bone allows the physical abuse to continue. In contrast to Shirley who does not attempt to conceal her hatred from the eyes of the community, Anney's enactment of motherhood is consumed with outward appearances of success, even when the internal workings of the family are dysfunctional and dangerous to her children. Anney's chief goal throughout the novel is to prove her self-worth to her judgmental community by erasing the stamp of "ILLEGITIMATE" from Bone's birth certificate. Anney equates the stamp with the accusation of her impoverished position in society. Solinger reports, "probably the most common and grievous violation a mother could be accused of was poverty" (186). The courthouse gatekeepers for the birth certificate revel in their ability to withhold the social acceptability that Anney most

desires to provide a screen for her impoverished position. Due to Anney's poverty and lack of social standing compounded by her family's nonconformity to southern standards for proper behavior, the courthouse staff view Anney as inconsequential and deserving of their scorn. On Anney's first visit to the courthouse to gain an unstamped version of Bone's birth certificate, the clerk tells her, "This is how it's got to be. The facts have been established" (Allison *Bastard* 4). Even the women clerks show Anney no mercy as Bone narrates, "The women in the doorway shook their heads and pursed their lips. One mouthed to the other, 'Some people.'" (Allison *Bastard* 5). When Anney returns to the courthouse a year later with Aunt Ruth in tow, the clerk again refuses to change the birth certificate and looks at the Boatwright women with "pure righteous justification" while "his eyes laughed at them" (Allison *Bastard* 5). Uncle Earle, Anney's brother, concludes, "The law never done us no good. Might as well get on without it" (Allison *Bastard* 5), but Anney never falters in her determination to amend Bone's birth certificate. The community fails to demonstrate kindness to Anney in something that is inconsequential to the gatekeepers of societal decorum, in this case the courthouse clerks, but of great import to the fifteen-year-old mother who simply wishes to make her daughter's life easier through an unblemished birth certificate. Anney is fixated on community approbation of her motherhood.

The actions of the courthouse staff demonstrate the denial of civic support for Anney's motherhood that women from more privileged classes are afforded. None of the courthouse staff have sympathy for the teenaged mother and her offspring. J. Brooks Bouson in her study of shame in *Bastard Out of Carolina* observes that Anney's disgraced family and status as a single mother generates shame on Anney. She writes,

“Anney is marked as a socially undesirable and tainted woman—as someone suffering from a spoiled identity” (Bouson n.p.). This judgment of Anney’s motherhood performance anticipates—and perhaps precipitates—Anney’s poor mothering of Bone. Anney is much more concerned with the appearance of good mothering to outsiders than with regularly delivering protective and nurturing mothering. Bone’s true needs, which are in Anney’s power to provide, are to be protected from a sexual predator. In this, Anney is unavailable to her daughter. Anney’s own lack of support from the community leave her as a target for an abusive man and prevents her from protecting her daughter from the true dangers of their world.

Anney’s dogged determination to change Bone’s birth certificate demonstrate Anney’s emphasis on outward appearances over the internal workings of the private relationship between mother and child. While Anney reports her actions are for Bone, in reality, Anney acts in her own self-interest. She wants to prove to the community that she is not another fifteen-year-old unwed mother; rather, she is an individual with value. Anney equates the stamp with an indictment of her social position. Bone relates, “Mama hated to be called trash, hated the memory of every day she’d ever spent bent over other people’s peanuts and strawberry plants while they stood tall and looked at her like she was a rock on the ground. The stamp on that birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they’d tried to put on her. *No-good, lazy, shiftless*” (Allison Bastard 3). Anney conflates the stamp on Bone’s birth certificate with her own lack of social currency. She wants to exact revenge on the people of her community who stand “tall and look at her like she was a rock on the ground,” yet she fails to understand and prevent the suffering of her own daughter while she presides over Bone’s destiny

Though she withholds emotional support, Anney is preoccupied with providing her daughters food. For Anney, her inability to feed her girls a proper meal means that she is failing as a mother, and she is tireless in her attempts to feed them. Bone reveals, “Mama knew how to make a meal of biscuits and gravy, flour-and-water biscuits with bacon-fat gravy to pour over them. By the time I started fourth grade, we were eating biscuit dinners more often than not” (Allison *Bastard* 72). Her lack of a steady household income necessitates cheap, carbohydrate and calorie-dense foods as the mainstay of her daughters’ diets. Without fresh vegetables and lean protein, the meal holds little nutritional value for her young daughters. The diet of biscuit and gravy marks the family as southern as Anney repeatedly serves this regional staple. For Anney, “mak[ing] a meal” is the essential role of the southern mother, no matter how limited the supplies at her disposal.

As a result, Anney’s breaking point with Glen is not when she catches him brutally raping her daughter, but rather when she is reduced to feeding Bone and Reese soda crackers and ketchup for a meal. She confronts Glen about their lack of income saying, “Soda cracker and ketchup. . . . You so casual about finding another job, but I had to feed my girls that shit while you sat on your butt all afternoon, smoking and telling lies. . . . Not my kids I was never gonna have my kids know what it was like. Never was gonna have them hungry or cold or scared. Never, you hear me? Never!” (Allison *Bastard* 73). Anney recalls the food scarcity of her own childhood, and through Anney’s words about hunger, cold, and fear, Allison indicates a multi-generational cycle of suffering. Anney’s own traumatic childhood has left her ill-equipped to provide for her children, even as it allows her to imagine their suffering for this fleeting moment. This is

a sharp contrast to Betts's *The Sharp Teeth of Love*, where Luna has the privilege of middle-class access to food and uses her ability to provide food as a means to win Sam's trust and ultimately step in as his adoptive mother. Both Anney and Luna find the ability to provide food is a gateway to being understood as a good mother. Luna, due to her financial standing, succeeds in this project, whereas Anney must resort to desperate measures to buy her daughters food.

Bone implies that after this incident, Anney resorts to prostitution to buy groceries, yet, she does not leave Glen. In her analysis of famine ways in southern women's writing, Jolene Hubbs compares Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone with the Wind* to Anney. Hubbs tells how Scarlett is admired for her "baking-powder cheeks" in contrast to the poor black and white women such as Anney who are "less attractive because of their close contact with foodstuffs. Food sullies Bone's mother, Anney, whose appearance after a long day of waitressing inspires Bone's 'sharp flash' of horror at her place in the world Mitchell depicts" (11). Hubbs acknowledges "how food makes elite women appealing and poor women appalling" (11). So, it is not only Anney's inability to provide a balanced diet to her daughters that mars her attempt at middle-class respectability through mothering, but it is also her relationship to food as a waitress and home cook that mark her social class to the community. Providing sustenance to her daughters is linked to Anney's desire to be understood as more than another impoverished and uneducated mother ill-equipped to care for her children, but her close proximity to the food foils this attempt.

Anney's continued obsession with social acceptability dominates her final interactions with Bone. When Anney leaves Bone to live with Glen, she drops an envelope on Bone's lap. Bone reveals:

Folded into thirds was a certificate. RUTH ANNE BOATWRIGHT. Mother: ANNEY BOATWRIGHT. Father: UNKNOWN. I almost laughed, reading down the page. Greenville General Hospital and the embossed seal of the county, the family legend on imitation parchment. I had never seen it before, but had heard all about it. I unfolded the bottom third. It was blank, unmarked, unstamped. (Allison *Bastard* 309)

Anney offers this public record as a substitute for the protection she was incapable of offering Bone. For Anney, providing Bone this clean slate to build a life for herself stands in for motherlove. While Anney believes the birth certificate is the ultimate demonstration of her motherly concern for her daughter, the irony is that she abandons Bone in the act of offering her a new identity that is not stamped with illegitimacy.

Despite all that she has suffered and her mother's implicit role in her abuse, mother abandonment is Bone's deepest fear. As Anney attempts to explain her love for Glen to her daughter, Bone reflects, "I had lost my mama" (Allison *Bastard* 306). Anney is forced to choose between her daughter and her lover, and she deserts Bone rather than separate from Glen. As Bone realizes her mother's decision she thinks, "My heart broke all over again. I wanted my life back, my mama, but I knew I would never have that. The child I had been was gone" (Allison *Bastard* 307). Like Godwin's Margaret, Bone marks the moment of maternal desertion as the end of her childhood. Bone, like Margaret, also yearns for her mother to return and for life to resume course following the societal

prescriptions that call for an ever-present mother to exclusively tend to her child's needs. Betts echoes these sentiments from the standpoint of the child through her writing of Mary who yearns for her mother to return and be the perfect front-seat mother who peers back lovingly at her daughter. Yet, neither Christine nor Anney is capable of performing that particular script of motherhood imagined by their daughters. Betts's Coker is an interesting counterpoint to these examples in that the mother who has caused him so much anguish refuses to leave the home, and he feels trapped by her presence to the point of considering either killing her or committing suicide. Coker wishes for a mother like his friends have, but he is enough of a realist to understand that Lillian will never be able to fulfill that role. Bone can long for Anney who has repeatedly put her own satisfaction over her daughter's safety, yet through Coker we see that the opposite reaction is perhaps even more harmful for a child. Bone's desire for the return of her mother even though it was full of horrors differs little from Margaret's desire for the idyllic life she had with her mother/playmate. Margaret was always treated as an entity worthy of protecting as opposed to Bone's treatment as an obstacle to Anney's marital happiness. In both cases, the idea of mother represents a fantasy of being the object of want and desire to the daughters. They both dream of being the center of their mothers' existence. Yet, for both daughters, the reality falls short, and they must cope with maternal rejection.

Despite her hurt and anger directed toward her mother, Bone is able to understand the role of the community and the desperation of poverty in informing her mother's actions. She can empathize with the fear her mother experienced as a young teen facing an unwanted pregnancy. Bone reflects, "Who had Mama been, what had she wanted to be or do before I was born? Once I was born, her hopes had turned, and I had climbed up her

life like a flower reaching for the sun. Fourteen and terrified, fifteen and a mother, just past twenty-one when she married Glen. Her life had folded into mine” (Allison *Bastard* 309). Bone metaphorically speaks of herself as a vining flower using her mother as a supportive base to gain access to life-giving sunlight, thus shadowing the needs of her mother in her own desires to survive. Without community support, Anney cannot bear the weight of raising her child. Bone notes that Anney was only a child herself at Bone’s birth. This window of understanding that Bone extends to her mother offers some hope that Bone can overcome the emotional toll of maternal abandonment and sets the stage for a more hopeful version of motherhood in *Cavedweller*.

Delia, the central mother figure in *Cavedweller*, offers a revised version of motherhood that operates as a counterpoint to Allison’s earlier works. In *Cavedweller*, Delia, unlike Anney who leaves her daughter for her lover, abandons her daughters to flee an abusive man. For Delia, remaining in Cayro would have meant suffering continued physical abuse and possibly death at the hands of her husband. Even though the abuse is widely known in the community, Delia is still subject to scorn from the citizens of Cayro due to her abandonment of her oldest daughters. The community harshly judges mothers who do not follow accepted scripts of motherhood. Child abandonment under any condition is unacceptable to the small Georgia community. Delia is ultimately able to gain forgiveness from the community for deserting her daughters, but only through a long term of penance and servitude to which the community bears witness.

