

Stony Brook University



OFFICIAL COPY

The official electronic file of this thesis or dissertation is maintained by the University Libraries on behalf of The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.

© All Rights Reserved by Author.

The “Ethereal State:” Weddings in Modern American Feminist Drama

A Thesis Presented

by

Andrea J. Cody

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Stony Brook University

May 2010

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

Andrea J. Cody

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this thesis.

**Carol Rosen—Thesis Advisor
Professor of English**

**Ayesha Ramachandra—Second Reader
Assistant Professor of English**

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

The “Ethereal State:” Weddings in Modern American Feminist Drama

by

Andrea J. Cody

Master of Art

in

English

Stony Brook University

2010

This study investigates weddings as moments of transition for women in three plays by American women playwrights in the late twentieth century. The study builds on the works of Gayle Austen and Judith E. Barlow on plays by American women through the application of the ideas of Stephanie Coontz, Jaclyn Geller, Chrys Ingraham, Jackie Stacey and Lynn Pearce. Jane Bowles’s *In the Summer House* (1953) investigates the influence of the mother-daughter relationship on female identity formation and the resulting anxieties regarding marriage and maturation produced by the complexities of the mother-daughter bond. While exploring the bride’s psychology, the play also probes the relationship between socio-economic conditions and marriage, showcasing how economic realities inform women’s experiences of weddings. Henley’s *Impossible Marriage* (1998) considers the tensions between societal conventions and personal desires, asserting the existence of true love while demonstrating the challenges society places on the individual’s passions. Finally Ruhl’s *Eurydice* (2006) showcases how multiple types of love affect women by moving Eurydice from the myth’s margins into

the play's center. In imagining loves intertwinement with loss, the play disproves the belief that romantic love ensures eternal happiness and makes up for past tragedies.

Table of Contents

The “Ethereal State:” An Introduction.....	1
Betrothals: Weddings in American Culture.....	5
Rehearsals and Regrets: Mothers, Daughters and Weddings in Jane Bowles’s <i>In The Summer House</i>	10
Reclaiming the Ceremony: Beth Henley’s <i>Impossible Marriage</i>	23
Love’s Reprise: Love, Loss, and Memory in Sarah Ruhl’s <i>Eurydice</i>	30
Conclusion.....	41
Works Cited.....	45

The “Ethereal State:”¹ An Introduction

Clare Boothe’s 1937 play *The Women* features the protagonist Mary’s daughter Little Mary questioning, “What fun is there to be a lady? What can a lady do?” Mary’s conclusion that ladies who “do do things” stop it “when they get the lovey-doveys” speaks to the impact of romantic love and marriage on the lives of American women (Boothe 89). Little Mary, who hates her breast bumps, comments on the position of women in society during the late 1930s. From her perspective marriage denies women the serious pursuit of occupations within the public sphere and the gratification that could accompany them. The play upholds this observation; the only women who work are those who are not married. Some of these women, like Crystal Allen, merely work out of economic necessity, intending to leave their jobs once they find a man. The only woman pursuing a serious career is Nancy Blake, and she is also Mary’s only friend to remain unmarried.

For Little Mary there are two choices: she can resist the “lovey doves” to “fly airplanes across the ocean” or “go into business or politics,” or she can marry and live a life as a wife and mother (Boothe 89). Little Mary’s division of women is simplistic, but there is some truth to her observation. Expectations for women’s roles in the public sector and private sphere have fluctuated throughout American history and so to has women’s access to roles in the public sector. In focusing on upper-class women in her play, Boothe wrote about a certain group of women who were expected to assume roles as homemakers and not businesswomen or politicians. Certainly a combination of the two roles was an unattainable goal for most women of this social class at the time.

¹ Jaclyn Geller refers to the Victorians’ conception of marriage as an “ethereal state” on page 25 of her book, *Here Comes the Bride*.

In 2010 many opportunities are open to women in both the private and public sectors. Some women choose to work and choose to remain unmarried. Other women work, marry, and raise a family. Still others do not work but marry and raise a family. Historian Sarah Evans notes, “Women now comprise almost half of the paid labor force and can be found in virtually every field” (234). In discussing feminism’s future in her book *Tidal Wave*, Evans writes, “The contradictions of women’s lives are likely to continue to fuel their involvement in feminist politics. Women are caught between a world of work, which assumes that there is someone behind every worker who is available to take care of family needs, and the tenacious presumption that women have primary responsibility for children and the household” (234). The conflict between women’s responsibilities at home and work influence the shape of women’s lives and consequently the development of women’s adult identities. The “loveys doveys” no longer preclude women from opportunities outside of marriage, but they do create a set of underlying problems and conflicts for some women.

Modern American feminist drama has been attentive to the conflicts that arise from “the contradictions of women’s lives” (Evans 234). Particularly the work of Wendy Wasserstein depicts the confusion of young women in choosing life paths. Growing up during second-wave feminism and experiencing maturity in post-feminist America, Heidi in Wasserstein’s *Heidi Chronicles* witnesses the rejection of marriage by militant feminists and the subsequent decision of her friends, who once rejected marriage, to marry and raise families in the 1980s. In her speech for Miss Crane’s School East Coast Alumnae Association, Heidi portrays women pitted against each other and vocalizes the failures of the feminist movement. By the play’s end Heidi chooses not to marry, instead

continuing her career as an art historian while adopting a baby. Similarly *Isn't It Romantic?* displays the conflicts that Harriet and Janie experience as two young, professional and well-educated women in 1980s New York City. Harriet's mother, Lillian, insists, "life is a negotiation," implying that women cannot "have it all" by juggling the demands of motherhood, work and marriage (*Isn't It Romantic?* 134). Harriet insists that she will "have it all" and rejects her mother's declaration by choosing to accept a marriage proposal from a man she has dated for only two weeks. Janie, on the other hand, finds herself having to make compromises in her career as a result of her relationship and so breaks up with her boyfriend. The play does not provide us with many answers. Instead it questions what provides women with fulfillment and the extent to which these provisions are available to women.

Wasserstein looks at the conflicts facing young women in the late 20th century, and still more plays investigate the contradictions of married women's lives. Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee, Lillian Hellman, Sophie Treadwell, Susan Glaspell and Sam Shepard are amongst the many American playwrights who offer depictions of wives within American families. If we are to better understand the dilemmas that face American women, it is useful to investigate moments at which women directly face these dilemmas. One such moment is a wedding. Weddings are unique because of their dual symbolism. They are both the grand ending to a beautiful story and the prologue to the very real social and legal implications of marriage. Weddings can both promise opportunities and deny them. They may evoke joy alongside anxieties. Regardless, weddings are a rite of passage for women. They symbolize the transition between girlhood and adulthood and are thus crucial moments in the identity formation of women.

What aspects of the self are reinforced or challenged in the transition from girlhood to adulthood? What does it mean to be a wife in American society? Indeed the answers to these questions are complicated and are informed by the historical moment in which these plays were written.

This study investigates weddings as moments of transition for women in three plays by American women playwrights in the late twentieth century. Jane Bowles's *In the Summer House* (1953) investigates the influence of the mother-daughter relationship on female identity formation and the resulting anxieties regarding marriage and maturation produced by the complexities of the mother-daughter bond. While exploring the bride's psychology, the play also probes the relationship between socio-economic conditions and marriage, showcasing how economic realities inform women's experiences of weddings. Henley's *Impossible Marriage* (1998) considers the tensions between societal conventions and personal desires, asserting the existence of true love while demonstrating the challenges society places on the individual's passions. Finally Ruhl's *Eurydice* (2006) showcases how multiple types of love affect women by moving Eurydice from the myth's margins into the play's center. In imagining loves intertwined with loss, the play disproves the belief that romantic love ensures eternal happiness and makes up for past tragedies. Studied together, these three plays have much to suggest about women's experience of life's transitions and the experience's impact on identity.

Betrothals: Weddings in American Culture

Much feminist scholarship exists regarding marriage and its impact on women. Germaine Greer discusses “the middle class myth of love and marriage” in *The Female Eunuch* (222). Betty Friedan voices the concerns of women “who want something more than [their husbands] and [their] children and [their] home” in *The Feminine Mystique* (78). More recent scholars such as Jaclyn Geller identify marriage with the negative hierarchical division of our society and female oppression (13). American literature is ripe with depictions of the American wife. From Hester Prynne to Edna Pontellier and Regina Giddens to Mary Tyrone, scholars have countless literary models from which to study the condition of the American wife.

