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**Challenging Maternal Inevitability:  
Abortion, Careers, and Abandonment in the Nuclear Family, 1879-1939**

A Dissertation Presented

by

**Lesley Lynn Broder**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements  
for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

in

**English**

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation examines representations of motherhood in transatlantic fiction and drama written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Each chapter considers an area largely unexplored in literature prior to the turn of the twentieth century: representations of abortion, working mothers, and women who abandon their families. Even as these texts reflect the evolution of the public's social imagination, they also reflect traces of a nineteenth-century understanding of gender that cannot separate femininity from maternity. Paradoxically, in violating expectations about maternity, texts that deal with abortion uphold standard family roles; I explore these representations in chapter one, including Elizabeth Robins's *Votes for Women!* (1907), Harley Granville Barker's *Waste* (1909), Eugene O'Neill's *Abortion* (1914), Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Tess Slesinger's *The Unpossessed* (1934), and Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl*

(1939/1978). The female characters' reactions to pregnancy and their ideas about family support audience expectations about maternal desire. In chapter two I focus on characters that reinvent conventional family arrangements by deciding to be working mothers, including figures in George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1902), Rachel Crothers's *A Man's World* (1909), Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* (1921), and Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *The Home-Maker* (1924). Having a profession provides freedom and power that would be unavailable if these characters remained at home with their children, yet working is at odds with their social function within the family. Chapter three moves to nineteenth-century characters that completely defy expected roles by abandoning their families, such as Nora Helmer in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Although these are the earliest texts examined, the characters are the most transgressive, completely ignoring social mores to pursue their own course. Audience members and critics often found it difficult to appreciate the mothers in these texts since their characterizations were so different from earlier portrayals. Throughout, I rework and expand E. Ann Kaplan's concept of complicit and resisting mothers to evaluate how much of a challenge these characters present to conventional ideas about maternity.

*To Grandpa Joe, who wanted so much to see me finish.*

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**Challenging Maternal Inevitability:  
Abortion, Careers, and Abandonment in the Nuclear Family, 1879-1939**

**Introduction**

At the end of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), Torvald Helmer advises Nora that "You're a wife and mother, first and foremost." In response, she makes an astonishing claim: "I don't believe that any more. I believe that, first and foremost, I'm a human being" (1995, 62).

Nora's subsequent departure is often cited as an important literary moment for women, signaling emerging ideas about maternity in a rapidly changing, industrial world. Nevertheless, Nora's demand that a woman's humanity should take precedence over her family relations was not easy to assimilate into literary portrayals. The dominant nineteenth-century, Western worldview that femininity and maternity were inextricable could not easily be put aside. As Nancy M. Theriot (1996) has observed, the words "mother" and "woman" are used interchangeably in nineteenth-century American domestic manuals, suggesting "the authors' basic assumption that maternity was a necessary aspect of womanhood" (26). Similarly, historian Ingrid H. Tague (2002) notes that in England, "the increasing importance of maternity in defining femininity" even affected aristocratic women by the early 1800's.

This project investigates representations of maternity that indicate shifts in women's status within the nuclear family in a range of British and American texts written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Even as these novels and plays reflect the evolution of the public's social imagination, the characterizations also reflect

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<sup>1</sup> The one exception is the play *A Doll's House*—Henrik Ibsen is Norwegian—though here, too, my focus is largely on its impact on British and American audiences.

traces of a nineteenth-century understanding of gender that cannot separate femininity from maternity. To illustrate this point, I examine areas largely unexplored in fiction and drama prior to the turn of the twentieth century: representations of abortion, representations of working mothers, and representations of women who abandon their families.

Paradoxically, in violating expectations about maternity, texts that deal with abortion present characters that uphold standard family roles; I consider Elizabeth Robins's *Votes for Women!* (1907), Harley Granville Barker's *Waste* (1909), Eugene O'Neill's *Abortion* (1914), Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Tess Slesinger's *The Unpossessed* (1934), and Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1939/1978). Even when they are absent from the text, women are characterized as wanting to continue their pregnancies, but choose abortion for a variety of reasons, including pressure from their partners, economic concerns, or the fear of having a child out of wedlock. Their ideas about pregnancy support audience expectations regarding the inevitability of maternal desire. However, women from all classes submit to a will outside themselves when making these reproductive decisions.

Next I focus on characters that reinvent conventional family arrangements by deciding to be working mothers, including figures in George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1902), Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* (1921), Rachel Crothers's *A Man's World* (1909), and Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *The Home-Maker* (1924). Having a job provides an intellectual stimulation and economic freedom that would be unavailable if these mothers remained at home with their children. Nevertheless, working is portrayed as being at odds with these women's social function as mothers. Within this

discussion, I categorize mothers into two groups: remote mothers raise their children from afar, using their capital to manage their children's affairs, while proximate mothers take a hands-on approach to combine their careers and daily management of their children.