The Cayro community considers child abandonment such transgression that even the threat of death is not reason enough to excuse a woman for fleeing. Delia’s initial

moment of public reckoning with her past happens under the watchful eyes of her third daughter, Cissy, during their first stop in Cayro at a local diner. The cook recognizes Delia, yelling, “You that bitch ran off and left her babies. . . . You took off with that rock band. Did all right for yourself, did you? Had yourself a good time? Well, don’t think people don’t remember. We remember. You the kind we remember” (Allison *Cavedweller* 39). The judgment of the community is clear; abandoning motherhood is not an option, even when your husband has no control over his temper and regularly beats you to near death. The waitress at the diner concurs with the cook, dropping the tip Delia left her on the floor under the attentive gaze of the busy diner’s customers as if even Delia’s money is contaminated. Not only does Delia have to battle her former in-law to gain custody of her daughters, she must also combat the negative judgments of the small community over her rights to regain custody of her children. Randall had always told Delia, “Cayro, Georiga, an’t never gonna love you. . . . If you want those girls, we’ll have to steal them” (Allison *Cavedweller* 41). In his decree, he exhibits more understanding of Delia’s loss of respect within the community than Delia can accept or predict in her return to the small southern town.

The harsh judgement of the community on Delia is significant in this hopeful version of motherhood imagined by Allison because Delia is not allowed to simply reinstate herself into community life or motherhood using just her credentials as birth mother of the two girls. Instead, she must prove herself to the community over a long period of time in order to be accepted. Initially, the community is relentless in casting their judgment on her performance of motherhood. The harsh penalty for Delia is that all aspects of her life are affected, from renting a house to securing a career. The omniscient

narrator opines, “Opinion had not shifted enough in Cayro to forgive or understand the sin, not enough to consider that a woman in danger might have lost her girls running from a man who would have surely strangled her in Parlour’s Creek if he had caught her before she climbed on Randall’s bus. No Cayro still believed Delia a sinner, and crying season was a penance they understood” (Allison *Cavedweller* 70). First, Delia has to show her remorse. The community revels in watching her join a cleaning crew, a job they consider to be punishment for high-spirited and talented Delia. They also appear to enjoy her obvious grieving for what she lost when she left her two girls fleeing for her life. When M.T., Delia’s close childhood friend, intervenes with a potential landlord on Delia’s behalf, Richie asks her, “An’t she that woman run off and left them girls?” He wants to deny Delia housing as a result saying, “And you an’t going to talk me into renting to no woman couldn’t be trusted with her own babies, much less my old house” (Allison *Cavedweller* 59). Without the goodwill and solid social standing of M.T., Delia would have a difficult time navigating the Cayro community’s ill-will and desire to punish. Interestingly, at no time does either woman consider this system as oppressive for mothers. Instead, they follow the expected script for Delia, that she shows remorse and grovels to regain community support. The memory of a small-town community runs deep, and Delia must serve her sentence for abandonment for enough time to overlay the memory of her as an unstable mother with her new persona of a dedicated mother and contributing community member.

Family bonds are typically a site of support for individuals in small, working class southern communities, but Allison explores how even these connections are tested when a woman does not comply with the standards set for mothers. Delia’s grandfather, her

only surviving family member, realizes the hopelessness of her quest to regain custody of her daughters. He responds to her with the same judgmental attitude she has experienced in the broader community. Upon her arrival at his home, he says, “Hell, . . . you can’t just waltz back into Cayro and think you gonna get what you want. An’t a soul in this county thinks you got any right to those girls. Not a soul” (Allison *Cavedweller* 51). Eventually, Delia’s tenacity over her quest softens Granddaddy Byrd’s attitudes towards her, and he offers her knowledge at key moments that assists her in gaining custody of the girls.

While the notion of a working mother is fraught for middle-class families in this study, particularly for women in a two-parent household with a working husband, Delia has no choice except to work to support herself and her daughters. This is a departure from the mothers imagined by Betts and Godwin, such as Betts’s Christine who is judged harshly for her desire to work outside the home and Godwin’s Lily who resents her marriage to Ralph that ended her journalism career. Work outside the home has the further advantage of providing Delia with a means to express her creativity and interact with members of the community. This adds to the hopeful version of motherhood that Allison imagines by allowing Delia to be both an engaged and loving mother while also finding success in a career that she enjoys. While the community does not judge her need to work, which is a more equitable view of women than communities imagined by Betts and Godwin, they do wish to control Delia by only allowing her the opportunity to do the most menial and woman-appropriate labor, working for a cleaning service. It is Mrs. Pearlman who is willing to forgive Delia and offer her the opportunity to return to her former trade, a hair stylist. Yet, even Mrs. Pearlman faces the wrath of the community for making the offer. Mrs. Reitower informs her, “That woman’s [Delia’s] a scandal. . . . No

one will come to the shop if you put her in there” (Allison *Cavedweller* 78). However, the community’s moral code ends where their vanity begins. Delia is a talented stylist and is able to work wonders with her clients’ hair. Despite their firm rebuke of her, the women of Cayro want to benefit from Delia’s ministrations to their locks. It is through approved woman’s work that Delia integrates into the community. Unlike Betts’s Christine, who faces her community’s working-class anxiety over a woman’s desire to create identity through work in the beauty industry, Delia’s work at the salon gains her credibility through her talents as a stylist in her working-class community.

While Betts is conflicted with a woman’s desire to work over her desire to mother, Allison demonstrates that work can be an essential and necessary part of a woman’s identity through her depiction of work as an anchor for Delia. Delia needs work as an outlet for her creative energy. In fact, her work as a stylist is discussed in magical terms throughout the text. With Delia’s first customer at the reopened Bonnet, “Delia murmured and smiled and worked magic with her hands” (Allison *Cavedweller* 100). However, work is also essential for her and her girls to have food and shelter. She does not have the financial luxury of a husband with a salary and middle-class respectability to choose not to work. Her career building establishes Delia into the community as a serious financial provider for her daughters and gives her the foundation to reclaim her lost daughters and reset her life. Allison’s imagined community that balances on the edge of the working and impoverished classes realizes the necessity for a woman to work, even a woman who is a mother. Yet, Delia still faces societal obstacles in her quest to gain custody of her daughters.

The opinions of the community are reflected in the legal code which has severed Delia's rights as a mother. Delia must engage in a legal battle to regain custody of her daughters. Clint is determined to use the girls as pawns in an attempt to recapture Delia or at least to hurt her for deserting him. Allison describes his association with Delia and his daughters:

Clint had seemed oblivious to those two yeasty warm bodies [his daughters]. It was Delia he breathed in and out, Delia he bruised and dreamed of lying limp in his arms. It was her wet, broken flesh that called to him, the children they had made together ghostly, distracting. Delia knew she was the only thing in that house that had ever seemed real to Clint. Only when she was gone did the girls register, and then only for the piece of her they were. Clint had held on to

Amanda and Dede because they were anchors for Delia's heart. (*Cavedweller* 73).

Delia recognizes Clint's motives for preventing her from raising her daughters. After Clint is granted full custody of the girls, she tells Randall, "He doesn't want them. . . . What he wants is to hurt me, bleed me from every pore. That is the sin God will judge him for, that is the crime. The man could open his veins on the throne of heaven and no mother would ever forgive him what he has done. He is damned, by God, damned forever" (Allison *Cavedweller* 73). Delia believes that the sisterhood of mothers will exact judgment on Clint despite the failure of the court system to recognize evil and act with sympathy for an abused woman. This is ironic since it is the sisterhood of mothers that makes her life so difficult upon her return to Cayro.

Delia's situation reveals the inadequacies of the judicial system in providing support to mothers. Even as Allison writes a triumphant version of motherhood with this

novel, she is also critiquing the obstacles that women who earnestly wish to shower their offspring with unconditional love while maintaining a strong sense of individuality face in a society that wishes to exert control on all aspects of motherhood. To reach her dream of reunion with her girls, Delia must subvert the court system and work directly with her tormentor, Clint, to regain the rights of motherhood. Once she had children with Clint, she is not free from his power to affect her life. Allison's exploration of this paradox of motherhood that forever connects a woman with the father of her children exposes an inherent vulnerability for women who have children. To regain custody of Amanda and Dede, Delia agrees to nurse Clint, who is dying from cancer, to his death. Allison shows that a woman is never sovereign in her role as mother. The birth father can use his parental status to control a woman even after she leaves him. As Allison illustrates, a devoted and invested mother is always exposed to the machinations of a man who wishes to control her through her children. Allison shows that motherlove leaves women such as Delia vulnerable to be exploited to the point of nursing a man who brutally abused her in order to gain access to her daughters.

In addition to the community's relentlessness in judging Delia's mothering skills, she also must contend with her own daughters' harsh judgements of her past behavior. In a mix of socialized attitudes of correct mothering as well as their propensity to want Delia's actions to center on them, her three daughters are initially vocal and angry judges of Delia's motherhood performance. Cissy is livid with her mother for uprooting her from her home in Los Angeles to live in the small Georgia town. Amanda, Delia's oldest daughter does not mince words. On their first evening reunited as a family she tells Delia, "I don't love you. . . . I don't care nothing about you. . . . You're nothing to me" (Allison

Cavedweller 119). Yet, even in the face of this vitriol, Delia is determined to create a cohesive family unit. *Cavedweller* is Allison's most hopeful mothering text as Delia's dogged determination softens her children's anger toward her, and she is able to reunite her beleaguered family into a fragile, but cohesive unit. This family building is a new and more hopeful ending for the trope of the runaway mother imagined by the authors of this study.

Delia is so single-mindedly driven to reassume the role as mother to her children that she refuses to consider how damaged her relationship with her daughters is after such a long separation. Rosemary, a close friend and collaborator from Los Angeles, points out the obvious problem in Delia's plan, "Lord, girl, you do not want to do that. Those children are half grown now. They an't seen you in more than ten years. Nobody there is going to welcome you, honey" (Allison *Cavedweller* 5-6). Cissy is much more direct with her mother about her feelings over their impending departure from Los Angeles, the only home she has known. She tells her mother, "I hate you . . . I hate you more than Satan and all the devils" (Allison *Cavedweller* 3). Yet Delia is determined; she tells Rosemary, "they're my girls. I'm their mother. That don't go away. They'll be mad at me, yeah. But I can handle that. I been handling it here" (Allison *Cavedweller* 6). At the crux of the story is the veracity of Delia's statement. She claims a biological mother has rights over her children regardless of her actions. Delia believes that even in abandoning her children, she still has the privilege to come back years later and reassert herself as a present mother in their lives. In the novel, Allison explores if this is pragmatic and even possible. Delia's task is even more Herculean in that her daughters are no longer malleable young children. They are now teenagers who have lived over ten years under

the cloud of maternal abandonment. While Delia does succeed in reinstating herself in the lives of her children, it is a difficult path to reconciliation. However, in Delia's success, Allison rewrites the trope of the fleeing mother from one who is so damaged she is irredeemable to a woman who can gain forgiveness and respect in her mothering role. In this way, Delia provides another version of an outlaw mother, who bucks the traditional script of motherhood expected and enforced by her society to carve out a version of mothering that suits her and ultimately provides sanctuary for her girls. Both Delia and Betts's Luna are willing to cast away the expectations of society that rule their behavior to succeed as outlaw mothers.