For all the scholarship that exists regarding marriage, there are far fewer scholarly studies of weddings. Some of the preexistent feminist scholarship regarding weddings condemns them; these studies link weddings and marriage with the disempowerment of women. Sociologist Chrys Ingraham analyzes contemporary American weddings from a materialist feminist point of view, discussing “the power relation organizing the allowed as well as the disallowed meanings and beliefs about white weddings” (31). Similarly Jaclyn Geller refers to our cultural assumptions regarding weddings and marriage as “the marriage mystique” and argues that our contemporary marriage narrative—from courtship to the wedding day—overlooks the cruel and oppressive history of marriage (13).

Ingraham and Geller unpack by different means the nature of the assumptions we hold about weddings in our culture. But women’s experiences of weddings often have little to do with their recognition of patriarchy’s power structure no matter how cognizant

the bride is of patriarchy's existence. Instead of exclusively focusing on the power structure behind the social institution, we have much to gain from considering our cultural beliefs regarding weddings and the interaction between these beliefs and our real experiences of weddings.

Our knowledge of romance narratives informs our beliefs about weddings. Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey discuss romance's narrativity in *Romance Revisited*, arguing that romance survives today due to its narrativity and the ability of the narrative to evolve. Pearce and Stacey define the classic romance narrative "as the quest for love delayed by a series of obstacles which desire must overcome" (Pearce 36). Romance narratives uphold what Chrys Ingraham refers to as the myth of romantic love. Ingraham writes, "Romance ideology works to secure in the popular imagination the notion that enthusiasm or the promise of love, lust and passion are what constitutes real love" (123). In other words, love is made real by the wedding promise "to love and to cherish until death do us part."

According to romance narratives, the quest for love is made worth it due to the transformative power of love—tomboys become princesses, the beast become a beauty, the frog becomes a prince. These narratives teach us that all we really need is "the power of love" to transcend our ordinary selves. The allure of love's magic in romance stories is nearly irresistible; Pearce and Stacey argue that our education in the narratives of romance from an early age causes "little hope for [our] immunity" to these stories' messages (Pearce 12).

Although we may not go around kissing frogs, our current romance narratives and the wedding industry uphold the belief that love is transformative and that one changes

for the better after the exchange of vows. Ingraham argues that the wedding industry perpetuates this belief through its marketing of brides' images. Brides epitomize our conception of femininity. Here we may recall Mary Tyrone's description of her wedding dress in *A Long Day's Journey into Night*. Mary's wedding dress validates Mary's identity as a bride— young, beautiful, innocent, wealthy and in love. Even as she criticizes her body, Mary concludes that she is “just as pretty as any actress [Tyrone] has ever met” when wearing the gown. The gown feminizes Mary, as “[she] held her breath when it was fitted, so [her] waist would be as small as possible” (O'Neill 117). Although Mary has not seen her gown in sometime, Mary can still recount the elaborate details of her “beautiful” gown lovingly: “It was made of soft shimmering satin, trimmed with wonderful old duchess lace, in tiny ruffles around the neck and sleeves, and worked in with the folds that were draped round in a bustle effect at the back. The basque was boned and very tight” (O'Neill 117). Mary consistently returns to her dress as symbol of hope, beauty and the promise of eternal love.

Jaclyn Geller discusses the alleged transformative power of love in describing the Victorians' conception of marriage as an “ethereal state” in which men and women complemented each other by occupying separate spheres (25). Geller suggests that Victorians described married life and Victorian domesticity as “heaven on earth,” but weddings are often depicted as ethereal in another sense. Ethereal love, as intangible as air and dictated by fate, has a magic-like quality that we often seek to replicate through wedding ceremonies and celebrations. Those who are described as “love sick” can attest to love's ethereal nature. Love can cause us to lose our grounding or to inflate our dreams beyond reason. Decisions based on love sometimes defy rationality—like Juliet's

suicide after Romeo's death or Jack's decision in Titanic to knowingly freeze in the water so that his beloved Rose is assured a space on the rescue raft. We may no longer believe in the ethereal nature of marriage, but we can recognize romance narratives' depictions of love as ethereal. We cannot stage our marriages or even our courtships, but we can "stage" weddings to capture desired aspects of romance narratives.

Germaine Greer takes on a more cynical view of romance narratives by discussing "the false consciousness" of romance in *The Female Eunuch* (Pearce 13). Greer finds romance as potentially damaging for women, because they lead women to believe that love brings happiness while simultaneously objectifying women. Greer's commentary regarding weddings reveals the seductive power of romance:

A woman is never so happy as when she is being wooed. Then she is mistress of all she surveys, the cynosure of all eyes, until that day of days when she sails down the aisle, a vision in white, lovely as the stephanotis she carries, borne translucent on her father's manly arm to be handed over to her new father-surrogate. If she is clever, and if her husband has the time and the resources, she will insist on being wooed all her life; more likely she will discover that marriage is not romantic...Nobody flatters, nobody makes her feel desirable (185-186).

Greer shows how women and men alike enact romance narratives during courting rituals. Women feel desired and empowered when they are being wooed, a technique that men have likely learned from their exposure to romance narratives. The problem, Greer argues, is that markers of romance mean different things to men and women since women are the primary consumers of romance texts. Whereas a man reads a first kiss as the first step to physical intimacy, women consider the first kiss as "the crown of love to be staged at climactic points" (Greer 181). Similarly weddings take on a different importance for women than men, partially because what women believe about weddings has become true. In Greer's vision the lovely bride relishes the spotlight as she walks

down the aisle to accept the love of her new male protector. But for many women the wedding day is the only day that they will command such power and presence. In this manner, society enables female fantasies by making a small portion of the dream a reality.

Love and marriage may not magically transform an individual like the way transformations occur in fairy tales, but marriage changes the way that society views an individual because of the cultural assumptions we hold about married life and married people. Historian Stephanie Coontz and feminist scholar Jaclyn Geller note that Victorian weddings celebrated a women's entrance into respectable domesticity (Geller 26; Coontz 167). Victorian society assumed that married women, morally pure and physically feminine, served a public function by monitoring their husband's morality and instilling their moral values in their children. We may no longer believe in separate spheres or the cult of female domesticity, but Geller argues that the Victorians' conception of marriage and women continues to inform our understanding of married women today.

Regardless of the assumptions our society holds about married women and brides, a wedding marks a real transition in a woman's life and, as with any life transition, it is accompanied by the individual's hopes and anxieties. Such emotions maybe a result of many forces such as society's expectations for women, the individual's past experiences or the individual's psychological condition.

Rehearsals and Regrets: Mothers, Daughters and Weddings in Jane Bowles's *In The Summer House*

Jane Bowles's *In the Summer House* seems an unlikely inclusion in a project dedicated to a discussion of weddings in plays by female playwrights that feature weddings. Although the play includes the "double wedding" of "Bride Number One," the mother Gertrude," to Mr. Solares and "Bride Number Two," the daughter Molly, to Lionel, the play's primary concern is not the romantic relationship between man and woman but rather the complexities of mother-daughter relationships (Bowles 441). A female's depiction of mother-daughter relationships, however, has much to offer theorists regarding female identity formation and the influence of the female identification process on females' relationships with love objects, both male and female.

Gayle Austin discusses the significance of mother-daughter bonding in *In the Summer House* within her book *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*. Austin draws upon Gardiner's understanding of object relationship theory, concluding that the construction of self occurs within social relationships in which the self perceives anything that is not the self as an object. Under this model a child views her mother as the first object or "significant other through whom both boys and girls realize subjectivity" (62). The realization of the child's subjectivity via the mother as love object accounts for "the ambivalence of fear and desire" that men and women associate with women (62).

Daughters experience "the [child's] ambivalence of fear and desire" towards the mother differently than do sons, as women nurture sons differently than they do daughters (Austin 62). Nancy Chodorow contends that a mother views her daughter as a double or extension of the self and therefore experiences a merging of identity with a daughter that she will not experience with a son. The mother's "sense of oneness" with the daughter

complicates the daughter's separation from the mother during adolescence (Austin 66). Chodorow concludes that mothers simultaneously desire to nurture their relationships with their daughters and to push them away. Such ambivalence provokes anxiety in daughters, thereby igniting the daughter's attempt to break away from the mother while also problematizing the separation process for the daughter. The anxieties experienced by both mother and daughter during the daughter's adolescence may lead both women to conclude that separation could bring disaster to them both (Austin 66).