Finally, my analysis turns to the late nineteenth century to a pair of texts featuring mothers who completely defy their expected roles by abandoning their families: Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House* (1879) and Kate Chopin's short novel, *The Awakening* (1899). The social undercurrents inspiring these plots foretold the immense growth the women's rights movement would experience in the twentieth century. Although *A Doll's House* and *The Awakening* are the earliest texts examined, the characters are most transgressive, ignoring mores that encourage them to identify collectively with their families.

Throughout, I focus on the contradictory popular and critical reactions these portrayals garnered. Some reviewers, dismayed by the threats the texts posed to traditional thought, greeted them with cynical bemusement, disdain, or outrage. Others celebrated them as attempts to rectify institutionalized inequality. Most significant, however, is that many reviewers could not or would not recognize the new representations, thereby marginalizing the issues presented.

Critics deserve only part of the responsibility for being unable or unwilling to appreciate the changes occurring in drama and fiction. The very authors who created these portrayals were also guided by nineteenth-century views that limited the scope of their perspectives. Each choice represented is therefore limited by the assumption that, even as women pursue new roles, maternity is still at the core of female identity. The

dynamic between reviewers who often ignored new issues presented to them and authors who could not escape embedded beliefs about women's capacities meant that some texts were viewed with a flurry of interest and then discarded until later in the century.

This dissertation draws from E. Ann Kaplan's *Motherhood and Representation* (1992), which focuses primarily on film and melodrama. Kaplan's text shows that no matter how they were received, fictional mothers' choices elicit the deep-seated taboo against women who consider their own needs before others. This same idea applies to the novels and plays I examine.

### **Sources of Representation in Activism**

By the time Nora made her demand for selfhood in *A Doll's House*, women had spent decades trying to expand their liberties inside and outside the home. As men claimed rights for themselves in the revolutions that swept across the globe, women also tried, with less success, to break out of the constricting domestic molds that male philosophers framed as natural for them.

It would take years for these insistent calls to be taken seriously. As early as 1790, for example, Judith Sargent Murray suggested that a women's sole place in the home was not enough to fulfill her. Olympe de Gouges horrified the French public in 1791 with her "Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne," which claimed women and men should be equal partners in society and in marriage. A year later, in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, where she railed against women's absolute dependence on men and the negative influence women's allotted occupations have on their intellect and potential; she proposed that marriage makes women "legally prostituted" (ch. 4). Margaret Fuller's influential *Woman in the*

*Nineteenth Century* (1845) called for equal rights for men and women from a humanist perspective; the book led to the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 (“Note” x). The abolitionist Grimké sisters fought for women’s rights in America. Sarah Grimké (1837) gave a religious basis to her argument for equality and looked at the plight of women around the world while her sister Angela Grimké (1852) posited that to achieve selfhood, women need to be educated and to stop feeding off men’s vitality like parasites. Some activists made their voices heard in the public sphere by fighting against slavery and gaining suffrage, but these efforts were often complicated by their own domestic situations.

Some men would add their voices to the women’s cause as well. In 1848, Ernest Legouvé’s lectures in Paris suggested greater educational opportunities and more protective laws for women would advance the private and public spheres of French society (Offen 454-55). Ten years before *A Doll’s House*, John Stewart Mill published *The Subjection of Women* (1869) which reasoned that expanding women’s opportunities would benefit society as a whole. As Mary Wollstonecraft had argued, Mill pointed to educational inequities to explain the apparent difference between men and women’s abilities. These tracts share the underlying belief that society will advance if women extend their influence beyond their domestic roles; detractors of the women’s movement would argue that expanded educational opportunities would only foster unskilled housekeepers who weaken the family bond and distort nature. It was only a matter of time before these demands for change found their expression in fiction and drama.

In the first essay of their three volume series, *No Man’s Land: The War of the Words* (1988), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss how women’s strivings for

equality became a public battle between the sexes by the mid-1800's. As women attempted to claim more control over their lives, the public discussion became heated and was expressed in both literary writing and news publications. Gilbert and Gubar note that "to many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century men, women seemed to be agents of an alien world that evoked anger and anguish, while to women in those years men appeared as aggrieved defenders of an indefensible order. Thus both male and female writers increasingly represented women's unprecedented invasion of the public sphere as a battle of the sexes" (*No Man's Land* vol. 1, 4). While some women publicly and noisily attempted to gain more rights over reproduction and their participation in society, many others, men and women, found these intrusions a disruptive threat to the status quo. This tension opened up a space in contemporary drama and fiction to deal with new representations of maternity.