Motherhood transformed Delia so that her children inform all aspects of her life. Rosemary observes the power of motherhood to change her friend, telling Cissy, "You with your hard little pinball eyes, that man in there [Clint] eating her up every minute, Amanda with her pinched mouth and nasty looks, Dede like a big old sucker snake swallowing the air wherever she goes—all this, and still Delia is happy." Rosemary gives her verdict, "Maybe there is something to all that stuff people say about making babies. Sure looks like it's pretty much taken over whatever it was that Delia wanted before you came along. I don't think she even remembers who she was before she made you girls" (Allison *Cavedweller* 169). Rosemary expresses ambivalence toward motherhood due to the actions of the girls toward their mother. Yet, Delia does not register or respond to her daughters' anger toward her. Instead, she meets them at all times with unconditional maternal love and acceptance. Despite the sacrifice of a potentially successful, solo music career and Rosemary's suggestion of the erasure of Delia's self-identity that existed prior

to motherhood, Delia can only see one route for her life, to reclaim her lost daughters and act as a hands-on mother to all three of her children.

Rosemary speaks of motherhood as a consumptive practice that erases Delia's true identity and confirms the worst fears of being consumed as a mother by characters inhabiting the texts of Betts and Godwin. Yet, contrary to the tensions of motherhood explored by Betts and Goodwin, Allison writes a mother who wants the opportunity to perform the rituals of motherhood to all her children and is willing to adjust her life to accommodate her children. Delia finds happiness in the quotidian everyday rituals of mothering three children. Despite Rosemary's confusion over Delia's decision to give up art, fame, and money, Delia never questions her drive to mother, nor does she ever express desire for a life different than the one she eventually gains. Delia attempts to explain herself to her children, "you're everything to me. Everything. . . . The three of you. The three of you are all I want in the world. If you don't love me, I'm not surprised. If you hate me, I can take that too. But you're mine, all of you. You're everything I am. And whatever else happens, I am going to take care of you" (Allison *Cavedweller* 119-20). For Delia, this instinct to provide for her children overrides all other desire and provides her contentment, even though her actions appear irrational to Rosemary, her childless friend.

Through Delia, Allison interrogates her own ideas about the mystic nature of motherhood that makes her want to devote her time to her own child, Wolf, instead of the career-building she did before his birth. In her interview with Dietzel, Allison says of Delia, "The novel is, it started out to be entirely about three sisters who hated each other. And it still is, but I got this thing with mother-daughter relationships and I figured out,

after I had made the sisters, that one of the reasons they hated each other was their mother, and I kind of fell in love with her, so Delia—Delia is quite amazing” (Dietzel 52). Allison is invested in the concept of triumphant motherhood as an overriding theme of the novel, and Delia operates as an example for how becoming a mother can change a woman’s outlook and desires so that motherhood is not an oppressive chore, but, rather, the platform for a woman to experience wholeness and satisfaction.

In these three works, whose publications span ten years, Allison demonstrates an evolution in her attitudes toward motherhood moving from the harm that uninvolved mothers inflict on their offspring to the empowerment that women can gain through motherhood. Allison’s earlier fictional mothers do not feel a call to mother. Instead, they drift in and out of their mothering roles as suits their own desires. In these earlier works, the community is complicit in disempowering the mothers so that they are deprived important resources – both material in the form of food and housing and psychological in the form of acceptance and emotional support -- that would allow them to better manage motherhood. This lack of community support in Allison’s earlier works is the catalyst that causes a character like Anney, who lacks social currency, to cling to her abusive husband at all costs. Allison’s personal experiences as a mother results in a change of focus in her fiction evident in *Cavedweller* which was written after the birth of her son. Through Delia, Allison demonstrates a version of mothering that is motivated by mystical motherlove that causes Delia to willingly perform a selfless version of motherhood that offers a new way to approach mothering outside the typical constrictions of perfected motherhood that affected many of the women that Betts and Godwin imagine to the point that their only recourse is bitterness, unfulfillment, or desertion. Delia’s unwavering need

to mold a form of motherhood that serves both her and her daughters defies the community's desire to tame her into their idea of the repentant mother, and, ultimately, she gains acceptance and at least limited support, from the townsfolk of Cayro.

Allison offers a glimpse of hope that traditionally minded southern communities have the capacity to adapt to new interpretations of the roles of women as mothers and to accept alternative family formations such as the single-mother household that Delia creates. Perhaps this acceptance is the first step in these communities banding together to offer real support to all mothers and their children. Instead of finding motherhood oppressive, Delia charts a new path to mothering performance and finds it to be a joyful ambition. In her reassumed role as mother, Delia finally gains peace, which no other mother in Allison's texts examined here is able to achieve. Allison's lived experience of motherhood and her complete devotion to her son signal this tonal change in her fiction and suggests that women can invent ways of empowered mothering outside of the script their communities expect. Allison's works provide a transition point and platform to interpret the successful mothers of Kaye Gibbons' fiction.

CHAPTER 4

KAYE GIBBONS' WOMEN-CENTRIC SPACES

Kaye Gibbons' novels from the late 1980s and early 1990s consider women on the fringes of working-class respectability who do not prioritize societal norms that dictate the behavior of mothers. Gibbons offers an exploration of empowerment for both mother and child through strong matriarchal networks that transcend societal rules for maternal behavior and allow women to create supportive family structures and communities that nurture each woman's unique talents. Gibbons' works are particularly focused on the mother-daughter relationship as well as multigenerational households. For Gibbons, the mother-daughter dyad is more broadly understood than a biological connection or traditional kinship. Beginning in *Ellen Foster* (1987), she makes the case that intergenerational relationships between women not related by a blood bond can be as powerful and important to the woman and child as a biological relationship. In Betts's *The Sharp Teeth of Love* and Allison's *Cavedweller*, Luna and Delia are outlaw mothers who succeed because they operate on the fringes of society and are willing to ignore societal norms. Gibbons builds on the notion of the outlaw mother and extends it to othermothering and alloparenting in which non-biological mothers are important nurturers in a child's life. Gibbons' fiction demonstrates application of Patricia Hill Collins's theory of the othermother and Sarah Hrdy's anthropological research on alloparents. Gibbons, in an interview with Jan Nordby Gretlund, explains her focus on mothers-daughter interactions. Gibbons says, "I think because my mother died when I

was ten, I have so few memories of her that I'm always in a book trying to create a personal history of a mother and daughter relationship. In each book I experimented with what would be ideal" (Gretlund 135). It is notable that in Gibbons' works studied here, men are purged from the households which allows mothers and daughters to define themselves in alternative, feminine-centric terms unencumbered by the pressures to conform to male expectations. As Betty in *A Cure for Dreams* (1991) recalls her father, she says, "When the door closed behind him, I thought, He's come home to ruin our day. I assumed this was his intention. This was my first original thought of my father" (Gibbons *Cure* 15). In all three novels considered in this chapter, the fathers/husbands die in rather hideous ways, yet through the termination of male toxicity from the household, the women are allowed the freedom to thrive. Gibbons' novels consider how mothers and their daughters respond when joy-killing fathers are removed from the home and question if strong women-centric bonds can fully form in the presence of a husband/father who does not support the development of feminine ties.

The women of the novels considered here live on the fringe of what Godwin's white characters would consider respectable southern, middle-class society. None of the matriarchal figures in Gibbons' works conform to the ideals of a traditional southern lady and mother that would require them to dedicate all their time and energy to homemaking and childrearing. Nor do any of the women adopt the philosophy that a strong male figure is needed to legitimize their household. In *Ellen Foster*, Ellen's new mama is a foster mother in a household that has so normalized the absence of male authority that it does not even warrant a mention in Ellen's narrative of her life story. Lottie, the matriarch in *A Cure for Dreams*, refuses to consider marriage after her husband's suicide, even when the

community and her extended family imply that it would be the proper thing for her to do. In *Charms for the Easy Life*, Charlie Kate has the financial means to afford a home in a middle-class neighborhood, but her nonconformist life excludes her from being sold a house in that area. Instead, she purchases a home in a struggling working-class neighborhood and proceeds to help her neighbors by fighting for proper sanitation as well as safer streets and sidewalks. While the middle-class communities surrounding these women are focused on establishing barriers of entry to respectability, Gibbons' matriarchal figures have little concern over gaining the respect of the middle-class. Instead, they utilize their outsider status to enrich their matriarchal powers in their unconventional homes.

In Gibbons' novels, mothers are also mediators of cultural spaces. As in Allison's novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, foodways are represented as a component of motherhood that are also connected to the evaluation of motherhood performance. Gibbons interrogates the expectations that are placed on mothers, both biological and otherwise, to provide sustenance to their children and how those expectations become metrics for motherhood performance to be evaluated.

In addition to the cultural representations of motherhood and food, Gibbons also explores motherhood and race in these novels. The main characters of Gibbons' novels considered here are white. Gibbons, in her first novel, *Ellen Foster*, lays the ground work for white motherhood performance to be evaluated based a woman's acceptance of interracial relationships and her propensity to resist racist ideas and actions. Gibbons' considerations of race offer a possible solution to Lillian Smith's observations implicating southern mothers in the perpetuation of racism in her 1941 *Killers of the*

Dream. The idea that support of racial equality is a measurement of white mothering effectiveness is present in all of Gibbons' novels considered in this chapter.

There is a tradition in southern writing of sometimes antagonistic relations between mothers and daughters such as those explored here in the novels of Betts, Godwin, and Allison. These relationships follow the precedent set by southern women writers such as Flannery O'Connor and the awkward relationship between Joy/Hulga and Mrs. Hopewell in "Good Country People" or Virgie Rainey and her mother in Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples*. In contrast, Gibbons celebrates the feminine bond and suggests that motherhood, which is imagined outside of the typical mothering scripts of the perfect, selfless, always-present mother attuned to every want of her child, can offer benefits to both mother and child.