In staging the undesired weddings of mother and daughter to men they do not love, Bowles exposes the influence of female identity formation on the female's transition into adulthood and her experience of other relationships. Gertrude's girlish daughter Molly experiences anxieties that transcend the normal premarital "cold feet" jitters. Although her impending marriage to Lionel does cause Molly tension, Molly appears anxious over living life in general, choosing instead to hide away dreaming in her summer house. Bowles reveals Molly's anxieties during Molly and Lionel's conversation about "the future" in Act One, Scene II. When asked if she thinks about the future, she responds, "I don't guess I emphasize that much" and "I don't think much about the future." Molly resists change, declaring, "I don't want anything different" (Bowles 430). While she and her mother fight, Molly would prefer to continue her life nearby her mother, daydreaming and reading comic books in the summer house instead of initiating her transition into adulthood by marrying or attending business school.

Molly is not the only character to resist maturation. Her beau Lionel appears unready for manhood in Act One. Lionel tells Molly in this scene that although he has the "ambition" to become a politician or priest thinking about both career choices fills

him with a sense of “dread” (Bowles 428). The fact that Lionel’s depiction of possible career choices is underdeveloped and over simplified suggests that he dreads his future—not just his potential career path. Lionel admits in the same scene that, like Molly’s retreat into the summer house, Lionel ran away from a previous life amongst his family to seek protection at The Lobster Bowl. Lionel delayed maturation by staying in the liminal space of this Southern California vacation community. There he temporarily delays the process of growing up by hiding away from the real responsibilities of adulthood. Both Lionel and Molly delay adulthood in their own way.

The audience gains a deeper understanding of Molly’s desires through Molly’s vocalization of her dreams. Gertrude proclaims earlier in the play, “Molly is a dreamer,” and the audience wonders of what Molly’s dreams are made (Bowles 419). We are not privy to her thoughts when in the summer house nor does Molly mention her dreams when with Lionel in Act One, Scene II. The only time we catch Molly “steeped in a dream” is when she recalls her now absent mother in Act Two (Bowles 445). Here Molly desires to be more like her mother despite the friction exhibited between the pair. Molly recalls that her mother drank fizzy water to cope with “the shadow” that “used to come and pass over her whole life and make it dark” (Bowles 446). In an attempt to mimic her model Gertrude, Molly sets out to drink an entire bottle of fizzy water but cannot because its too cold and because “nothing...nothing really turned out like [she] thought it would” (Bowles 446). As anxieties vex the relationships between mother and daughter, Molly cannot openly show worship through mimicry. She must instead enact her adoration in secret. And even in secret Molly’s attempt to act like her mother fails.

The child's ambivalent desire for a parent continues into adulthood, as we see with Gertrude's dreams of her father. "Lost in a dream," Gertrude speaks of her father, "When I was a little girl I made up my mind that I was going to be just like him. He was my model, my ideal. I admired him more than anyone on earth. And he admired me of course. I was so much like him—ambitious, defiant, a fighting cock always. I worshipped him" (Bowles 415). Gertrude's idealized memory of her father and their relationships reveals much about Gertrude's identity. Gertrude never mentions her mother, only her father and her sister, but in worshipping her father as her model the audience understands that Gertrude values masculinity and the traits associated with masculinity over femininity. This preference is consistent with Chodorow's theory of mother-daughter bonding and her belief that mothers perpetuate the devaluing of femininity. Gertrude wants to be ambitious and defiant like her masculine father rather than meek, frail and delicate like her feminine sister, Ellen, or lazy and lackadaisical like Molly. Furthermore, Gertrude values the character traits she associates with her father's masculinity in other men. Before deciding to marry Mr. Solares, she asks him, "Do you like business or do you really prefer to stay home and lazy around?" (Bowles 418). Gertrude wants to marry someone like her idolized father.

Of course that stuff from which Molly and Gertrude's dreams are made is really those shadows that darken their lives. Ultimately the story Molly recalls for the audience in her time of estrangement from her mother is the story of her mother's unfulfilled fantasies. The mother's shadow is made from the residual sadness she experiences from both losing her father and never attaining the closeness she wished to experience with him. In turn Molly's shadow, as represented by her dream, is the loss of her mother.

This point is further exemplified by the fact that Molly mourns the loss of her mother and expresses her futility in front of her husband Lionel, the person who should rightfully serve as the object of her love at this point in her life. Even in marriage Molly retreats to the safety of a cerebral summer house—the recesses of her own mind and imagination. She cannot vacate this figurative space long enough to more than “half hear” her husband (Bowles 446).

The sadness and anxiety that accompanies parent child relationships in this play is best expressed through Gertrude’s recollection of “the senseless dream, a nightmare” she experiences prior to reuniting with Molly (Bowles 456). Earlier in the play Gertrude suggests that she experiences sadness by admitting that sometimes a shadow passes over her life and produces “a strange feeling of isolation” where “even [her] griefs and [her] sorrows don’t seem to belong to [her] (Bowles 414). Gertrude’s dream more fully imagines the extreme sadness and fear of loss of control that Gertrude attempts to deny and ignore earlier by occupying herself (Bowles 414).

Gertrude shares the dream with Mrs. Constable in a moment in which Gertrude is simultaneously experiencing anxiety due to the delaying of the mother-daughter reunion and defensiveness due to Mrs. Constable’s faint mocking of Gertrude’s depiction of her father and her relationship with him. In her dream, Gertrude is running quickly to find Molly, losing the presents she bought Molly along the way. She finds Molly “in a cold room” with her father, and Gertrude asks her own father for a gift to give Molly. The gift that he provides Gertrude, macaroons, crumbles and turns to dust as Molly tries to eat them. In the face of this mother’s disaster, Gertrude’s father laughs at Gertrude, directly

attacking Gertrude's romanticized image of her father and their relationship (Bowles 457).

The dream captures the central dilemma of the play in articulating Gertrude's fear of inadequacy and abandonment. Gertrude imagines herself running after her daughter, even as in real life Gertrude has chosen to run from Molly. Although Molly may suck out Gertrude's vitality at times, she also serves as Gertrude's livelihood since Gertrude is both attached to Molly and to her role as a mother. Furthermore, the dream depicts Gertrude as an inadequate mother, a woman who cannot nourish her own daughter. Molly remains out of Gertrude's reach; Gertrude struggles to get to Molly, and once she does, she can do nothing to protect and nourish her daughter. Of course, Molly does slip from Gertrude's grip by play's end when Molly finally decides to follow Lionel instead of staying with her mother. In this manner, Gertrude's worst fears are realized.

The dream is further complicated by Gertrude's father's vexing presence. By providing Gertrude with the deteriorating macaroons, he assists Gertrude in realizing her worst fears, her detachment from a father who is unable to nurture her. His menacing laughter firmly converts Gertrude's dream into a nightmare, as her own father both rejects and mocks her. The mocking that occurs in the dream echoes Gertrude's announcement in Act One, Scene I that Molly mocks her "for being such a failure in the garden and not being able to make things grow" (Bowles 416). Ultimately the dream leaves Gertrude feeling as if she is a failure both as a daughter and a mother. Gertrude's shadows may be stronger than she realizes.

Although Gertrude is wary of dreams and dreaming throughout the play, she does not entirely understand how her own dreams influence her behaviors. Gertrude clings

relentlessly to her fantasy of her father's preferential love to convince herself of its existence. Gertrude's idolization of her father often prohibits her from providing emotionally for her daughter. Instead of attending to her daughter's needs, Gertrude chastises her daughter for lacking characteristics such as ambition and pride that Gertrude associates with her father. Gertrude lives her life in service to the fantasy she holds about her father; as her ambitious and hardworking father "stuck to [himself] and [his] work," Gertrude associates dreaming with idleness and laziness (Bowles 415). Her desire to dismiss the shadows of her life is the desire to forget the pain of unfulfilled fantasies by grounding one's self in tangible realities. Accordingly Gertrude concerns herself with the financial condition of her family. Certainly she is better at providing for her family financially through her arrangements of her and Molly's marriage than she is at supporting her family emotionally.