The individuals who tried to alter the prevailing perspective on women's place in the world were challenged by convention that kept them securely in the home; however, these unflagging efforts eventually resulted in expanded rights in the twentieth century. Despite new opportunities, the conception persisted that normal women viewed maternity as their greatest ambition. Thus, even as choices that concerned real women's lives found extensive representation in literature—making the decision to have an abortion; taking on a career and motherhood; abandoning the family all together, and not just for the sake of another man—audiences expected the mother figure to be self-sacrificing. Centuries of thought could not be overthrown with a few pieces of legislation.

### **Theorizing the Mother**

"Yes, yes," today's feminist rereader might think, "we already know all this: motherhood as a social institution that works to circumscribe women and protect



the status quo of patriarchy; motherhood is not simply a personal experience but one deeply shaped by the forces of the state, defined by legal systems, controlled by the medical system, linked to the production and protection of the nuclear heterosexual family and a capitalist economy; motherhood as the vehicle by which children are gendered and the family is reproduced; motherhood as an ideological ideal to which all women are taught to aspire but that none can achieve; motherhood and birth as yet further terrain on which women's bodies are coerced and controlled by the structural institutions of patriarchy. And perhaps this alleged banality is in fact something to be celebrated, for it suggests that feminists have learned something in the past three decades. That is, thanks precisely to the work of feminists like [Adrienne] Rich, we now understand much more about the workings of patriarchy and the social constructions of gender and sexuality; we are now able to see motherhood as a cultural institution that is itself imbricated in many other cultural institutions, institutions that, for the most part, have not served women's interests. (McCullough 103-04)

Thus begins Kate McCullough (2004) in her analysis of how contemporary self-help texts for mothers still serve to undermine their needs. Glossing the major arguments involved in studies of maternity in Western society, the passage reveals how common theories regarding the mother as a tool of oppressive political, economic, and patriarchal institutions have become. The repeated attempts to expose the factors that oppress women have one underlying principle: women can gain a certain amount of freedom by understanding the issues that are working to maintain their traditional roles in society. My dissertation takes off from this well-trodden field to examine first, how fundamental ideas about women's nature remained unchanged despite these expanded fictional representations, and second, how critics and audiences responded to these portrayals. Scrutiny of public and critical responses to novels and plays reveals just as much about the changing world as do the literary texts themselves.

Anxiety over women's behavior can be found in nineteenth-century domestic manuals like Harriet Martineau's 1848 *Household Education*. This text was in wide circulation and would go through nine more editions by the end of the 1880's. Martineau

shocked and intrigued Victorian audiences by advocating equality in the household and demanding greater scope to women's education. Despite her progressive views, Martineau's reasoning about men and women's interests seems reactionary; her ideas about the occupations that most satisfy women attest to this perception. She writes, "I am sure that some,—perhaps most,—girls have a keener relish of household drudgery than of almost any pleasure that could be offered them. They positively like making beds, making fires, laying the cloth and washing up crockery, baking bread, preserving fruit, clear-starching and ironing" (199). This point of view was common in household manuals concerning the division of the sexes at the time, even a progressive one like Martineau's. While Martineau believed that girls should be educated, she also believed it was imperative that they learn household skills as well.

In an attempt to regain power over women's increasing freedom, household manuals written by men were published widely, advising women on housekeeping, family, and social matters. Among the middle class, the medical-religious genre was popular throughout the nineteenth century and predicted dire outcomes for an immoral society (Gay 305). For instance, when Nicholas Francis Cooke anonymously published *Satan in Society* in 1870, it soon found a wide reading audience in the United States. A sampling from his chapter "Education and Training of Girls and Young Women" encapsulates the friction that already existed between those who wanted new rights and those who enjoyed the status quo.

This heresy has been christened by the seductive cognomen of "Woman's Rights." . . . While it is difficult to see how any single abuse could be reformed, it is easy to imagine how very many would be created by the "political enfranchisement and eligibility of woman." It would most assuredly introduce a new and alarming element of discord into the family circle, already weakened, well-nigh ruined, by the singular customs of the time . . . Nature, not legislators,

has assigned to the two sexes their respective spheres, as we shall prove . . . But how is it with those women who neglect these sacred duties to follow schemes of ambition or of pleasure? They are justly regarded as monstrosities. (85-89)

Clearly, the many fronts where women finally imposed themselves—education, reproduction, enfranchisement, professions—threatened to topple the order of the nuclear family that seemed natural to many: women should remain at home while men should reside in the world. There must have been great interest in these ideas because the book enjoyed several printings.