Unlike Betts and Allison who have written and talked extensively about their personal lives including their experiences as mothers, Gibbons is very private and reveals very little about her own life experiences in interviews. She is the mother of three daughters, and, in a 2009 interview with Don O'Briant says of her home-life, "I lost so much in the divorce [from the father of her children, Michael Gibbons]. . . [but the] house is orderly, and it's big enough to allow for those flare-ups that happen when you're a single parent with three teenage girls" (n.p.). Martha Waggoner in "Novelist Gibbons Continues Uphill Battle" contacted Michael Gibbons for her report. Michael Gibbons says of his daughters with ex-wife, Kaye, "All he can do is make sure his daughters stay in contact with their mother." He reports that Gibbons' daughters are "not overjoyed with the situation, but they're not in counseling" (n.p.). Gibbons' deteriorating mental health has left her alienated from her children as well as her inner circle of friends and family

which explains, in part, her avoidance of the public eye. In her own life, Gibbons lives on the fringes of the expectations for mothers in the South to maintain marriages with male providers - a theme considered in much of her fiction.

Even so, Gibbons indicates the grounding effect that motherhood had on her life. In a rare interview discussing her private life, Gibbons, in “How I Became a Writer,” says, “Having my first child made me feel part of the human race” (133). Gibbons’ first-born allowed her to feel inclusion in the community, a benefit that reinforced her humanity. Yet, Gibbons’ experiences with bi-polar disorder and the sometimes-failed struggle to regulate her disease, have made her more guarded than other writers of this study about publicly sharing her personal experiences as a mother. Even in this void, Gibbons, like many of her fictional characters, is at the edge of southern tradition where a woman is compelled to discuss her experiences as a mother to all who will listen. Gibbons’ idea that experiencing motherhood can be beneficial, even liberating, to a woman is a nascent concept in some of the works by other writers considered here and completely counter to a majority of the works of this study. In three of her early works, *Ellen Foster* (1987), *A Cure for Dreams* (1991), and *Charms for the Easy Life* (1993), Gibbons offers a more hopeful view of motherhood than the other writers of this study which is powered by her women’s disregard for masculine-imagined tropes controlling the behavior of women.

Nonessential Men

Gibbons’ early novels depict mothers and children who thrive in the absence of men. In fact, men are ineffectual and often unwelcome in the lives of Gibbons’ mothers and children beyond their usefulness in procreation. Judith B. Rosenberger studies the

function of female kin in the meta-identification of womanhood. She notes, “[c]ultural anthropology documents the splintering of women as a social group when their routes to self-preservation and influence are limited to association with powerful males”

(Rosenberger 66). Gibbons offers a vision for mothers and their daughters in the absence of traditional power structures originating from a powerful male income earner.

Rosenberger continues, “Sisterhood as collective membership to extend female influence and self-determination reintegrates mother and daughter. . . . [the] uninterrupted positive affinity of mother and daughter as female kin provides a source of security through many changes in individual womanhood” (67). Gibbons’ mother-daughter dyads, featuring relationships both within the kinship structures and outside of biological bonds support an alternative woman-centric environment as fertile ground for the women to explore routes to fulfillment.

Ellen in Gibbons’ first novel, *Ellen Foster*, sets the tone for the treatment of men in the author’s early works. The novel, told in the voice of eleven-year-old Ellen, begins, “When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy” (Gibbons *Ellen* 1). While Ellen does not kill her father, he does, indeed, die. Gibbons’ fiction reflects her own lived experience with her alcoholic father who died while Gibbons was still a young girl. Ellen reports, “He drank his own self to death the year after the County moved me out. I heard how they found him shut up in the house dead and everything” (Gibbons *Ellen* 1). His alcoholism and abusive nature lead to his alcohol-fueled and lonely death. Ellen remarks, “And I can say for a fact that I am better off now than when he was alive” (Gibbons *Ellen* 1). Thus, Gibbons establishes fathers as obstacles that mothers and children must surmount in order to achieve contentment. This is a sentiment that is repeated in all the

works considered here. The fathers are so abusive and destructive mentally and sometimes physically that each young daughter only expresses relief at the demise of her father. Once the fathers no longer stand as obstacles for the women, their female-centric relationships are able to fully blossom.

Ellen's quest to gain independence from her neglectful and abusive father is complicated by her lack of a strong maternal protector. Ellen's mother is too sick and defeated from her illness and the constant abuse directed at her from her husband to provide Ellen with nurturing typically associated with a mother toward her child. Instead, Ellen takes on the role of nurturing her mother. When her mother returns home from the hospital, it is Ellen who comforts and cares for her. Ellen reports in her narrative, "Mama's easy to tend to. She goes back in the bedroom. Not a bit of trouble. Just stiff and hard to move around. I get her back in bed and tell her he's [her husband] outside for the night. She starts to whimper and I say it is no reason to cry" (Gibbons *Ellen* 6). Ultimately, her mother believes that her only escape from disease, poverty, and abuse in the home is through suicide. This reflects Gibbons' lived experience. O'Briant writes that, "much of her [Gibbons'] depression stemmed from unreconciled grief over her parents' deaths. Although she had written about that in her first novel, *Ellen Foster*, she still blamed herself for her mother's suicide" (n.p.). For Ellen, her mother's death leaves her even more exposed and vulnerable to her alcoholic father.

While Ellen's biological mother is unable to form a powerful mother-daughter dyad with Ellen that usurps the dominance of the abusive husband/father, Ellen still believes that a mother-figure in her life is the stabilizing support she needs to succeed. Upon the death of her mother, Ellen's focus shifts from protecting her mother to finding a

new mama to form an alternative mother-daughter dyad with her and provide her life with stability. She actively seeks a woman to become her new mother that will provide her with the security she lacked when living with her abusive father and weakened mother. Ellen believes a mother is replaceable, and she is determined to find stability through a new maternal presence in her life. Ellen is engaging in what Patricia Hill Collins identifies as the search for an othermother. In “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships” Collins details the ideals that white middle-class women overlay on motherhood that “become particularly problematic for Black women and others outside this debate” (43). These difficulties include the operation of mothers within a traditional nuclear family where the woman is dedicated full-time to domestic chores including childcare, the strict gendered segregation of roles within the family, and the assumption that good mothers are reliant on men for economic security. These strict guidelines prevent more creative approaches to mothering that can be beneficial to both women and their children who exist outside of middle-class, white, heteronormative relationships. Collins writes, “In African-American communities, the boundaries distinguishing biological mothers of children from other women who care for children are often fluid and changing. . . . African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible” (46-7). Therefore, these communities that operate outside of the white, middle-class norms for motherhood rely on “‘othermothers,’ women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” (Collins 47). Ellen and her biological family are relegated to the ranks of white poverty, well outside the valorized ideals of white, perfected motherhood, by the more affluent members of their community.

Ellen operates under the conditions Collins describes, seeking an othermother to nurture Ellen to womanhood. The household of Ellen's new mama, her othermother, is devoid of men and led by her strong and loving foster mother.

Sarah Hrdy also explores this concept from an anthropological standpoint in *Mothers and Others* asserting that alloparents, similar to Collins' notion of othermothers, those who tend to the needs of children who are unrelated to them through blood bonds, are favored in the processes of natural selection to allow more children to reach adulthood, thus ensuring the survival of the species. Hrdy writes, "The need for alloparental succor transformed the selection pressures that shaped our species, and in doing so altered the way infants developed and then the way humans evolved" (67). Ellen recognizes that her survival is dependent on an alloparent to fulfill the void left by her biological parents, and, in a twist on Hrdy's ideas, she actively seeks a replacement instead of passively awaiting a community member to fulfill the need. This demonstrates the community's reticence to protect all of their young. In Ellen's southern society, she is considered a throwaway child that is not worthy of saving much like Bone in Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*. It is Ellen's personal fortitude and desire that affords her the opportunity for a safe home.

While Gibbons explores the benefits of othermothering and alloparenting in her fiction, it is an idea that is dangerous to the middle-class status quo that insists biological mothers are the only suitable childrearers for their offspring. Only because Ellen operates on the fringes of respectable, white society is her pursuit of an othermother allowed to reach fruition. It is doubtful that Godwin's middle-class, white characters would experience the same latitude in employing othermothering, as it would be dangerous to

the white status quo in their communities, yet, Lydia's Black friend, Renee, engages in the practice by placing her daughter, Camilla, in the home of Camilla's grandmother freeing Renee to pursue her academic goals. Both Ellen and Renee offer evidence that the ability to escape the maternal roles prescribed by more affluent, white southern society is an important step for women to achieve goals such as education and engage in successful self-building as Ellen does when she finds her othermother.

In *Ellen Foster*, Gibbons provides a new outcome to a repeated motherhood trope in the collections of works explored in this study. The runaway mothers of Betts, Godwin, and Allison result in daughters who pine for their lost mothers. These mothers are irreplaceable to the young daughters who yearn for the love and acceptance of this singular human to bring contentment to their lives. Ellen is an alternative form of daughter. After acting as caretaker and protector of her mother up to her mother's death, Ellen gives a metaphorical shrug and looks forward for a means to improve her life. She reports of her new life with her alloparent, "I figure I made out pretty good considering the rest of my family is either dead or crazy" (Gibbons *Ellen* 2). After being shifted from home to home, she takes matters into her own hands and chooses a new mother. For Ellen, birth-mothers are not the founts of irreplaceable love and acceptance. Instead, she searches for an othermother who will provide her a complete package of what a child requires: a safe home, regular access to food, clean clothes, and acceptance. She spots a potential mother replacement at church and thinks, "since you [her new mama] already had some girls about my size . . . you might be able to squeeze me in" (Gibbons *Ellen* 118). Upon arriving at her new mama's doorstep on Christmas after leaving her aunt's home following a fight with her selfish aunt and cousin, Ellen only has two questions as a

form of interview of the woman she hopes will take her in. She asks, “Well I need to know if you are pretty healthy or if you have a disease or bad habits like drinking. Also are you generally friendly or do you have days when you act crazy or extra mean?” (Gibbons *Ellen* 119). Ellen’s concerns are based on lived experience in her unstable home with her birth parents and reinforced by the loveless homes she encountered while living with members of her mother’s family. Ellen is a no-nonsense pragmatist with a quirky, homespun voice who breaks the mold of traditional scripts children have for their mothers which consider the mother unique and irreplaceable. Her attitudes echo feminist thought with origins in the 1960s women’s movement expressed by women like Germaine Greer who questioned the importance placed on the idea that only a birth mother can successfully raise her biological child.

Ellen refuses to accept the traditional script that other children of this study believe – a biological mother is the only means for security. Ellen’s fictional peer-group considered here believes children must be showered by the attention and love of a birth mother. Betts’s Mary believes that only her mother can make her life complete and dreams of very specific activities such as Girl Scout leader and Sunday School teacher that her mother will perform to demonstrate her dedication to her daughter. Godwin’s Margaret echoes this idea through her collection of runaway mother stories and her need to understand her mother’s desertion. Ellen’s adaptability allows her to find a stable home, and true to Gibbons’ reoccurring theme, Ellen’s new home is dominated by a strong maternal figure and is notably missing a paternal figure. Gibbons leaves Ellen’s new mama unnamed until her 2006 sequel to the novel, *The Life All Around Me by Ellen Foster*, in which Ellen reveals her foster mother’s name as Laura. Ellen does not

explicitly point out the lack of a male figure in the home in either novel, but Laura operates as an independent head of household without a male partner in both stories. The fact that it is so natural to Ellen to find peace in a household without a male head that she does not explore it in her musings is noteworthy. Ellen's views of the world have been shaped to be very woman-centric due to the trauma of her early childhood inflicted by her father. In the two novels of this study that follow the publication of *Ellen Foster*, Gibbons reverses the trope of runaway mothers again, by giving us mothers who stake their territory, refuse conventional motherhood scripts, and rid their environment of the men who attempt to stop them. In these novels the men flee while the women take control of home, income, and child rearing.