Marriage is a necessity of maturation for most of the women in this play including Molly. The wedding scene showcases two brides in the absence of their grooms, and Gayle Austin has commented that the scene is visually depicted more like a wedding between two brides than between two brides and grooms (Christensen 67). The unwanted weddings cause both brides pain, although Molly's emotional reaction to her marriage is stronger than her mother's. The play continuously denies the possibility of romantic love between a man and a woman. Gertrude remembers Molly's father as lazy and irresponsible; Mr. Solares serves no other role to Gertrude than that of financial provider. He is incapable of attending to Gertrude's emotional and psychological needs. Similarly Mrs. Constable says later in the play that her husband always hated her. The absence of romantic love within the play causes the audience to read Molly's wedding as

more of a crisis than a celebration. Mrs. Lopez tells Lionel upon his inquiry regarding Molly's whereabouts, "She don't feel good. She's crying in here. I cried to when I had my wedding. Many young girls do. I didn't want to leave my house neither" (Bowles 442). Indeed Molly's wedding causes her emotional trauma rather than comfort or pleasure.

Molly's wedding, devoid of romance, enacts the complicated separation between mother and daughter. Bowles clearly shows that the scene involves a mother and daughter rather than two mature women, as Molly "looks more like a girl graduating school than a bride" (Bowles 436). The scene maintains Gertrude's forceful presence in Molly's life by depicting Gertrude giving continuous and almost nagging advice to her daughter regarding her wedding and marriage. The audience never gets the sense that Molly is an independent woman who can take care of herself and function in adult society. Molly listens to her mother's advice, enjoying herself and eating at her own party, until confronted with the realization that the marriages necessitate her separation from her mother.

Molly's desperation in the face of her mother's departure and Gertrude's reaction to Molly's desperation enact some of the anxieties that Chodorow believes mothers and daughters experience in separating from each other. Unlike Vivian, who according to her mother "[liked] her freedom," Molly enjoys the closeness and interdependence that she has experienced with her mother, even if she has not vocalized this fact prior to this scene (Bowles 423). In her desperation Molly resorts to emotional outbursts and irrational behaviors. She begs her mother not to leave her and forlornly attempts to prove her love to her mother by trying to jump into the ocean to which she has previously shown no

interest. Bowles depicts Molly as a child facing the impending abandonment of her mother. The wedding is both about new beginnings and the anxious separation of parent and child.

If Gertrude seems more composed at the prospect of her marriage, it may be because she has experience with life's realities. Gertrude's time for tears has passed; although she is able to cling to her fantasies regarding her father, Gertrude has lived for a long time on the outside of her summer house or symbolic nurturing womb. There are no tears to mourn her marriage to Mr. Solares. Gertrude might not love Mr. Solares, but she needs him for financial support and to escape her daughter. The ambiguous and complicated emotions that Gertrude experiences for her daughter facilitate Gertrude's departure from Molly in this scene and necessitate Gertrude's return to Molly later in the play. Overall it appears that Gertrude finds the emotional intensity of the relationship between mother and daughter both unbearable and necessary. Earlier in the play Gertrude expresses her disgust for Molly's refusal to swim in the ocean and her preference for daydreaming and reading comic books in the summer house. Gertrude says, "I'd thought we found paradise at last—the perfect place—but you don't want paradise... You want hell" (Bowles 416). Gertrude's failed attempt to provide for her daughter financially and emotionally causes her pain.

As Gertrude finds Molly's seemingly ungrateful behavior unbearable, so to is Molly's love for her mother. Molly loves Gertrude with such intensity that Gertrude feels smothered by her daughter. Gertrude interprets Molly's "frenzy of despair" over the impending loss of her mother not as the irrational panicking of a child facing abandonment but as "something violent... something heavy and dangerous inside

[Molly], like some terrible rock that's ready to explode" (Bowles 440). In this feminist, Oedipal reading of the play, the daughter threatens the mother's identity not by winning the affections of the father but through the fluctuation of the mother-daughter relationship from symbiotic to parasitic. The mother and daughter desire separation but are co-dependent, thus the actual separation of mother and daughter places anxiety on the relationship and on the identities of both women. Mother and daughter cannot live together, but they also cannot survive without each other. The wedding culminates with the violent throwing of ritual rice on the brides by Mr. Solares's female relatives. In the post-edenic garden of the summer house, fantasies are more often nightmares than beautiful dreams.

Weddings are about relationships, and although Bowles's play does not depict romantic love and the dynamic between a man and a woman as a result of such love, the play critiques patriarchy through its depiction of the mother-daughter relationship and relationships between women at large. Men play minor roles in this production, but a feminist viewing of the play can attribute the anxieties experienced by Gertrude and Molly to the influence of patriarchy on the identify formation of men and women. Firstly the patriarchal societal structure teaches women to value masculinity over femininity. Accordingly Gertrude admires her father and her father's characteristics above all others. Patriarchy both prefers and rewards masculinity over femininity by empowering men with economic resources. In fact the image of masculinity that Gertrude vocalizes for the audience intertwines the concept of masculinity with that of economic success; Gertrude associates hard work, ambition, pride and industriousness with masculinity, and she looks for these traits in potential suitors. While Gertrude may have the same characteristics as

her father, these characteristics do not necessarily financially empower a woman as they might a man.

Women's reliance on men for support and survival cause conflict amongst the female characters. The "something violent" that Gertrude recognizes in her daughter maybe seeds of envy that women hold for other women as a result of the female's position in a male-dominated society. There are plenty of women within the play to which Gertrude might theoretically turn for support, but her interactions with these women are often antagonistic. Gertrude complains about Mr. Solares's sister, Mrs. Lopez, throughout the play, and indeed Mrs. Lopez seems to interfere in Gertrude's relationship with her potential suitor. In Act One, Scene II the audience learns that Mrs. Lopez financially relies on Mr. Solares since her husband died several years earlier, and so Gertrude and Mrs. Lopez will have to vie for Mr. Solares's attention and economic resources. When Mr. Lopez expresses interest in Mrs. Constable's crocheted dress, stating "You look real good," in the same scene, Mrs. Lopez makes a point to say, "Now you want to go eat chop suey because he's talkin' to other lady. You be careful, Senora Eastman Cuevas or you gonna lose him" (Bowles 434).

Gertrude's envy of Mrs. Constable in this scene echoes the envy Gertrude held for her sister, Ellen, as a child. For as much as Gertrude insists that her father preferred Gertrude to the pale and frail Ellen, the fact that Gertrude's father spent time on vacation with Ellen and without Gertrude suggests otherwise. The empowered masculine object prefers to associate with feminine subjects. Women must fight for the necessary attention of men even within this "women's world."

Mothers are socially conditioned to gender difference as defined by patriarchal society, and as the primary caregivers mothers have the power to pass on these gender assumptions to their children. Accordingly mothers may unknowingly teach their daughters that masculinity is preferable to femininity and that, therefore, women are subservient to men. Mothers also teach their daughters that they are more like their mothers than their fathers. Such knowledge may incite different behaviors in a daughter as she develops. Some, like Mrs. Solares's pre-Oedipal Frederica, may desire continuous closeness with the mother, seeking to mimic and to please the mother (Christensen 55). Others, like Mrs. Constable's Vivian, may seek freedom from the mother-daughter relationship, perhaps attempting to escape her fate of becoming a mother. Patriarchy, after all, rarely reveres mothers.

Certainly patriarchy's messages regarding mother and daughter relationships produce Molly's anxiety regarding her separation from her mother. Molly associates with her mother and experiences a closeness to her that she may never experience again, at least not until she has a daughter. This same closeness causes Molly to recoil from her mother in the final scene. The mother's attention on the daughter, and vice versa, is stifling. As Lionel proclaims, Gertrude's closeness to Molly is "like a wall...some kind of shadow between [Lionel and Molly]" (Bowles 459). In order for Molly to mature acceptably within this society, Molly cannot return to Gertrude nor can she choose death over life in response to this separation crisis. Instead Molly exits with Lionel, leaving Gertrude alone with her shadow dreams.

Bowles's play deeply recognizes the extent to which women might experience isolation as a result of the patriarchal societal structure. Since patriarchy prohibits

women from supporting each other in a community, further emphasis is placed on the romantic relationship between men and women. Gertrude is married in the play, but her marriage does not diminish the isolation she experiences. In this manner Bowles depicts a relationship that patriarchy values as emotionally unfulfilling. Thus patriarchy leaves women with only one relationship in which to diminish isolation—the relationship between mother and daughter. This relationship has the potential to combat isolation, because, in identifying with their daughters, mothers experience “a sense of oneness” with their daughter that is socially permitted for the duration of the daughter’s childhood (Austen 66). While Gertrude’s “sense of oneness” with Molly endures tragically, Molly’s affections and preference for her mother is offset by Molly’s realization that her future livelihood relies on her relationship with Lionel.