A few decades later, Dr. A. T. Schofield provided similar advice about marriage to the British public in *Husband and Wife* (1900), which also went through several editions. The delineation between a woman's place in the home and a man's place in the world is clear to him and provides a counterpoint to the voices of the feminist movement. Dr. Schofield writes, "To a woman in one shape or another it is practically her all, even if the love be divided between husband, home, and children. But with the husband it is not so, he may be a most affectionate husband, a loving father, and fond of his home, but he has in addition what must bulk largely in his life and thoughts, his business and out-door life and interests. He is the bread-winner, he provides the means even if it is the wife who attains the ends" (60). This rhetoric, dividing the private and public spheres, continued to be echoed by popular child care experts in the twentieth century and worked to limit the spaces women could inhabit. Women's fight for political and reproductive rights and their willing entrance into the workforce during World War I belie their passive acceptance of these tracts.

Dr. Schofield makes clear recommendations about how women and mothers should behave, mothers whom he ostensibly holds up as sacred facets of modern culture. Despite this elevated status, they very often fall short of their proper roles as wives.

A true wife and mother . . . never despairs of the most hopeless of husbands . . . On the other hand, many wives quite unconsciously are very selfish and many husbands are supremely unselfish. Many wives have no idea how irritatingly incompetent they often are. A large number, shall I say the majority, have no practical knowledge of marketing, of home comforts and the care of the house and furniture, of elementary sanitation, of packing and storing, of the management of servants, children, or even of a husband. They may have had, what is still called in the twentieth century, a “liberal education for women” and yet have never spent one hour in learning these necessary accomplishments. This is a crying evil . . . (115-16)

Thus, Schofield attacks the growing feminist movement, which almost always called for expanding women’s educational opportunities. He represents the cultural discomfort with a woman’s looking outside the family for satisfaction. This trend not only defies tradition, but it also threatens man’s place in the world on two fronts. If a woman is occupied in the world, then who will readily serve men? How can men be expected to compete with women in the workplace and politics?

Manuals like those by Cooke and Schofield played into a growing anxiety over shifting family patterns in an industrialized world. Having a clear sense of gender roles helped to maintain stability by preserving the important nuclear family unit. The long-standing importance of this family structure is emphasized by Michael Gordon (1972), who argues against the common perception that the Industrial Revolution replaced the extended family with the nuclear family. This conception is only partially true since British town records reveal that many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century families were nuclear. Only briefly, when the eldest son married, inherited land, and lived with his parents from the time they retired to their deaths, did extended families live together. For

the most part, the family structure was nuclear (2-3). In the United States, this brief period when an extended family lived together was even more infrequent since the father usually owned so much land that he had the means to give pieces of it to each of his sons, not just to the oldest one. Thus, according to Gordon, the Industrial Revolution did not produce the nuclear family, since it already existed; rather, the move away from an agrarian-based society only erased the short period when parents retired and lived with their adult children (3). The nuclear family was such a deeply entrenched aspect of Western culture that any threat to it would be viewed with suspicion. Women's childbearing capacities acted as an instrument of their own oppression as their presence in the home was cited as necessary for maintenance of family and nation. This belief is so entrenched that it exists to the present day, despite great advancements in opportunities for women.

### **Reading Representations of Maternity**

How could the traditional biological plot of women's lives—virginity to marriage to pregnancy to motherhood and domesticity—be narratively interrupted? This textual contraception, an interruption of the reproduction of the traditional plot(s), allowed for new conceptions of women and sexuality. (Capo 19)

While Beth Widmaier Capo's focus in *Textual Contraception* (2007) is on birth control, the representations I examine similarly form "an interruption of the reproduction of the traditional plot(s)." The traditional trajectory for women's lives had changed, and as a result, so did their literary portrayals, including depictions of mothers' desires and drives. A related point is made in *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985), where Rachel Blau DuPlessis discusses the ideological functions of fictional narratives. Nineteenth-century novelists, for instance, provide heroines with only two outcomes by the text's ending: death or marriage.

According to DuPlessis, “In nineteenth-century fiction dealing with women, authors went to a good deal of trouble and even some awkwardness to see to it that *Bildung* and romance could not coexist and be integrated for the heroine at the resolution” (3). Once a woman achieved the goal of marriage, her greatest mission was fulfilled and she could now focus on family. In the twentieth century, narratives about women stopped following this convention, subversively undercutting sanctioned modes of behavior and emotion. In DuPlessis’s reading, “The invention of strategies that sever the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction and consciousness about women is what I call ‘writing beyond the ending’” (x). Thus, the twentieth century saw the rise of new patterns of fiction by and about women, so that female characters were not punished for having ambitions beyond marriage and marriage could shift from a central point in the plot. Though I agree with Capo and DuPlessis that the twentieth century provided new opportunities to represent female experience, my analysis reveals that it was not easy to shake the specter of the nineteenth-century, where femininity is inextricably linked to maternity and family.