The strong matriarchal forces that shape the lives of women in *A Cure for Dreams* and *Charms for the Easy Life* offer a sharp contrast to Ellen's relationship with her birth mother. Gibbons tells Gretlund that *A Cure for Dreams* is her favorite book: "It is because I re-created an ideal situation with those three women living in the house together" (135). The daughters of these novels do not face the abuse that Ellen faces in her early years because they are supported by a strong maternal line. For Lottie and her daughter, Betty, in *A Cure for Dreams*, Charles, the husband/father, is a dark and gloomy force in the household that acts as an impediment to the women's freedom to conduct their lives on their own terms. Betty, whose parental loyalty lies solely with her mother, remarks, "My mother eased further away from my father so thus he had less and less time to talk about my illness or anything else to her. Her intent, in fact, was to leave him without leaving him" (Gibbons *Cure* 29). Charles's lack of interest and support for his wife and daughter have alienated him from their tightknit relationship. Upon his suicide,

Lottie is angry for the disruption and complication his suicide causes her due to the gossip about his death in the small town and among her family members. At no point does either mother or daughter express sadness or remorse over his death. Betty reports, “He killed himself solely for himself, and it was, in his case, a more particularly selfish act than usual. He didn’t die for fear of failure in our eyes. He was not at all of this mind” (Gibbons *Cure* 81). Once the women realize their firm financial footing even with the loss of the family earner, they continue on in their woman-centric society with more freedom and abandon than they ever experienced when Charles was living. Betty is the prized daughter and side-kick to her mother’s activities in the community.

Husbands and fathers are equally superfluous to the mothers and daughters of *Charms for the Easy Life*. Upon the death of her father, Margaret narrates, “For years he had made himself unavailable to me, and so the fact that he was now truly unavailable didn’t create a void or fill me with a sense of loss. Nothing of that nature. I didn’t think I’d have less of a life with him gone. I knew my mother and I would have more” (Gibbons *Charms* 49). Margaret echoes the sentiment of Ellen and Betty in their lack of remorse in losing their fathers. All three daughters state that life will be more satisfying without the presence of a father. With the security of land and a home, Margaret and her mother are free to explore their mother-daughter relationship on their own terms which leads to empowering unity between the two women. While Gibbons concedes in her interview with Gretlund that fathers are more involved with children now than in the historical period of the novel, she still believes, “the burden of raising children is on women” (136). Thus, the absence of men allows women to more intently focus on their roles as caretakers of the future generation.

The strength of maternity is only increased when Sophia's mother and Margaret's grandmother, Charlie Kate, moves into their home creating three generations of strong-willed women under a single roof. Before Margaret's father dies, Charlie Kate's husband left for work one morning and did not return. Margaret reports, "As he [her grandfather] became more and more frustrated with his life, he became, understandably, more and more unbearable. My grandmother secretly withdrew her affection and offered more of herself to caring for my mother" (Gibbons *Charms* 21). This repeats the ideas from *A Cure for Dreams* that a mother can withdraw affection from her husband and instead become immersed in raising her offspring. This act of defiance is threatening to the control men, such as those middle-class men imagined by Godwin, exert over women to maintain traditional scripts for women as submissive to the whims of their husbands. In the latter of Gibbons' works examined in this study, men are valuable in procreation, but are impediments to mothers' abilities to remain fully attentive to their daughters. In order for the mothers to gain complete autonomy to successfully experience identity building, the husbands/fathers are ignored and removed emotionally from the lives of the women prior to their physical departures from the home. The women thrive in these women-centric, yet heteronormative, spaces where they are free to generate unconventional and empowering mothering scripts marking these women's experiences as unique from women who see no alternative to traditional motherhood.

Working Woman Redefined

Gibbons reimagines a woman's position both in the home and community, and she demonstrates systems for a woman to blend her work of childrearing with her work outside the home. Betts's Christine and Godwin's Ruth experience frustration and

confinement in their expected roles as traditional southern mothers who selflessly make serving their children, husbands, and community their life's work. Both of these mothers flee to embark on identity building that is independent of motherhood and the family. Gibbons recognizes this southern mothering expectation in some of her secondary characters such as Betty's mother-in-law. Mary Jo Randolph unquestioningly upholds southern tradition in her negative critique of the scooped bodice of Betty's wedding dress and her observation of southern social order that forces Betty and her mother to sneak Polly Deal into Betty's wedding shower held at the Randolph home. Mary Jo is a flat character that lacks the curiosity and courage to carve out her own unique self-identity like the women in close orbit to Betty and her mother. Gibbons' main characters are women who realize intellectual self-actualization while simultaneously mothering their children which in turn energizes their relationships with their children.

In *A Cure for Dreams*, Lottie's energy is focused outside the home as opposed to inside the home throughout the text. Betty narrates, "Soon we were living more outside our home than in" during the period while Charles was alive (Gibbons *Cure* 29). Instead of remaining in the home focused on the traditional duties of wife and mother such as women like Mary Jo Randolph, Lottie is focused on close involvement with life outside the home. Kathryn McKee in her work on the language of women in *A Cure for Dreams* discusses the power that the spoken word provides the women of the story: "The purpose of that voice is not to equip women for participation in the male-dominated discourse that undeniably continues to structure their physical worlds. Rather their acquisition of voice allows them to talk to one another" (McKee 98). This talk is empowering and allows the women to "circumvent the confines of patriarchal dominion" (McKee 98). Lottie and

Betty use their woman talk to create worlds outside of Charles' observations or understanding through the power of their words.

Preparing dinner for the working husband is one of the patriarchal confines the two women evade. Betty observes that mother and daughter would "return home barely in time to lay out the meals that Polly Deal had already served my father for lunch and left on the stove disguised as supper. . . . For years I watched my mother fairly teeter on the edge of having my father ask her where she'd been all afternoon that she couldn't fix a fresh meal at supper" (Gibbons *Cure* 29-30). Lottie refuses to perform in the manner expected of an obedient southern wife, and instead is focused on creating a community of women who are empowered through their interactions. This lack of conformity in the domestic realm echoes Betts's letters to Abbot where she speaks of her lack in achieving these same household tasks expected by her husband such as meal preparation. While it is not a paid position, Lottie approaches her work in the community of women as a career of sorts. McKee discusses this as "a world, a reality, of their own in contradistinction to the patriarchally defined one in which they must typically operate" (99). The women can occupy both realities, even simultaneously. McKee writes that they are not deluded by this duality, "Rather the women create an alternative reality that is simply more meaningful for them" (99). It certainly moves Lottie and Betty out of the home and instills in Betty a sense that a woman is not responsible for delivering quality meals or attentive homemaking to her spouse and children. Lottie's mothering is integrated into her community mission. Betty says, "I was in step with my mother, and though I was on friendly terms with young people my age, I preferred to stay right by her like a little twin" (Gibbons *Cure* 50). Lottie's work outside the home in developing a community of

women does not detract from her attentions to her daughter, but, rather, the two engage in the activities together in a sororal relationship, and both are enriched.

Similarly, in *Charms for the Easy Life*, Charlie Kate blends her work and homelife. She is the ultimate working mother who seamlessly combines her talent for healing with nurturing Sophia and later her granddaughter, Margaret. Through Charlie Kate, Gibbons imagines motherhood, not as a zero-sum game for women, but instead as just one component of a many-faceted woman. For Charlie Kate, motherhood does not mark the end of her career as a healer in her community. Instead, she integrates Sophia, and later Margaret, into her practice. Margaret narrates the story of the mother-daughter relationship between Charlie Kate and Sophia, “My mother, during this time, was happy as pie, going to elementary school, coming home and wrapping bandages, pressing pills, helping with supper, doing her homework by the fire. She first witnessed an operation performed by her mother in 1911, when she was seven” (Gibbons *Charms* 23). Margaret also experiences the connectivity between domestic and work spaces when Charlie Kate moves into the home she shares with Sophia. Margaret narrates, “From the first day she [Charlie Kate] was with us, my eyes stayed wide open in astonishment. I was continuously full of looking, because not only did she come, but her thriving medical practice came with her. . . . She had left a sign on her door notifying patients that she had moved, asking them to pass word to friends and family” (Gibbons *Charms* 58-9). The line between the domestic space of the home and public space of business is blurred for the Birch women making it possible for Charlie Kate to continue her practice as a healer while participating fully in the domestic realm with her daughter and granddaughter. The masculine idea of leaving the home to work in a separate space is discarded by Charlie

Kate as she models the possibilities for women to engage in intellectually stimulating work while fully participating in the life of the family, but family is redefined to include only women as men are viewed by Charlie Kate as intrusions to their way of life. Despite Charlie Kate's aversion to men after the defection of her husband and the advances she is able to make in her alternative medicine career, it is noteworthy that Charlie Kate, before she dies, encourages both her daughter, Sophia, and her granddaughter to marry men who will nurture them while also allowing the next generation of women the freedoms to pursue career and self-building outside the home. While Charlie Kate finds that men represent traditional southern societal norms that stand as roadblocks to her preferred lifestyle, the novel ends with her display of hopefulness that her daughter and granddaughter can engage in successful and fulfilling lives as part of more conventional, heteronormative relationships.

Outside Traditional Southern Societal Norms

In Gibbons' novels, southern society operates as an insider/outsider system. Women who follow the dictates of the southern script for mothers that places them squarely into domestic service are shielded as insiders. Women who defy this narrative live on the fringes of southern society and expose themselves to ridicule as the dominant southern society attempts to gain compliance from these outliers. For instance, Dora, Ellen's cousin believes that the woman Ellen decides will be her new mother is beneath her own social class. When Ellen asks Dora the identity of the women with all the children; "Dora whispered back to me [Ellen] like she might be talking about special handicapped children behind their backs. She said they are the Foster family and that lady would take in anything from orphans to stray cats. Or so her [Dora's] mama said"

(Gibbons *Ellen* 99). Dora and Nadine maintain class boundaries by belittling Ellen's new mother because she does not ascribe to the conventions of southern motherhood. Her family of foster children does not fulfill Dora and Nadine's ideas of respectable families. Gibbons' women such as Ellen's new mama in these novels succeed in redefining motherhood and womanhood because they are able to reject the pressures to assimilate into southern society's hierarchies which are so important to Dora and Nadine. Gibbons champions women who are immune to ridicule or judgement that attempts to force them into compliance. Ellen's new mama participates in society only as it suits her purposes. Ellen spots her at church, which her new mama attends with her foster children because the church provides her family needed financial support. Her new mama also cooperates with the court system because complying with these demands allows her to provide aid to the at-risk children in her community through foster parenting. Yet, she stays on the outside of the southern community that dominates church and political life. Ellen's new mama is not accepted into Nadine and Dora's social circle and, even though they all attend the same church, Dora and her mother consider Ellen's new mama to be a social pariah who is an outsider to their safe, middle-class life.