Molly’s future is invested in a person for whom she expresses no desire. In fact, most women in the play do not achieve their objects of desire. Mrs. Constable loses Vivian, proclaiming that her daughter never loved her. Molly loses her mother, and Gertrude loses her father and Molly. Only the proprietor of the Lobster Bowl, Inez, and Mrs. Lopez appear content. Inez does not have an object of desire that challenges her independence or that leads her on an impossible quest. Instead Inez likes “everybody to be going his own independent way” (451). Alternatively Mrs. Lopez enjoys the love of her daughter and the affections of an extended community of women. Overall Bowles suggests that women’s position within society prohibits many women from experiencing requited, sustained love.

Reclaiming the Ceremony: Beth Henley's *Impossible Marriage*

Beth Henley's *Impossible Marriage* considers the tensions between societal conventions and personal desires in a comedy about a twenty-year old woman marrying a fifty-something man (Andreach 145). Marriage is an essential component to the development of the female characters' self-images. Since the play is in the garden of a country estate outside Savannah, the severity of Southern conventions informs the characters' actions. Conventional appearances mask complicated realities in this play, because the female characters innate desires often conflict with the societal roles they have assumed. The play's matriarch Kendall insists in Part Three that "tradition cements our sanity," but the play questions this assumption by suggesting that tradition is at odds with our instincts and therefore a source of suffering and neurosis (Henley 37). Although sacrificing one's desires to conform to tradition leads to suffering, Henley does not believe that "marriage is an evilly antiquated institution. A suffocating environment where banality is bred" for all couples (Henley 15). Instead she imagines the possibilities of romantic love unrestricted by society's conventions.

The conflict between tradition and personal desires is most evident in the sister of the bride, Floral. Floral marries her husband Jonsey, because "[she] wanted to emulate [her mother] and father. How [they] loved each other," a fact whose validity her mother later denies (Henley 38). She describes her wedding day as perfect and says she was happy, and yet by the opening of the play Floral feels trapped in marriage to her handsome husband Jonsey, a man she does not love. Jonsey loves Floral; he frequently vocalizes his affections and testifies to his love through acts of caring such as rubbing his wife's feet, providing her with chocolates to sooth her cravings and pouring sweet oils for

her bath. Floral, however, is a passionate person, and Jonsey has no interest in sex, stating, “Regrettably, sex holds no interest to me. It doesn’t even repulse me. I’m that flaccid, I’m afraid” (Henley 25). Characterized by unrequited love and unsatisfied desires, this marriage does seem “impossible.” In the minutes before her sister’s wedding in Part Three, Floral concludes, “After all, marriage isn’t for everyone. Once you are married you’re stuck. Nothing ever changes” (Henley 37). For Floral marriage is a death rather than a new beginning.

Floral’s marriage is further complicated by both partner’s attempt to uphold the appearance of a “normal” marriage. Jonsey “flirts with other women to proliferate the myth that [he is] a cad” in an attempt to disguise his abnormal celibacy (Henley 41). Floral, however, believes that her husband is actually unfaithful and seeks the counseling of Reverend Jonathan Larence before the play’s beginning in an attempt to find happiness. Here Floral is overcome by her desires and after sleeping with Reverend Larence becomes pregnant. Although Jonsey knows that the child is not his, he upholds the façade of their marriage. In Part Three when Floral suggests she might leave him because her unborn child is not his, Jonsey says of the child, “We’ll say it is [ours]. I’ll love it like it is” (Henley 41). Jonsey’s love for his wife allows for him to dismiss her indiscretions in order to uphold their marriage.

Born from tradition and civility, Floral’s marriage upholds Southern societal structures. Unfortunately for Floral her marriage serves a societal function only; it does nothing to service her desires and has nothing to do with love (at least from her perspective). Repressed by her relationship, Floral acts on her passions impulsively, finding unusual outlets for her desires. Since “being civilized is a rot” Floral leaves the

garden in Part Two, constructed by society, to roll down hills in the uncivilized woods (Henley 34). Her pregnancy cravings are unusual and uncontrollable; Floral takes a bite out of her sister's wedding cake the night before the wedding and eats muffins with raspberries whose juices could "drip down [her] lips" the morning of the wedding (Henley 34). Floral's mother, Kendall, comments on Floral's eating of the wedding cake, stating, "Forgive me, I thought we were civilized human beings, not animals" (Henley 32). In her encounter with Reverend Larence in Part Two, Floral states, "I feel romance all in the air. It's ripping through me like flowers blooming through my skin" (Henley 30). Floral is passionate and capable of love but the possibility of love only exists outside of her marriage.

Henley's contemplation of traditional marriage as lacking love and happiness continues with her depiction of Floral and Pandora's mother, Kendall. Kendall is concerned primarily with maintaining appearances throughout the play. She is worried about her daughter Pandora's marriage to a man more than twice her age, as she believes the marriage is scandalous. When her daughter's fiancée, Edvard, reveals that his ex-wife has sworn to kill herself if Edvard remarries, Kendall implores Pandora to postpone the wedding, again stating "I do not like scandal" (Henley 22). Similarly when Pandora announces in Part One that she will not wed Edvard, Kendall is most concerned with the wedding cake on public display at the bakery in town: "I refuse to have the whole town viewing [the cake] as an emblem of our impetuous hearts" (Henley 12). Kendall is also concerned with upholding traditions, noting that there was no precedent for Floral's decision to seek the Reverend's counseling and stating "people don't get divorced in our family. There's no precedent" (Henley 14). For Kendall weddings are not about love but

rather conformity and tradition. She even admits to Floral in Part Three that she and her husband never loved each other.

Pandora and Edvard's relationship and their impending wedding complicate Floral and Kendall's pessimistic views of marriage. Edvard and Pandora's relationship is the most unconventional. They marry more as a response to their desires than societal expectations, since their marriage does not conform to Southern societal standards. Even though Pandora is temporarily convinced by her "jealous" and "wicked" sister Floral to call off the wedding, Pandora voices her love for Edvard throughout the play, stating "he's all I've ever wanted" (Henley 10). Neither partner is upset by their age difference. When Floral asks Edvard whether or not he thinks he is too old for Pandora, Edvard answers, "no, I love her madly. What else matters" (Henley 14).

Edvard and Pandora treat their love as true love. This idealized conception of love imagines a relationship that continues despite outside challenges due to the purity of the love itself. When Pandora finds out that Edvard's ex-wife plans on killing herself if Pandora and Edvard wed, Pandora does not become upset. Instead she proclaims, "How you must love me to go through with our marriage under such tragic duress" (Henley 22). Both Pandora and Edvard incorporate the play's often-absurd challenges into their idealized image of their relationship. This concept is complemented by the conditions of Pandora and Edvard's relationship. Pandora makes a fitting bride, because she is "a beauty," "the image of youthful exuberance" (Henley 8). Edvard is a prince-of-sorts to Pandora; as a writer, Edvard has immortalized Pandora as a whimsical character with blue wings in his novel. Floral suggests that Edvard has made Pandora into a legend.

Although Edvard and Pandora insist on getting married and speak at length about their love for each other, Henley ironically has Edvard and Pandora vocalize doubts about their marriage—doubts that very easily may become realities. Pandora evokes the myth of romantic love in this speech in Part Two: “How flustered I am with excitement. Tomorrow I will be wed. Tonight is the last night I stand on this planet a solitary person. I will never be alone again. Marriage is the most wonderful state. Never to be alone...All of this love, it will last and last and last” (Henley 20).

Pandora believes that weddings secure relationships and consequently love. Edvard, a divorcee, takes another view of marriage, responding, “Not necessarily. I mean my first marriage didn’t last forever” (Henley 21). Henley imagines the possibility of eternal love and then immediately mocks the image. A similar moment occurs with Pandora towards the end of the play. As Pandora departs to elope with Edvard, Floral admits she is jealous of Pandora, because “[Her] marriage is a morbid predicament without passion or hope. [Pandora has] such brave gaiety, romantic notions, youthful daring and translucent beauty” (Henley 39).

To this, Pandora responds, “There’s a terror to it...I play the lovely, joyous child everyone adores and is drawn to, but sooner than later my face will be less round, my eyes will dull, worry lines will cross my hardened brow, and I will soon become something that once was and now is not. My charms will not age well. Now is my time. I must take it” (Henley 40).