My approach in this dissertation is influenced by E. Ann Kaplan’s *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992). Kaplan points to three “eruptions” that influenced the evolution of the historical mother within the nuclear family and, as a result, discourses about mothers. She fleshes out these dominant discourses, dividing them into three phases. The early modern mother, a product of Rousseau’s work and of changes resulting from the Industrial Revolution when women became consumers instead of producers, first established the connection between the private sphere inhabited by the mother and the public one inhabited by the

father. A “rupture” to this divide came with the modernist mother in World War I, as women were needed in the workplace and continued to demand more rights. The Postmodern-mother arose out of the social upheavals of the 1960’s, the flourishing of corporate capitalism, and the computer revolution (chapter 2).

The first two of these categories are useful for my purposes. The characters that abandon their families are part of Kaplan’s first group, the early modern mother who was, for the first time, a consumer. At the time of the Industrial Revolution, there was a willingness to grant women new power when they became politically involved in working against slavery—but only to a certain extent. Kaplan notes, “At that point the new concept also centered on the Mother as the position that could *safely* be granted a certain power as long as it remained intact—that is, as long as women were not demanding the freedom totally to leave the home and the family” (23 emphasis original). However, once a little bit of power was granted, writers took this freedom further so that literary mothers *did* leave their families—not for the love of another man but for independence. When these texts alarm audiences or reviewers, they are really activating a fear about mothers defying nature and threatening the family and the state.

The proliferation of works depicting both abortion and working mothers roughly corresponds to Kaplan’s categorization of the high-modernist mother. Greater public attention to women’s ability to control reproduction most likely provoked representations of abortion in literature from the turn of the twentieth century onward. My examination of working mothers also starts early in the twentieth century when the image of the New

Woman became firmly established.<sup>2</sup> This turn toward independence became more of a necessity when the labor shortage during World War I brought women into the workforce. These new representations challenged audiences even as they relied on familiar conceptions of women's aspirations.

While childcare manuals still focused on a mother's sacrificing nature, one that would naturally put all other considerations aside with the coming of a child, these texts depict women who had passions that equaled or exceeded the passion they had for their children. Thus, Kaplan's categories are especially useful when she makes correlations between the disruptions occurring in society and particular mother images. She writes, "While within a certain historical period (say 1860 to 1960) psychoanalytic processes seem similar, social/political/economic conditions change. When the social situation permits, women make demands for subjectivity. Cultural productions, like novels and films, in periods when such demands are made bear traces of women's challenge to dominant culture" (60). My focus on representations of mothers identifies these textual locations where women's challenge is apparent.

The novels and plays I examine, whether written by men or women, are often the source of audience and critical discomfort. Some of these narrative patterns are what Kaplan calls "complicit" and some are "resisting." In complicit texts, women submit to the patriarchal discourse as outlined in this chapter while resisting texts challenge this point of view. For the complicit text, there are two types of works. One type is the mother-sacrifice pattern, usually given from the male point of view, where the woman is

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<sup>2</sup> The term "New Woman," first used in 1894 by novelist Sarah Grand, quickly became a popular designation for women who rejected Victorian femininity and instead were educated and bold, liable to smoke cigarettes or ride a bicycle. The New Woman rejected the idea of separate spheres and insisted on economic independence outside of marriage (Nelson ix-x).



no longer a threat to men and has accepted her position in society. When the phallic mother is represented, she is usually described from the child's point of view as the text works to denounce the over-bearing possessive mother (124-25). In the resisting text, the narrative has more realistic elements and represents the way society can restrict women; these texts often provide alternative ways that society can be structured to overcome inequity (74). While I use this framework in reading the texts under examination, my method will differ from Kaplan's in that I will give greater emphasis to audience and critical reception of the works I investigate. For instance, I consider the production history of the plays and sales records for fiction to determine the general public's response to each text. Surveying the reception of books and plays expands our understanding of how the ideas presented resonate with and affect particular segments of the public. Furthermore, rather than considering the complicit and resisting positions as binary poles, I use these designations as a continuum through which characters move. Though characters sometimes fall neatly into one category, they can more often move between them or find their place along the spectrum between complicit and resisting.

Although the characters that have abortions are not mothers, at some point they all fall into the complicit category since they either submit to the male character's will to abort or cannot imagine themselves mothering independent of a man. After the abortion, the characters' trajectories differ. Characters silenced by abortion in *Waste, Abortion, Voyage in the Dark*, and *The Unpossessed*, become entrenched in the mother-sacrifice pattern as circumstance removes their threat to men or the family. On the other hand, Vida from *Votes for Women!*, moves along the spectrum between complicit and resisting. Initially she has an abortion because her lover's father will disinherit him if she has his

baby out of wedlock. Later, however, she uses their past, as a resisting character, to promote her political agenda. In *The Girl*, Meridel Le Sueur contrasts complicit and resisting characters, with the effect of highlighting the importance of female relationships.