Ellen, whose mission is to secure a stable home and has little use for the complicated social structures that operate to hinder her progress, misses the innuendo implied by Dora that marks this family as beneath Dora's social order and thinks, "[t]hat fit my description perfect and I started thinking hard about how to be her new girl" (Gibbons *Ellen* 99). Ellen and her new mama are united in their lack of interest in social order. When they can, they use societal conventions to their advantage and disregard

ideals of social order that do not promote their independent causes. Gibbons' explorations of the latitudes of community outsiders continue in the novels that follow *Ellen Foster*.

Family stability is a result of matriarchal strength that topples patriarchal strength in *A Cure for Dreams* and *Charms for the Easy Life*, which places the women of these stories on the outside of southern, middle-class society. The lack of the masculine figure allows the women to redefine family and the mother-daughter relationship on the outskirts of tradition. After Lottie's husband commits suicide there is pressure on her to remarry to recreate the expected familial script. Lottie is adamant in her refusal. Betty remarks, "My mother was blunt with women who wanted to know her plans for the future. She always knew what she meant. *You mean what am I going to do about finding another man? Well, I've been married enough*" (Gibbons *Cure* 99). Within the man-free space, Lottie's mothering is unrestrained and can develop a lifestyle that allows the two to become co-conspirators in their work to defend and advance the women of the community. Despite this woman-centered freedom, Betty still wants to adopt the traditional womanly scripts for herself. Betty says, "I feel so hemmed in here. I feel like I'm less and less marriageable as day after day passes" (Gibbons *Cure* 113-4). However, Lottie is a roadblock for Betty's plans. She does not want to lose her companion and the power she has over her daughter. Betty finally declares her intentions to leave and notes, "I felt a great deal of power saying this" (Gibbons *Cure* 114). Even in the freedom of the man-free space the two occupy, Betty feels drawn to adopting a traditional role. She sees her only options for a future to rest with marrying a man, and so she embarks to Richmond to seek her fortune. This is a surprising development in Gibbons' world of powerful women, yet a theme she repeats in *Charms for the Easy Life*. In Gibbons stories

the elder generation makes the break from a traditional male-dominated southern marriage, yet, the following generations of women still pursue heteronormative relationships that result in marriage. Gibbons suggests that there is hope for women to find fulfillment even within a traditional-styled marriage. Ultimately, Betty's marriage still allows her to build and maintain her women-centric relationships. She is also able to transfer the power of a strong web of caring women to her daughter. For Marjorie Polly, the sound of women talking, which eclipses even the return of her father from World War II, is the foundation of her earliest memories.

Despite the strong matriarchal role models in these novels, the daughters seek out more traditional situations for themselves. When things go awry for Betty in Richmond, Lottie inserts herself back into Betty's life through her written declaration to her daughter, "*So many young people are going to the bad these days and if you don't consider yourself strong enough to keep out of trouble living the high life then you should come home in spite of the fact that you may think I'm just trying to get you back here*" (Gibbons *Cure* 132). Betty resists her mother in her return missive, but then packs her bags and heads toward home. While Lottie creates a space for herself to operate outside the script of traditional southern motherhood, she expects her daughter to comply with the expected role of the agreeable daughter who bends to the will of the parent. So, the freedoms that Lottie achieves upon the death of her husband are non-transferrable to her daughter. Instead, Betty experiments with traditional roles and must determine her own relationship with them. Sophia and Margaret experience similar situations in their interactions with Charlie Kate. Gibbons demonstrates that the pioneering matriarchal forces can create paths for their progeny to thrive in more traditional relationships.

The three generations of women in *Charms for the Easy Life* emulate the familial structures established in *A Cure for Dreams*. Charlie Kate is the matriarch and defines the Birch family's position in the community. Charlie Kate's gift for healing and her moral compass define her and her family outside of typical patriarchal structures. In the community of Wake County, North Carolina, the women are in a unique situation because they are financially independent of men. Margaret says:

My mother's family didn't arrive poor. My grandmother's savings as well as the stock she inherited from a wealthy landowner whom she had once treated for syphilis made her a woman of surprising comfortable means. But because she lacked the social position commensurate with her robust financial portfolio, she couldn't live in the surroundings she deserved. Instead, she purchased the best house in the Beale Street area, the worst part of town. (Gibbons *Charms* 19-20)

It is Charlie Kate, and not her ferry operator husband, who provides the family with financial stability. Since she controls the finances, she is empowered to act independently of her husband's expectations. Upon his desertion of the family, she carries on unencumbered by her husband and outside traditional middle-class society that has little regard for her social work to make improvements within the mill community. Charlie Kate, as an outsider to southern society, realizes that the wealthier community leaders devalue her and her poorer community. She tells Margaret that the mill community is neglected because "the people there didn't count as people" (Gibbons *Charms* 21).

Charlie Kate is determined to make the people of her community as well as her daughter and granddaughter significant by showering them with her healing knowledge. The women are empowered as outsiders to traditional, more well-heeled southern structures

such as the upper middle-class families considered in Godwin's novels to build identity and a peaceful lifestyle.

However, like Betty in *A Cure for Dreams*, both Sophia and Margaret pursue more traditional lives than the unconventional role as healer that Charlie Kate assumes. Sophia pursues Mr. Baines and ultimately marries him. Charlie Kate encourages Margaret's relationship with Tom Hawkings. While Sophia intends to settle into a traditional relationship with Mr. Barnes, Margaret desires a relationship that melds the desires of her grandmother and mother together. She wants marriage as well as an independent career. Tom seems a likely candidate to provide this since his mother, a news reporter, has acted as an example for how this type of relationship can succeed in the middle-class. Even before their first date, Charlie Kate coaches Margaret, "When you go on a date with that boy, mind your manners and tell him right up front you intend to go to college and *then* raise a family. And I'd also harp a bit on how expensive medical school is, and how much it costs to have somebody looking after the house and children, and things of that nature. Dwell on the high price of cooks. Don't nag him. Just line everything out." (Gibbons *Charms* 183). Margaret is on the brink of "having it all," a goal of women in the late 1980s and 1990s to successfully juggle family and career. However, through Charlie Kate, we learn that it requires money and a dedicated husband to successfully achieve these dual identities. Just as Godwin's characters demonstrate in *A Mother and Two Daughters*, white, middle-class women must arrange their child rearing and careers in the proper order. For instance, Godwin's Lydia tended to childrearing first and college second, whereas Charlie Kate prioritizes the opposite for Margaret. Charlie Kate was able to blend home and work, but her observations of a

changing society in post-World War II America indicate the silos erected to end the blurring between these two functions for women.

Gibbons' novels plot a decline in the autonomous power of the matriarchal unit from the freedoms women like Charlie Kate had in the pre-World War societies they occupied to a post-World War II society that craves a return to an imagined normalcy of traditional roles for women as mothers and homemakers. There is a nostalgia for the "good old days" which creates a social pressure for women to conform to the nostalgic ideal by leaving work outside the home and focusing on homemaking. Charlie Kate expresses understanding of the limitations that marriage into the upper-middle class can put on her granddaughter due to the expectations Tom's society places on women. Charlie Kate's methods for negotiating an important role in her community through her outsider status will not be available to Margaret as an insider to the upper echelons of southern society, so she helps Margaret chart a course which will still allow her a satisfying career and home life, a more traditional approach to a working woman than the blending of home and work that Charlie Kate designed for herself.

Blending of Home and Work

Gibbons imagines women who succeed in redefining home so that it empowers them by home becoming a crossroad for emotional grounding, personal fulfillment, engagement with the greater community, and even a source of income. For Ellen, the house where she was raised with her physically and mentally weak mother is devoid of the sanctuary inferred by the concept of home. Kristine K. Groover argues that Ellen's lack of a physical home equates to a lack of a spiritual home, so "[f]or Ellen, unlike the canonical American hero, homelessness represents not freedom, but spiritual oblivion"

(24). Ellen understands that without a home, she will be unable to obtain the fulfillment she desires. After her mother's death, her house is a place Ellen must flee in order to protect herself from her violent father. For Ellen, home implies the presence of a strong mother figure who can offer security from poverty, hunger, and abuse. Ellen says of her home with her new mama, "I live in a clean brick house and mostly I am left to myself. . . . Two years ago I did not have much of anything. Not that I live in the lap of luxury now but I am proud for the schoolbus to pick me up here every morning. My stylish well-groomed self standing in the front yard with the grass green and the hedge bushes square" (Gibbons *Ellen* 2). Ellen believes home should be well-kempt, safe, and clean. Like her notion of a mother, the idea of home is transferable to mean the place where she feels safe and protected. Gibbons imagines home as an alternative space to traditional ideas. In her novels studied here, home is where women can operate freely outside of the control of men in order to generate empowerment that women gain by living harmoniously without the presence of men.

For Betty in *A Cure for Dreams* home and her mother blend so that one represents the other. As Betty matures, her home, which offered refuge in her childhood becomes oppressive to her desires to establish individuality from her mother's overbearing personality. Lottie is the 1940s version of a helicopter mom. Betty attempts to assert her independence by leaving home for the larger city of Richmond. Betty, unlike her mother who has had enough of marriage, is interested in finding a husband. She understands that while her father was a dreary force in her life, "that some men can be decent and untroubling nonentities" (Makowsky "Kaye Gibbons" 606). Betty's experiment to establish herself away from her mother fails, and she returns home and allows her mother

to orchestrate a marriage to a hometown man for her. Gibbons places confidence in the matriarchs such as Lottie to be guides to the younger generations. While Betty proclaims contentment with this arrangement, it points to an inability for the strength of femininity to be passed easily from one generation to the next. Gibbons' mothers are more empowered than other mothers of this study, but their inability to transfer the power they have achieved stands as a warning that each generation must engage in the hard work of maternal power-building. She also points to origins of the current trends in destructive motherhood practices through the inability for generational power transfers from mother to daughter leaving younger women unable to reap the benefits of empowered mothering established by their matriarchal forebearers.