Pandora draws the audience’s attention to several realities in this speech. Perhaps Pandora is more beautiful and happier than her sister, but what Floral interprets as “brave gaiety” and “youthful daring” is not without purpose (Henley 39). Pandora understands

that youth and beauty fade and that men desire both in women. This speech does not undermine her love for Edvard, but it acknowledges that love exists within the frameworks of reality and that not everyday is as perfect as one's wedding day.

Ultimately the play seems to suggest that love requires passion and therefore is often at odds with the conventions of society. The play, however, does not deny the existence of love, nor does it definitely conclude that societal conventions always trump individual desires. It does question marriage's promise to provide an individual with happiness, passion and fulfillment as marriage serves the society rather than the individual.

Accordingly the play does not end with a traditional wedding. Pandora and Edvard "have decided not to be bullied and blackmailed by [Edvard's deranged] ex-spouse" (Henley 39). Instead they break tradition by deciding to be married by the Justice of the Peace in a neighboring county, enjoying an anonymous wedding away from family and neighbors. Once the Reverend returns from his stint rolling down hills and contemplating what is impossible, Floral admits that the child she is carrying is the Reverend's and the fallen couple exit together into the woods. Even Kendall throws off society's restrictions, asking Sidney to kiss her again. Sidney cannot kiss her, although he continues to sit with her, despite his announcement that he is leaving to eat raspberries, a symbol of passion and desire from earlier in the play. Sidney says he cannot kiss Kendall, because "he is an impossible fool" (Henley 43). The audience is given the impression that Sidney, who knew nothing about love at the play's beginning, is now a romantic, and perhaps he too is waiting for his true love. Henley's play, like many romantic comedies, ends with a wedding, so the audience will never know if

Edvard and Pandora's love will "last and last and last" (Henley 20). We do know that the couple loves each other, despite society's rules, and they choose a commitment to each other. A marriage based on true love might not be that impossible after all.

Love's Reprise: Love, Loss, and Memory in Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice*

Ruhl's *Eurydice*, a retelling of the Orpheus myth, attempts to more accurately portray the human condition by combining the interactions of our complicated, grandiose and surreal emotional lives with the ordinary stuff of everyday living.

Ruhl stated in an interview for *The Dramatist*, "I try to interpret how people subjectively experience life, as opposed to taking a picture of them and seeing what they look like from the outside. Everyone has a great, horrible opera within them. In that sense, you could say that I aspire to write realism" (Howe 30).

In *Eurydice* Ruhl uses ordinary objects in fantastical ways to imagine the "great, horrible opera" of human love and loss. The water that streams down on Eurydice as she exits the raining elevator that transports her to the underworld viscerally evokes both sadness and spiritual purging. Similarly the sweet yet practical advice that Eurydice's father includes in his letters to Eurydice from the underworld evoke the tenderness of parental love. The setting and plot of Ruhl's play maybe surrealistic, but the story itself conveys a palpable realness in its representation of human love and grief. By interweaving the ordinary with the sublime, Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* contemplates the nature of love, the power of memory, and "the discombobulating experience of grief and loss" (Isherwood). The themes of love's intertwinement with loss and the human desire to remember even when memories cause pain resound throughout the play.

Eurydice dramatizes the love between Orpheus and Eurydice poetically. As star-crossed lovers, we get the sense that Eurydice and Orpheus are drawn to each other magnetically. "Too young and a little too in love," Orpheus gives Eurydice an "invisible sea" and writes for her a symphony for twelve instruments (Ruhl 333). Ultimately

Orpheus travels through the gates of hell to be reunited with his beloved. Eurydice has no symphony to write for Orpheus, but she too loves him. When asked by Orpheus how she will remember her love for him, she replies, “That’s easy. I can’t help it” (Ruhl 340). Eurydice has difficulty recognizing her father in the underworld, but her father’s mere mention of Orpheus when reading the first of many love letters to Eurydice reignites Eurydice’s recognition of her love for Orpheus. And although Eurydice is saddened by the prospect of leaving her father alone in the underworld, she still chooses to go after Orpheus, assuring her father that Orpheus can take care of her despite his narrow shoulders.

Although Orpheus and Eurydice’s love for each other might be true, its expression is flawed. The lovers, fundamentally different people, also communicate differently—Orpheus through his music and Eurydice through her language. Eurydice says to her father in the second movement, “Orpheus never liked words. He would get a funny look on his face and I would say what are you thinking about and he would always be thinking about music” (Ruhl 385).

Still both Eurydice and Orpheus attempt to understand and respect the inner life of the other. Orpheus cannot follow Eurydice’s explanation in the First Movement regarding the interesting book she read, but he does not want his confusion to come between them, saying, “I love how you love books. Don’t be mad” (Ruhl 336). Orpheus initially finds that his only method of communication with his wife is through words after her death and so this great musician tries writing love letters. After a first failed attempt, Orpheus’s sent letter reads, “Dear Eurydice, Symphony for twelve instruments” (Ruhl 367). Try as he might, Orpheus’s music is louder than his words. A second letter relies

on the words of a poet and playwright, Shakespeare, as Orpheus, who believes Eurydice must miss her books, sends Shakespeare's Collected Works to his wife. Eurydice also treats Orpheus's music with respect, regardless of her ability to understand it. Eurydice is excited that her husband has written a new symphony in the First Movement and vows that she will always remember the melody because "it will be imprinted on [her] heart like wax" despite her inability to carry a tune or keep rhythm (Ruhl 338).

Eurydice reveals the complexity of her love for Orpheus in Scene 16 of the Second Movement.

If we were in a restaurant, sometimes I would get embarrassed because Orpheus looked sullen and wouldn't talk to me and I thought people felt sorry for me. I should have realized that women envied me. Their husbands talked too much.

But I wanted to talk to him about my notions. I was working on a new philosophical system. It involved hats.

This is what it is to love an artist: The moon is always rising above your house. The houses of your neighbors look dull and lacking in moonlight. But he is always going away from you. Inside his head there is always something more beautiful.

Orpheus said the mind is a slide ruler. It can fit around anything. Words can mean anything. Show me your body, he said. It only means one thing (385).

Eurydice is commenting on her desire to communicate via language with her husband. Not only does Eurydice wish for her husband to talk to her, but she also wants her husband to attentively listen to and appreciate her intellectuality as expressed through her words. Eurydice and Orpheus's love is passionate and kinesthetic. Orpheus has his music, Eurydice her words, and in an attempt to bridge the divide, Orpheus desires Eurydice's body, something he believes he cannot misinterpret.

The audience cannot help but feel sympathy for Eurydice in this scene. Reunited with her father in the underworld, she reflects on her life, expressing both her desire to

reunite with her beloved but also the imperfections of their former union. Eurydice loves Orpheus—she loves him enough to choose him as her partner even though Orpheus loves music, and will always love music, more than his wife. There was beauty in Eurydice’s life when she was with Orpheus, but Orpheus himself was never completely available, always “going away from her” (Ruhl 385).

Eurydice’s first death on her wedding day further unveils the tensions and anxieties that complicate Eurydice’s love for Orpheus. The scene reinforces the audience’s recognition of the love between Eurydice and Orpheus. As the two lovers dance and sing to “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree,” Ruhl’s stage directions indicate that Orpheus and Eurydice “are happy” (347). As much as the audience is led to recognize the love of Orpheus and Eurydice, we also apprehend a peculiarity about Eurydice on her wedding day, a presence or idea that keeps her from the celebration. The absence of her father tempers Eurydice’s happiness on the so-called happiest day of her life. Her grief is reinforced by the visual presence of her father. Scene 2 of the First Movement, the first of the wedding scenes, features Eurydice’s father writing a letter to Eurydice that contains the advice he would have delivered in a speech on her wedding day, and the wedding dance scene features Eurydice and Orpheus on one side of the stage with the Father practicing the jitterbug simultaneously on the other side of the stage. His physical presence serves to make Eurydice’s grief more palpable to the audience, as we come to recognize and witness the losses she has suffered.

When the audience first sees Eurydice on her wedding day, she is standing next to a water pump a great distance from her actual wedding ceremony. Eurydice offers several excuses for her absence from the celebration, finally stating, “A wedding is for

daughters and fathers. The mothers all dress up, trying to look like young women. But a wedding is for a father and a daughter. They stop being married to each other on that day” (Ruhl 345). The candid honesty of Eurydice’s comment evokes sadness. Her statement recognizes the theatricality of the wedding ceremony, but it also suggests the strength of the emotional bond between daughters and fathers. Eurydice loves Orpheus, but her love for Orpheus does not alleviate the grief she experiences as the result of her father’s death. Eurydice’s wedding day is bittersweet, because the ceremony is unalterably changed by her father’s absence. Indeed Eurydice’s longing for her father leads to her death on her wedding day, as Eurydice follows the “nasty, interesting man” to his high rise apartment and the stairs that ultimately cause her death only because he possesses a letter addressed to her from her deceased father. In the world of Eurydice new love cannot substitute for lost love. Each love is experienced differently, so love and loss echo simultaneously and indefinitely.