In contrast to representations of abortion, representations of working mothers all feature resisting characters, though once again, this is not a static designation in every text. Claire of *The Verge* and Frank of *A Man's World* do begin and end the text as resisting, though close analysis reveals their characters are not completely progressive. *Mrs. Warren's Profession's* Kitty Warren appears to be a resisting character, but by the end it is clear that she is complicit, framed as the overbearing phallic mother who is conventional at heart. *The Home-Maker* takes the opposite path since Evangeline begins the text as a complicit, phallic mother, but moves to a resisting stance when her work brings her satisfaction.

In the texts where women abandon their families—*A Doll's House* and *The Awakening*—female characters move along the arc from complicit to resisting. Both Nora and Edna play the part of dutiful wives, despite their husbands' scolding and suspicions. They begin as complicit agents, with personal reservations about the way they are expected to act, and then after a period of self-reflection, move into the active resisting category by challenging social norms. These texts stop short of providing new alternatives for society once the mothers break free from the family.

### **Maternity as Invisible Institution**

Ivy Schweitzer (1990) comments that “Motherhood, like the fictions of romance, is a discursive function of a certain ideology . . . which makes femininity and maternity

inseparable, crucial to the maintenance of patriarchal society and laissez-faire capitalism, but incompatible with female desire, autonomy, or independent subjectivity” (169).

Propagating the idea that female desire has its high point in maternity maintains stability in an erratic, changing world. This method, so embedded that it is invisible, can be drawn across class and racial lines. My dissertation sets its lens on only part of this landscape to settle on white, Anglo-American characters. Its socio-economic viewpoint is a bit wider and includes representations of poor, lower-middle class, upper-middle class, and wealthy women, as well as figurations of women who move either up or down within the class structure. Access to financial power offers a greater range of choices to some characters, but it doesn't ensure a happy ending.

Chapter One evaluates representations of abortion in the early twentieth century, before and after women were granted universal suffrage; greater rights earned in the public sphere did not have measurable impact on the representation of women's experience. Although abortion was covertly referenced in literature toward the end of the nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> the twentieth-century produced detailed representations of the experience and thoughts involved in the act. Even if writers broached the subject in more detailed ways, censorship prevented some of these texts from finding a publisher or producer until later in the century. Even when women are not focused on matrimony and maternity, there is an underlying textual assumption that this really is their concern. As a result, abortion often casts these characters as victims, thereby enforcing standard family roles. For the texts written before universal suffrage, *Votes for Women!*, *Waste*, and *Abortion* and those written after, *The Unpossessed* and *The Girl*, abortion is imposed on

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<sup>3</sup> For example, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893) by Arthur Wing Pinero or “Virgin Soil” (1894) a short story by George Egerton.

pregnant bodies—by convention, society, and masculine dominance. *Voyage in the Dark*, a text that links the two groups by virtue of being composed during both time periods, highlights how abortion is symptomatic of the dangers of a woman living outside the nuclear family. Abortion, which became an issue of public debate toward the end of the nineteenth century, was so regulated that reviewers and critics often evade or hedge the topic, using vague euphemisms to maintain propriety. Such a critical approach is not surprising since these critics faced their own censorship restrictions and, most likely, were unused to broaching this issue.

Chapter Two discusses working mothers, another new literary trope that evolved in the early twentieth century. These texts portray mothers who forgo daily participation in their children's lives (remote mothers) or work in addition to their daily maternal responsibilities (proximate mothers). This was a break from past literary images where women could end employment upon marriage. Representations of remote mothers were most innovative in content and form: *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is thematically audacious while *The Verge* is pioneering stylistically. On the other hand, proximate mothers were presented in more popular formats; *A Man's World* is a melodrama and *The Home-Maker* is a mass-marketed women's novel. Resolving texts with conventional ideas about femininity constrains ideas about remote mothers more than those about proximate mothers. As such, critics seemed apt to comment on other aspects of remote mothers' lives, but not their role as mothers. On the other hand, nestled in the more traditional forms of women's literature, reviews of proximate mothers were received with disbelief. Women's fiction and drama were dismissed easily by critics, who believed these progressive portrayals were unrealistic and silly.

Having outlined new representations that comment on conceptions of maternity, Chapter Three steps back to the late nineteenth century to examine a play and a novel where women completely abandon their families. Since these texts are the most progressive under consideration, the themes were not taken up by authors in the decades that followed because audiences were not yet ready to imagine women with such new aspirations. The protagonists of *A Doll's House* and *The Awakening* decide to leave their homes for their own purposes, not to pursue happiness with another man. Despite the absolute novelty of this idea, Ibsen and Chopin's portrayals stop short of imagining how a life post-nuclear family could be lived. *A Doll's House* ends with Nora's exit and *The Awakening* concludes with Edna's suicide, just at the moment the characters realize life with their families will be impossible. While these are the most progressive portrayals discussed, the reader only has a glimpse of what life could be like for women outside the nuclear family. These authors lacked the tools or the models to bring the reader to the other side of the family unit. Nora and Edna's maternity was not overlooked by critics as was the case for remote mothers. Like portrayals of proximate mothers, however, these texts were met with disbelief and consternation.