Betty is infantilized by her mother in a fashion that mimics a patriarchal infantilization of women. Betty reveals her mother's meddling in her relationship with Herman who she ultimately marries. Herman and Betty are exchanging letters as they discuss his enlistment to fight in World War II. Betty narrates, "Anybody else's mother would have merely sighed and walked off, but mine took the pencil from me and snatched a fresh sheet of paper out of my ledger and wrote this letter [to Herman from Betty]. I just watched" (Gibbons *Cure* 147). This moment is curious in that it borders on the unhealthy. As a young adult, Betty should have sovereignty over her love interest, but in true helicopter-mom fashion, Lottie will not allow for this. This implies that some of the power that Lottie has achieved is based on her continued domination over her daughter's life providing further evidence to support Gibbons' concept that intergenerational transfers of power are difficult between mother and daughter as some of the mother's power comes from controlling her daughter. Gibbons does not walk back

this control, but instead, Betty opts to use her mother's letter as she thinks, "[it] was as good as anything I could've written" (Gibbons *Cure* 148). In Lottie and Betty's relationship, we see the unfolding of the origins of intensive mothering that gained traction in the late 1980s and 1990s in this female-centric home that offers a space for Lottie to exert complete control over all matters of Betty's life. It is not until Betty enters motherhood through the birth of her own daughter that she is initiated into the circle of matriarchal power. This harkens back to Allison's contention that there are some things a woman can only know once she becomes a mother. So, the privileges afforded to the matriarchs such as Lottie are not always extended to their offspring until they are earned through some sort of initiation ritual such as entering motherhood.

Maternal Cultural Performance

The women of Gibbons' novels wrest power from traditional power sources such as their husbands, but it is in the acquisition and preparation of food that the mothers have unchecked household control. The relationship between motherhood and food takes interesting twists over the course of the novels studied here. In these novels, children closely associate motherhood with food. Gibbons echoes the connection that Betts makes between motherhood and food in *The Sharp Teeth of Love* when Luna wins over Sam's trust and ultimately his love through her offerings of sustenance. Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston in *Food and Femininity* discuss the high stakes for mothers in successfully navigating maternal foodways. They write, [t]he price of . . . food 'failures' is high, as children are figured as the promise of collective futures. Thus, mothers shoulder the burden of fostering the next generations of healthy, responsible food consumers, or risk being pushed outside the boundaries of good mothering" (Cairns and Johnston 85). For

Ellen, the abject poverty of her early years with her biological family amplifies her association of mother as food provider. She describes one of the final meals her biological mother prepares for the family upon her return to from the hospital. Ellen thinks, “I myself was looking forward to something fit to eat but I was not about to say anything,” after her father demands that her ill mother prepare dinner (Gibbons *Ellen* 3). Ellen has fended for herself during her mother’s absence and longs for a home-cooked meal, but even as a child, she understands that her mother is in no condition to cook for the family. Even though Ellen craves a meal prepared by her mother, she refuses to eat this fraught meal in the presence of her father, complicating her mother’s ability to provide nurturing. For Ellen, food is the language of security and caring between mother and child, and her biological mother is unable to provide these basics for her daughter. Veronica Makowsky in considering the role of food in *Ellen Foster* says, “Food, Gibbons’s major metaphor for these levels of significance, is as basic and instinctive as the voices of her narrators. In their preoccupation with meals, Gibbons’s narrators are all seeking the perfect recipe for happiness: how to provide nurturance for others, how to receive it for themselves and, most importantly, now to nurture themselves” (“Only Hard Part” 103). It is natural after this lack in her early years that Ellen would judge the suitability of an othermother based on her ability to provide proper sustenance for her children. For Ellen, the availability of food symbolizes a woman’s ability to perform mothering that will meet Ellen’s needs.

Ellen equates motherhood with food. After the death of her biological mother, Ellen must navigate foodways alone. This fuels her need to find a new mother to take over the responsibility for food procurement and preparation. Ellen says of that period of

her life, “I fed myself OK. I tried to make what we had at school but I found the best deal was the plate froze with food already on it. A meat, two vegetables, and a dab of dessert” (Gibbons *Ellen* 25). Ellen has discovered the pinnacle of the industrial food supply, the TV dinner. In *Gender, Class and Food*, Julie M. Parsons considers maternal foodways. She weighs in on this food source, “part of the problem with convenience/commercialized food products is that they are associated with less healthy diets, obesity and related chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer” (Parsons 52). When Ellen asks her new mama to purchase TV dinners, her new mama dismisses them as too unhealthy to serve a growing child. Until Ellen finds a stable home, her loss of her biological mother, who grew her own vegetables and had the domestic skills to prepare tasty, fresh meals, leaves Ellen subject to reliance on the industrial food supply for sustenance. This has implications on Ellen’s value in society. Cairns and Johnston convey, “[c]hildren’s food practices are widely seen to reflect the success or failure of mothers’ socialization efforts” (67). Ellen’s biological mother is a failed mother by these standards. As seen in the work of Cairns and Johnston, she is unable to instill in Ellen healthful food practices since she dies before Ellen is able to accept these lessons. Parson writes, “the rise in consumption of these types of meals [industrialized food] is associated with unhealthy diets and therefore unhealthy families, it links junk food with a ‘junk childhood’” (52). Like Allison’s Bone, Ellen is relegated to the position of a throw away child as represented by her diet.

Beyond providing Ellen a tangible methodology to interpret mothering performance, food also operates in Gibbons’ novels as subtext for social class, and, in Ellen’s case, the availability of wholesome food is indicative of the class climbing from

poverty to the working class that Ellen experiences as she charts a new path for herself. Parson notes, “[t]here are two interrelated issues for maternal foodways, the valorisation of healthy [homemade food] and the significance of home-baking. . . . both are markers of high cultural capital and bound up with notions of appropriate middle class maternal foodways” (Parsons 51). Parsons connects mothers who prepare meals from scratch for their families with Sharon Hays’s notion of an intensive mother. Ellen’s new mama prepares traditional home-cooked feasts for the foster children in her care, and Ellen reads these meals as admission to a new world where she is no longer responsible for her own food access. Instead, that duty is handed off to her stay-at-home othermother who fulfills traditional functions of mothering through her attention to providing Ellen and her foster siblings access to regularly-prepared, wholesome meals.

Ellen’s new mama is evaluated by Ellen on her ability to provide food to the children in her care. Much of Ellen’s early discussions about her new mama revolve around the availability of food in the home. She reveals, “There is a plenty to eat here and if we run out of something we just go to the store and get some more. I had me a egg sandwich for breakfast, mayonnaise on both sides. And I may fix me another for lunch” (Gibbons *Ellen* 2). Makowsky writes, “Ellen repeatedly refers to her new home in terms of gratified hunger. . . . The kitchen is no longer a place of conflict or empty routines, but is filled with affection” (“Only Hard Part” 107). This is a sharp contrast to Ellen’s life with her biological parents where she says, “The only hard part was the food” (Gibbons *Ellen* 25). Ellen’s experience with hunger resulting from the poverty of her original home makes her aware of the importance of a ready food supply. Her new mama is deemed a success because Ellen never goes hungry while in her care, nor is Ellen concerned that

food may become scarce, which was a constant worry in her years living with her biological parents.

In contrast to the uncomfortable meals with her birth parents, eating with her new mama and foster siblings is a point of enjoyment for Ellen. Makowsky notes that Ellen's "continuing obsession with food shows how deeply traumatized she is from years without nourishing affection" ("Only Hard Part" 107). Ellen says, "My new mama lays out the food and we all take a turn to dish it out. Then we eat and have a good time. Toast or biscuits with anything you please. Eggs any style. Corn cut off the cob the same day we eat it" (Gibbons *Ellen* 4). The cornucopia of food is a marker for a functional family in Ellen's estimation. The following of ritual contributes to Ellen's sense of wellbeing. She says, "I keep my elbows off the table and wipe my mouth like a lady. Nobody barks, farts, or feeds the dogs under the table here" (Gibbons *Ellen* 4). This is in sharp contrast to her description of a meal with her father who is "humped over [his] plate like one of us is about to snatch it from [him]" (Gibbon *Ellen* 4). She goes on to describe him as an "old hog." Parsons explains the traditions surrounding family meals as necessary to maintain divisions of social class; "the rituals and rules of this main meal event [the evening meal], these family foodways are considered significant for maintaining social stability" (35). Parsons connects these traditions to the maintenance of quality family life and class norms. Ellen reveals the distastefulness of poverty with her biological father's ghastly eating habits while extolling the benefits of social climbing through her favorable views toward her new mama's attention to middle-class notions of proper table etiquette. Not only is the abundance of food important to Ellen, but the community of sharing at a civilized dinner table also contributes to her pleasure in eating. Ellen will not eat with her

father in a public space. She says, “I would not go to a restaurant with him because I did not want to be seen with him” (Gibbons *Ellen* 25). In contrast, her new foster family is one she is proud to describe and be seen with. The cornucopia of the dinner table in her new mama’s home is a means for her to gage the value in her new home over the disharmony of her old home.

Like *Ellen Foster*, food is also used as means to judge the performance of motherhood in *A Cure for Dreams*. Lottie’s husband uses the summer of 1932, “The time your mother let you get sick,” as a means to control his often-uncontrollable wife (Gibbons *Cure* 21). Betty narrates, “I developed a taste for corn bread and molasses, and soon these were the only foods that would please me. My mother tried to prime me with tidbits of other vegetables or meats, but I declared I would eat what I wanted or nothing at all” (Gibbons *Cure* 21). Charles points out his wife’s ineptitude in feeding their daughter, but her habitual defiance of him causes her to rebel by continuing to allow Betty to eat as she pleased which resulted in a pellagra diagnosis for Betty from the family doctor. Cairns and Johnston purport that, “a gendered division of household labor can be further legitimized through rationales that do not explicitly name gender, but rely upon gendered assumptions. One such assumption is the idea that women are more interested in health” (68). Charles’s accusations against Lottie are effective because both he and Lottie accept that Betty’s health is the sole purview of Lottie. At no point is it ever considered that Charles could intervene and support Lottie’s attempts to expand Betty’s palate. Betty defends her mother saying, “Like other mothers of this time, she wasn’t born knowing about vitamins or taught nutrition at school, so she honestly believed that as long as I was full I was fine” (Gibbons *Cure* 21). While Ellen judges motherhood

performance on the abundance of food available, Lottie is judged by her husband and family doctor on her inability to adequately supply nutrition to her daughter despite the abundance of food available in the household.

The male doctor who makes the diagnosis judges Lottie as a failed mother once he realizes that she does not know how to feed her child. Betty reports, “He put me on liver extract tablets right away and gave my mother a great deal of advice on how to feed a child, all told as well in a belittling fashion. Then he said he was going to stop by the mill and discuss this matter with my father” (Gibbons *Cure* 24). Betty feels partially to blame for this judgement laid on her mother saying, “I recall longing at that moment to be swept up by a cyclone” (Gibbons *Cure* 24). Charles’s victory over Lottie is in goading her until she must admit, “*I know, I thought I knew about children, but I don’t know anything, nothing, not a thing about nothing*” (Gibbons *Cure* 25). Lottie takes great pride in her daughter and their unique relationship. Charles uses her pride in motherhood and this moment of mothering failure as an attempt to control his wife. It is a weak point in Lottie that leaves her susceptible to his attacks. Betty reports that her father often brought up the summer of pellagra as a means to wound Lottie’s pride and that her mother would have a physical reaction at the mention of her mothering shortcoming. While motherhood can operate as an empowering experience as Gibbons demonstrates in the relationship between Lottie and Betty, the fierce pride and motherlove of Lottie also operates as a weakness allowing her husband to harm her verbally.