Eurydice’s father echoes Eurydice’s grief through his actions in the underworld. For him also, weddings are about fathers and daughters; there is no guarantee that Eurydice will receive the letter that her father writes to her on her wedding day, but he sends one anyway, writing all the advice that he would have given in his wedding speech. Ruhl captures the tenderness of parental love with the Father’s advice to his daughter “Everything in moderation...take care to change the lightbulbs” (Ruhl 343-344). The Father’s solitary enactment of his daughter’s procession down the aisle emphasizes his steadfast love for his daughter. Ruhl’s stage directions read, “In the underworld, the father walks in a straight line as though he is walking his daughter down the aisle...He looks at his imaginary daughter; he looks straight ahead; he acknowledges the guests at

the wedding; he gets choked up; he looks at his daughter and smiles an embarrassed smile for getting choked up” (344). These are the tears of a parent who has been denied the possibility of witnessing the milestones of his daughter’s life.

Ruhl emphasizes Eurydice’s father’s love for his daughter during their underworld reunion in the Second Movement of the play. Eurydice has technically outlived her father, since her father died before Eurydice, but the endurance of the Father’s consciousness and memory allow him to experience life after death. Although Eurydice is still alive in the play’s First Movement, her father experiences the complicated emotions one feels when losing a loved one. The Father’s loss of Eurydice is every bit as real as Eurydice’s loss of her father. The Stones, Ruhl’s underworld chorus, underscore the intense grief one feels when losing a loved one, saying to the audience upon Eurydice’s arrival in the underworld, “Listen to her the way you would listen / To your own daughter if she died too young / And tried to speak to you across long distances” (Ruhl 361).

The Stones’ proclamation suggests that both the parent and daughter experience tragedy with the daughter’s death. The daughter experiences frustration and fear due to her failed attempts at communicating with loved ones; the parent is helpless, unable to comprehend the daughter’s message. Ruhl portrays parental love as undying love within the play, and, accordingly, the Stones want the audience to listen to Eurydice with the sympathetic tenderness of unconditional love despite the intense sadness and frustration a parent might experience in the face of a child’s inability to communicate.

The Father renders the emotional strength to treat Eurydice with compassion, patience and love despite Eurydice’s tragic inability to recognize her father. Dipped in

the river Lethe like all those making passage into the underworld, Eurydice has lost access to memory and language, both of which her father has preserved through accident; we find out in the First Movement that the Father was not dipped long enough in the river as to erase all consciousness. His knowledge of Eurydice's name comes back to him while listening to the rain from the underworld's elevator. Eurydice's inability to recognize her father does little to diminish his elation in this scene. His love for his daughter transcends the tragedy of the reunion; the Father patiently continues to communicate with his daughter and to comfort her. As Eurydice does not understand English any longer, he speaks to his daughter in the simple "language of stones," translating the word "father" into an image that Eurydice understands, the image of a tall tree:

Father: When I was alive, I was your tree.

Eurydice: My tree! Yes, the tall one in the backyard! I used to sit all day in its Shade (Ruhl 364)!

The Father's love for Eurydice makes it possible for him to find the language to communicate with her and to comfort her. Even as Eurydice continues to mistake her father for a porter, the Father continues to care for his daughter, creating a room for her where there is none. It's a simple, heartfelt act of love, but one that any parent could relate to. With no authentic materials to craft shelter, the father creates a room out of string for his daughter.

As with all of Ruhl's plays, the stage directions in this scene poetically showcase the relationship between the characters on stage: The Father creates a room out of string for Eurydice / He makes four walls and a door out of string. / Time passes. / It takes time to build a room out of string" (Ruhl 367). Here the audience understands that the Father

would give anything to ensure the safety and happiness of his daughter. The Father is even willing to sacrifice an eternity with his daughter to protect his daughter's happiness and to give her a second chance at life, assuring Eurydice upon Orpheus's arrival that the best choice is to leave the underworld for a chance at life with her husband. The Father, however, is not strong enough as to endure "the second death" he experiences upon Eurydice's reunion with Orpheus. Instead the Father dips himself in the River Lethe thereby "remember[ing] to forget" (Ruhl 401).

The wedding ceremony experiences two more incarnations in the Third Movement of the play. With Orpheus's arrival in the underworld to save Eurydice, Orpheus, Eurydice and her father are finally in the same location, initially alleviating the grief that kept Eurydice away from her earthly ceremony. The stage directions have Eurydice and her father processing towards Orpheus, arm and arm, to wedding music. This is the integral action missing from Eurydice's earlier wedding. But Eurydice's father cannot return to Earth with Eurydice, a fact that Eurydice cannot overlook, calling for her father once he is out of sight. The reunion of Orpheus and Eurydice ends in tragedy when Orpheus turns, startled, and looks upon Eurydice despite the Stones' direction to face away from her. Both Eurydice and Orpheus distrust the Stones and experience anxieties as they continue walking, blind to each other. It seems only human to experience such doubts—to trust in something they cannot perceive after enduring the gates of hell. Eurydice does not recognize her husband; she screams for her father and wants to return to her house of string. Orpheus does not recognize Eurydice's voice, and so he turns, and Eurydice, dying a second death, is lost to him forever.

The loss of her father and her husband leave Eurydice utterly alone and vulnerable with only her memories to comfort her. Eurydice finds that memories cannot protect her from the cruel forces of the world. In a third imagining of the wedding, the Lord of the Underworld, played by the same actor as the “Nasty, Interesting Man” who, in his attempt to seduce her while on earth is responsible for Eurydice’s death, comes to make Eurydice’s his bride. The Lord of the Underworld’s conception of love and weddings is disturbing in its contrast to the Father and Orpheus’s expression of love for Eurydice. Through his desire to protect and comfort Eurydice, especially on her wedding day, the Father exhibits selfless love for his daughter. And while Orpheus may not always understand his wife, he, too, expresses self-sacrifice, risking his life to save Eurydice and sacrificing his life when his first attempt fails. Conversely the Lord of the Underworld objectifies Eurydice through his singular desire for her body. At times he appears as a sexual predator, telling Eurydice, “I can do chin-ups inside your bones” (Ruhl 381). The Lord of the Underworld makes good on his claim, entering Eurydice body’s without her consent. The audience recognizes him as a villain from our knowledge of romance narratives; The Lord of the Underworld eschews all conventions associated with romance, instead wishing to possess Eurydice without any wooing rituals.

Whereas the two earlier wedding ceremonies in the play showcase music, dancing and tender affection, the Lord of the Underworld’s references to weddings focus on the bed. In readying himself for his impending wedding ceremony with Eurydice, the Lord of the Underworld calls for the preparation of the “the satins and silks” as “he is ready to be a man now” (Ruhl 408). Eurydice asks for time to prepare also, and the Lord of the Underworld responds, “Don’t be long. The wedding songs are already being written.

They're very quiet. Inaudible, you might say. A dirt-filled orchestra for my bride. Don't trouble the songs with your music, I say. A song is two dead bodies rubbing under the covers to keep warm" (Ruhl 409).

When the Father is with Eurydice in the underworld, the underworld is more of a sanctuary than purgatory. Together with her father in the house of string, Eurydice experiences safety and love. In the absence of her father and Orpheus, the underworld becomes Eurydice's hell. The Lord of the Underworld's imagines a loveless vision of marriage, void of romance and respect. It's not so much that he desires Eurydice to be his wife, but rather, his concubine. Faced with impending danger, Eurydice chooses instead to dip herself in the river and join her father in an eternity of forgetfulness. Her choice is made ever more tragic by Orpheus's arrival in the underworld. The play ends with all three, father, daughter and husband, unconscious together in the underworld.

Whereas other female playwrights have used wedding scenes to showcase the conflict between societal expectations and personal desires, Ruhl's ahistorical play uses weddings to underscore love's intertwinement with loss. As in Bowles's play, Ruhl's weddings are about relationships—the romantic relationship between she and Orpheus and parental relationship between she and her father. Weddings celebrate the eternal commitment between two people who are romantically in love, but they are also personal milestones that should incorporate all the couple's loved ones. Eurydice misses her father on her wedding day, as he will not be able to serve in the traditional fatherly capacity by walking her down the aisle.