In these works, it is clear that the new patterns offered by modernism were not sufficient to allow the authors to re-imagine the formula of the family. Sometimes the works that could most likely be tied to the project of modernism—like *The Verge* or *Voyage in the Dark*—most easily imagine negative outcomes for their protagonists who make new choices. Texts written in more traditional formats, like melodrama, can go further with radical themes. As such, *A Man's World* can end without a resolution in marriage, madness, or death because the audience is lulled into the conventionality of the

play as a whole. Whether these plays break boundaries stylistically or thematically, the issues they tackle return to the problem of reconciling this disconnect between the needs of modern, twentieth-century individuals and the standards for nineteenth-century women.

These new maternal representations are hindered by the lack of viable options that could be imagined by authors trying to cast their heroines in different forms. Thus, abortion is the tool used by writers to prevent unfit mothers from bringing children into a world devoid of the nuclear family unit. It was difficult for authors to imagine that working mothers would easily find happiness in their ability to work and to mother; a career most often precludes satisfactory motherhood. Finally, authors do not take the reader very far in cases where a mother abandons her child. Once the character actively decides to abandon her family unit, authors end the narrative—leaving the character to the imagination—or end the character’s life—implying nothing exists for women outside of her family. Despite these limitations, the texts make clear that something very new was happening in the collective imagination, broadening the scope of literary portrayals of gender.

## Chapter One

### Abortion and Standard Family Roles: The Economics of Terminating a Romance and a Pregnancy

#### Introduction

*My God, said Margaret Flinders to Margaret Banner-that-was; we are sterile; we are too horribly girlish for our age, too mannish (with our cigarettes, our jobs, our drying lips) for our sex . . . Was this what my mother meant for me, sending me off to college, a book of Ibsen under my eager arm? O Economic-Independence Votes-for-Women Sex-Equality! you've relieved us of our screens and our embroidery hoops, our babies and our vertigo; and given us—a cigarette; a pencil in our hair.*

Margaret Flinders from *The Unpossessed* by Tess Slesinger, 93, (1934)

As Margaret ruefully ponders women's status in the 1934 novel *The Unpossessed*, she considers how the post-suffrage world seems to have replaced maternity with sterility. Liberation from standard sex roles has not provided the satisfaction that the suffragists might have imagined for themselves. Now, she thinks, relieved from biological imperatives, women are expected to lay down their womanly pursuits to act like men. Her social set seems to have absorbed this ethic, for upon hearing she is pregnant, one friend can only stand "stock still" and wonder, "A *baby?* have you tried everything?" (305).

This chapter examines representations of abortion in drama and fiction written before and after women's universal suffrage to compare how women's expanded rights in the public sphere were mirrored in the private sphere of reproductive choice.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In the United States, universal suffrage was granted with the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 (Hannam, Auchterlonie, and Holden 216-17). In Great Britain, women over thirty were allowed to vote in 1918 with the Representation of the People Act; it would be another decade before the Act was revised so that the voting qualifications were the same for women and men (Hannam, Auchterlonie, and Holden 254-55 ). The periods preceding and following universal suffrage represent different points in women's consciousness about their role in the public sphere. The earlier group actively inserted themselves into

Progressive legislation, including access to safe abortions, may have helped real-life women preserve control over their bodies, a control that would have been compromised if they were forced to continue their pregnancies. However, representations of abortion, in both pre- and post-suffrage literature, present the act as anything but liberating. No matter what a woman's socio-economic class, abortion is characterized as an act imposed upon pregnant bodies, whether by individuals or by the dictates of a patriarchal society. As opposed to contemporary discourse on reproductive rights, where pro-choice activists emphasize women's right to choose abortion, the characters in these texts are coerced into abortion so that they lose the right to choose pregnancy. The element of force permanently marks the women, most often to their detriment.

Even when it is not mentioned by name, abortion functions as a narrative device, used to resolve the outcome of the plot and determine the characters' fates. These patterns are reversed only for the last novel discussed here, Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl*, where the Girl's decision to keep her child closes the novel with hope and possibility, the seemingly powerless Girl having circumvented personal and public attempts to wrest away control of her body. The Girl's mother serves as a stronger role model than her peers who submit to abortion as men demand it; in this case, the action of the text is resolved with childbirth. That texts produced in the thirties faced some censorship and publication difficulties highlights the overwhelming discomfort with the reality of abortion, even though this theme was addressed with increasing frequency through the century.

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public discourse; the second group never found a cause equally unifying and learned that the rights that they earned did not necessarily ensure them equality.