In contrast to these mothers who are judged on their ability to provide plentiful and nutritional food to their children are the Birch women who privilege other activities over food preparation, a counterpoint to Ellen’s view that middle-class aspirations

necessitate access to delicious food prepared lovingly by a stay-at-home mother. Since the Birch women operate outside of the purview of men, they are not judged by their lack of domestic skills. They had depended on the work of their servant, Maveen to provide food for the family, but Maveen retired and Charlie Kate did not care for any of the potential new hires interviewed by the trio. Margaret reports, “my mother gave up [on hiring a new domestic servant] and announced that we would cook and clean for ourselves. The three of us cooked and ate like bachelors” (Gibbons *Charms* 84). Unlike Ellen, Margaret, who is ensconced in a woman-centric household where she understands her value, does not find this solution upsetting or an indication of her mother’s lack of affection for her. The blurring of lines between home and career allows Margaret to privilege the work the women do in providing medical services for the community over a bounty of carefully prepared foods on the table each day. Thus, Sophia and Charlie Kate are provided more time and energy to pursue work beyond the traditional domestic realm as dictated in a patriarchal-centered home. Since these women do not aspire for social class respectability in the traditional sense, they do not feel compelled to follow the traditional enactment of maternal foodways that Parsons describes as “even more significant in the display or performance of legitimate middle class mothering” (54-5). For the Birch women, their woman-centric home represents freedom from the mundane chores of homemaking such as food preparation that do not hold their interests.

In addition to foodways representing a cultural performance on which mothers are judged, maternal empathy regarding race is another point where the maternal fitness of women is judged by their daughters in these novels by Gibbons. In the bildungsroman *Ellen Foster*, Ellen’s views towards the African Americans in her community evolve to a

more generous outlook from the racism that she expresses early in the novel. As Linda Tappmeyer points out, “Ellen’s changing attitudes regarding race . . . are initially formed from her prejudiced family and community” (87). While Ellen seeks out Starletta’s family for refuge when things spiral out of control at her house shared with her father, she is conflicted by her own racist ideas about the family. Ellen privileges her whiteness as a means to maintain superiority over her African American neighbors, an action that she has been conditioned to expect by her family and community. Perhaps the only bright point in Ellen’s poverty, her mother’s death, and her father’s lack of social credentials is that Ellen has freedom to create her own path toward understanding her views about race.

Ellen’s racist attitudes change over the course of the novel, and she begins to judge her potential alloparents based on their acceptance of Starletta without reference to race. Julia and Roy, Ellen’s temporary guardians, pass muster with Ellen in part because of their complete acceptance of Starletta. For Ellen’s birthday, the couple includes Starletta in the festivities earning Ellen’s approval for their uncensored kindness to her friend. Ellen’s new mama passes a similar test when she is unflinching in Ellen’s desire to have Starletta visit for the weekend. Her new mama even “sewed S’s on a set of towels just for Starletta” (Gibbons *Ellen* 121). Gibbons offers a counterpoint to Lillian Smith’s claims in *Killers of the Dream* that it is southern mothers who inculcate the terms of racism to their children through Ellen who demands her othermothers engage in racial equality in their homes and judges their worth as mothers in part through their ability to act in kindness to her black friend. Sharon Monteith, in her study of the novel, notes the growth in Ellen that helps her shed the damage of being a poor white child lacking the skills to participate fully in middle-class society, but, Monteith gives a harsh critique of

Gibbons' treatment of Starletta in the work. She says, "Starletta remains a plot function in spite of Gibbons's general engagement with issues of race and presentations in her work" which makes "Ellen's black counterpart . . . all the more disappointing as a result" (55). While Monteith's analysis certainly points to Gibbons' lack in not allowing Starletta to be an equal to Ellen, the novel does end in hope that Ellen will pass a new narrative of racial understanding to her own children. As Ellen watches Starletta nap ensconced in what Ellen considers the riches of her new life she thinks, "low Starletta you sure have a right to rest. And all this time I thought I had the hardest row to hoe. That will always amaze me" (Gibbons *Ellen* 126). Ellen, who has suffered poverty, hunger, and abuse, understands that the difficulties of being black in America eclipses the hardships she has faced and recognizes the privilege of her whiteness. Gibbons' offers an alternative view of race in *A Cure for Dreams*.

As was typical in the middle-class, white American South during the 1940s, Betty and Lottie employ an African American woman who performs domestic tasks in their home. Betty says, "Polly Deal was a wonderful gingercake-colored woman who worked as our part-time cook and laundress and doubled as a midwife and baby doctor" (Gibbons *Cure* 29-30). Polly Deal eventually moves into their home when Betty leaves for Richmond and refuses to give up Betty's room upon Betty's return. Betty reports, "she told me right away that she'd moved into my bedroom and was comfortable to the point of contentment. She was very quiet, looking straight at me, waiting until I finally said, Well, you stay right there then and I'll move in the room with my mother" (Gibbons *Cure* 132). In the feminine space of the Davies home, the women are equals with no consideration of a hierarchy based on race. Lottie models this behavior for Betty who

accepts it without question. However, outside the home, the hierarchy remains. When Herman's mother hosts a wedding shower for Betty, Betty and her mother know that the only way to allow Polly to attend was "under the pretense of service" (Gibbons *Cure* 152). When Polly trips the servants' call button repeatedly and then goes to the door expecting more guests, Betty says, "Neither my mother nor I had the heart to tell Polly the definition of a servants' button and whispered to the others to keep mum as well" (Gibbons *Cure* 152). Tonita Branan, in her discussion of the power that narration brings to the Randolph women, writes that Lottie "subvert[s] racist labels" and "includes her black friend, Polly, at white folks' gatherings" (92). The Randolph's home functions under patriarchal norms which have been shattered in the feminine space of the Davies home where Polly Deal is treated as an equal.

It is Polly Deal who interrupts the influence that Lottie holds over Betty allowing Betty to assume a more powerful role in the household. With Herman deployed in the war, the three women are happily cohabitating in the Davies home. When Polly comes home to find Betty alone and in labor, she assumes her role as midwife. Betty tells Polly that Lottie is babysitting Trudy's children. Polly replies, "Let's leave her there. Let's let her stay as long as she will. Let's born the baby just us. It's easier without a mother at a borning. Young girls will wonder and look to their mothers to see if they're doing something wrong. It's no right and wrong, though. . . . And I think that you as much as anybody needs to do this one thing this time without Miss Lottie" (Gibbons *Cure* 167). Polly recognizes that Betty must establish herself as an independent woman and that childbirth provides her an opportunity for initiation into the circle of powerful women that Lottie and Polly occupy. By excluding Lottie from the birth of Betty's first child,

Polly allows Betty the opportunity to claim her place as a matriarch in the household. Makowsky notes this as a device Gibbons repeats in her writing: “This absent or overly symbiotic relationship [between mother and daughter] is often transcended through the presence of an African American woman who teaches the protagonist how to be her own mother so that she can nurture others and receive their nurturing” (“Kaye Gibbons” 605). Before Lottie returns, the baby is delivered and Betty is compelled to name the child after Polly, Marjorie Polly, a name Lottie loathes. Marjorie Polly, in writing of her birth says her grandmother, “*campaigned for something with more character*” (Gibbons *Cure* 171). However, Betty and Polly Deal prevail, and the name remains, signifying Betty’s ascension as a power in the household.

This moment allows Betty to gain control of her own narrative. McKee notes that the bond between Lottie and Betty is valued by the two women over other relationships including Betty’s to her spouse, but, she adds, “[t]hat fact is also potentially dangerous, in this case for the development of Betty’s individual voice, a voice that can both articulate her independently formulated views and participate in a communal chorus” (McKee 101). It takes her othermother, Polly Deal, to rescue Betty’s voice and autonomy through childbirth. Once Betty is freed from her mother’s fierce oversight, the three generations of white women and an African American woman occupy the Davies home as equals, in a space filled with “*the sounds of the women talking*” (Gibbons *Cure* 171). The women live outside traditional patriarchal norms and chart a path toward equality that would be impossible in a space like the Randolph’s house with its servants’ buttons and hierarchies based on race. The example of racial equality is passed from mother to daughter in the

Davies family, as the youngest member of the group carries the name of her black othermother.

Charlie Kate also offers an alternative narrative of race to her daughter and granddaughter. During her trek to Wake County with her husband, they found a man hanging along the road from a lynching. The man was barely alive and the two cut him from the tree and Charlie Kate provided healing ministrations to restore his health. He rode with the couple to Wake County and presented them with an easy-life charm: “the hind foot of a white graveyard rabbit caught at midnight, under the full moon, by a cross-eyed Negro woman who had been married seven times” (Gibbons *Charms* 19). Charlie Kate ignored the conventions of her time that would prevent a white woman from saving a black man from lynching. Her retelling of the story indoctrinates her daughter and granddaughter to her idea of equality. When she passes the charm to Margaret to present to Tom for Christmas, Charlie Kate intends for her nonconformist ideas of racial equality to be passed to a new generation. It is the woman-centric space of the Birch household that normalizes this radical (for the time) viewpoint.

The women of Gibbons’ early novels carve out an alternative to the problems of motherhood that drive women like Betts’s Christine and Allison’s Anney to abandon their daughters and the conventions of a traditional southern mother. Gibbons accomplishes this by creating female-centric households on the fringes of the community that are populated by women who have little concern with upholding performances of traditional motherhood. The untimely deaths of men in these households and the women’s financial security are the lynch-pins that allow the women to experiment with mothering performance that also better allows them to work toward self-building and

goals beyond homemaking. While the moments Gibbons captures in these women-centric spaces appear idyllic, they are also fleeting, lasting only a generation. The daughters in these scenarios are unwilling to reject traditional heterosexual relationships and the opportunity to become mothers themselves. In *A Cure for Dreams*, Betty seeks out a mate and becomes a mother. In *Charms for the Easy Life*, Sophia marries Mr. Barnes despite Charlie Kate's initial rejection of his intrusion into their female-centric space, and Margaret "waited to be found" by her intended, Tom, upon the death of her grandmother (Gibbons *Charms* 254). Only Ellen's new mama indicates a method for women to mother in the absence of men. Her new mama is a foster mother and does not require a man to become a mother. Gibbons also complicates the female space because domination of the young women continues, it is just replaced with a forceful matriarch instead of a dominating patriarchal figure. Yet, her novels demonstrate that mothering can be an engaging and self-building project which can occur if traditional southern motherhood is replaced by empowered, women-centric mothering.

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