In this sense Ruhl's play also recognizes that love in many forms nurtures women, a fact that many feminist writers including bell hooks have emphasized in their

contemporary work. Eurydice's love for Orpheus and her father complement each other. Although different, both loves are integral parts of her life experience as they speak to different aspects of her identity. It's not Eurydice's love for her father that keeps her from Orpheus but rather the loss of her father that causes her hesitation on her wedding day. In his review of the Yale Repertory Theater's production "A Comic Impudence Softens a Tale of Loss," Charles Isherwood writes of the play, "As it happens...love is seen as an continuing process of remembering and reconstructing, of looking back—even when the act of recollection brings anguish...Eurydice is ultimately about the painful choice that comes with the passings of joys and pleasures; whether to remember, in sadness, or to forget and achieve a calm but emptier equilibrium."

To be human is to love, lose and remember. In *Eurydice* love is eternal, although humans are not. And memories are the stuff of which we are made, sustaining us even as we continue looking back. In the play, as in life, there is no joy without sadness, pushing this surreal tragedy into the realm of Ruhlman realism.

Conclusion

From my desk I can see as I write this the bridesmaid dress that I am to wear to my best friend's wedding in less than a month, my grandparents' wedding photograph and a thank you note from a recently attended wedding. All of these are reminders of wedding's real presence in women's lives. We can critique weddings for their complicated history, or, in some cases, their unnecessary grandiosity, but we cannot deny their contemporary importance in the lives of many women.

The three plays studied in this project may seem more different than similar at first glance. Some of these differences can be attributed to the time period in which the plays were written. First produced in 1953, *In the Summer House* features unwanted yet necessary marriages. Matrimony was the expected fate for young Americans in the postwar period. Stephanie Coontz writes in *Marriage, a History* that a 1957 survey in the United States reported that four out of five people believed anyone who preferred to remain single was "sick" and "neurotic" (230). *In the Summer House* recognizes that marriage was not only expected but also necessary for most women of the time. Far from a realization of a female fantasy, Gertrude stages her wedding and her daughter's wedding to fulfill the expectations of the community and their fiancés. Although Gertrude has endured many hardships in her quest for economic survival, she knows how to play to win in a man's world.

Pandora also encounters obstacles in pursuit of her goals in Henley's 1998 comedy *Impossible Marriage*. Henley showcases how the adherence to society's social conventions impacts love and the individual. Henley mocks the traditional, Southern wedding ceremony by depicting a ceremony for society's benefit rather than as an

authentic validation of the couple's love. In this manner there is a disconnection between love and the wedding ceremony in both Bowles and Henley's plays. Unlike Bowles, Henley validates the existence of romantic love in the play. Pandora and Edvard can escape society's grasp but Gertrude and Molly cannot.

Molly's anxious compromises and Pandora's realized dreams return in the figure of Ruhl's Eurydice. Love for both Orpheus and her father drives Eurydice to her fate in a play that re-imagines the experiences of love and grief continuously. Ruhl endows Eurydice with the psychological complexity of Bowles's Gertrude and the passionate spirit of Henley's Pandora. Society, in the figure of "the nasty, interesting man," and mortality allow nothing more than the temporary relief of Eurydice's grief. *Eurydice* is the only one of the three plays to depict a wedding ceremony enacted for the lovers' sakes rather than for the sake of society. Whereas Pandora and Molly must combat very real outside forces, Eurydice's opponents are mostly internal. Eurydice's memories and experiences of love keep her from her wedding and cause her apprehensions in returning to Orpheus by play's end.

Despite the plays' many differences, all three plays move women from the margins to the center. The choices presented to Gertrude, Molly, Pandora, Floral and Eurydice in their respective plays may not always be favorable, but these women are presented with choices nonetheless. Restricted by patriarchy's economy, Gertrude and Molly make choices that assist them in navigating these restrictions. Gertrude marries Mr. Solares; Molly decides to stay with Lionel rather than returning to her mother. Pandora and Floral escape society's restrictions instead of resigning to the fate of their

mother Kendall. And Eurydice, the most tragic bride, pursues love and chooses death after that love can no longer be attained.

When studied together, these plays reveal the theatricality of the wedding ceremony. Weddings, in a sense, are staged productions. Participants are assigned roles (bride, groom, maid of honor, etc.) and the ceremony takes place in front of an audience. Gertrude and Molly perform their weddings for Mr. Solares, Lionel and the inhabitants of the Southern California vacation community. Pandora and Edvard refuse to perform their wedding for Kendall's audience. Eurydice cannot complete the performance of her wedding ceremony as an integral participant, her father, is missing from the celebration. The only solace her father finds on her wedding day is in acting out the ceremony by himself.

Weddings are a rite of passage for many women. They also enact the collision between the real and the ideal. Wedding ceremonies celebrate real people in real relationships, but they transcend our ordinary experiences of these relationships. Weddings can memorialize beautifully the love between the couple in a way uniquely available to them only on their wedding day. They may instead enact the social superiority of the couple or the couple's family in ceremonies that are more conscience of the audience than the marrying couple. Some argue that weddings empower women by celebrating their choice for a love match and in focusing on women to a degree that does not occur as part of the everyday. Others contend that weddings continue to objectify women in valuing women for their beauty, femininity and alleged purity.

Weddings will continue to captivate the minds of young women but hopefully for the right reasons. Weddings are the most attainable component of the traditional romance

narrative, as they are the only component controlled by women. Women may not dictate how they are wooed or what happens after vows are exchanged but they can control what music they will walk down the aisle to and what they will be wearing. Too often it seems, as sociologist Chrys Ingraham argues, that weddings become about consumerism and materialism rather than love. But when weddings serve to memorialize the willing commitment of two people to each other, then they are cause to celebrate. Weddings are one of the few major celebrations in our society. Weddings provide us cause to gather together the family and friends who have loved and supported us. In this manner, weddings can be a celebration of community and the couple. The enjoyment derived from weddings points to a void in our society. Perhaps we need more occasions for celebrations as we turn towards recognizing love in its many varieties.

Works Cited

- Andreach, Robert J. *Understanding the Plays of Beth Henley*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006. Print.
- Austen, Gayle. *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990. Print.
- Booth, Clare. *The Women. Plays by American Women, 1930–1960*. Ed. Judith E. Barlow. New York: Applause Theater Books, 2001. 49–154. Print.
- Bowles, Jane. *In the Summer House. Plays by American Women, 1930–1960*. Ed. Judith E. Barlow. New York: Applause Theater Books, 2001. 397–466. Print.
- Christensen, Peter G. “Family Dynamics in Jane Bowles’s *In the Summer House*.” *A Tawdry Place of Salvation: The Art of Jane Bowles*. Ed. Jenine Skerl. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997, 49–63. Print.
- Coontz, Stephanie. *Marriage: A History*. New York: Viking, 2005. Print.
- Evans, Sarah M. *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End*. New York: Free Press, 2003. Print.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1997. Print.
- Geller, Jaclyn. *Here Comes the Bride: Women, Weddings and the Marriage Mystique*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2001. Print.
- Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1971. Print.
- Henley, Beth. *Impossible Marriage*. New York: Castle Productions, 1999. Print.

- Howe, Tina. "IN CONVERSATION WITH Sarah Ruhl." *Dramatist* 9.5 (2007): 30-35. International Bibliography of Theatre & Dance with Full Text. EBSCO. Web. 6 May 2010.
- hooks, bell. *Communion*. New York: Williams Morrow, 2002. Print.
- Ingraham, Chrys. *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Isherwood, Charles. "A Comic Impudence Softens a Tale of Loss." *New York Times*. New York Times, 3 October 2006. Web. 30 March 2010.
- Isherwood, Charles. "The Power of Memory to Triumph Over Death." *New York Times*. New York Times, 19 June 2007. Web. 30 March 2010.
- O'Neill, Eugene. *Long Day's Journey into Night*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2002. Print.
- Plunka, Gene A. *The Plays of Beth Henley: A Critical Study*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002. Print.
- Stacey, Jackie and Lynn Pearce. "The Heart of the Matter." *Romance Revisited*. Ed. Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey. New York: New York University Press, 1995. 11-45. Print.
- Ruhl, Sarah. *The Clean House and Other Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006. Print.
- Wasserstein, Wendy. *Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990.