Although abortion connects characters and determines their fates, it can remain unnamed throughout the text, discussed indirectly by both male and female characters. Even so, Leslie Reagan (1997) cautions against thinking of real women as silenced when it comes to abortion. Though women may not have had control over reproductive policy, in private they took control over their bodies, not connecting abortion and morality as was the case for public rhetoric. Reagan suggests it would be more accurate to describe abortion as something women did in secret, within private spaces among friends and family and the “semiprivate, semipublic spaces” of medical professionals (20-21). The subject is taboo enough to remain unnamed in literary representations but sufficiently common as to be unavoidable. Though women, and men, have a secret language to explore abortion in these texts, it is also true that they are silenced, often cut off from the narrative after the procedure fails.

It is only in recent years that literary representations of abortion have been closely examined. In his dissertation “Abortion Gothic in American Literature and Law,” John R. Quinn (2004) notes that although the subject is often addressed by fiction writers, “There exists no anthology of such literature, and neither the MLA index nor . . . any other research tool that categorizes literature by content includes, yet, an entry for ‘abortion literature’” (2). This avoidance may be attributed to the difficulty, or impossibility, of discussing abortion without taking a political stand. Since it is a subject that still creates conflict and debate, it is the safer stance to ignore the topic or keep it from the center of discussions on the female body and reproduction.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Recently, however, abortion has been readily tackled in dissertations. Quinn looks at twentieth-century American literature and notes that these texts rarely take a position for or against the procedure. Rather, representations of abortion in literature fall within the American Gothic tradition, a mode which helps readers confront something feared. Leslie Shouse-Luxem (1999) illustrates how political and social

## Abortion Law in Great Britain and the United States

Throughout the nineteenth century, the British and United States governments each worked to legislate female reproduction. Beth Widmaier Capo (2007) discusses how the state regulated reproduction through the nineteenth century, beginning with an 1803 crime bill by Lord Ellenborough which equated abortion with murder and spreading to U.S. legislation that was modeled on Lord Ellenborough's bill (12). By 1873, the Comstock Law prohibited any materials regarding "any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or procuring of abortion" to be sent through the U.S. mail (qtd. in Capo 13).<sup>6</sup> While women's magazine advertisements often used covert language to subvert these laws, people's access to information about family planning was curtailed with this legislation. Although the upper class had the means to pay for expensive birth control and abortion, the lower classes had more difficulty accessing these resources.

The law made abortion an especially dangerous undertaking since it forced women to rely on unqualified individuals willing to face harsh laws. England's Offences Against the Person Act in 1861, for example, declared that acquiring an abortion was a

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movements in Germany paralleled depictions of infanticide and abortion in German literature. Amelia Lynn Cuomo (1999) writes about abortion, birth control, and reproductive technologies to analyze how pregnant women are constructed in drama. In her examination, a male protagonist's downfall occurs after his lover has an abortion. She shows how the pregnant woman is removed from these texts, positing that "social ideologies concerning women and reproduction inform texts" (viii). Jeff James Koloze (2001) looks at the topic of abortion in American literature from a religious perspective in, "Abortion in American Fiction." After outlining six objections to abortion from the Judeo-Christian tradition, he decides that in American fiction, representations of abortion do not address traditional religious concerns, but have their own agenda. Most recently, Meg Gillette's excellent *Modernism's Scarlet Letter: Plotting Abortion in American Fiction, 1900-1945* (2007) moves away from analyses that treat abortion as it reflects other trends and instead comments on what it says about abortion practices. Fiction dealing with abortion "rehearsed readers in modern reproductive crises and laid the groundwork for today's abortion debates" (2). This trend may indicate that abortion will be more readily addressed in the coming years.

<sup>6</sup> The implications of Comstock's laws will be discussed in greater detail during the discussion of O'Neill's *Abortion*.

felony that could result in life in prison; just supplying the tools for the act was a misdemeanor carrying a three-year jail sentence. This law was amended with The Infant Life (Preservation) Act of 1929 which allowed women to abort pregnancies that would endanger their own lives; a judge's 1938 ruling extended abortion to those who would suffer psychological damage with pregnancy. While these changes meant safer abortions would be administered, some doctors were still hesitant because the law required doctors to prove that the woman was at risk and because the 1938 ruling could be overturned in higher courts. Women and doctors would not be fully protected until the Abortion Act of 1967 (Hindell and Simms 13-14).

In *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (1984), Kristin Luker explains that in the United States, anti-abortion efforts meant the procedure evolved from being generally accepted by common law at the turn of the nineteenth century to being outlawed in every state at the turn of the twentieth century, with exceptions made for the pregnant woman's health. As in Great Britain, the act was a felony for the abortionist and, depending on the state, for the pregnant woman as well (13-15). Curiously, doctors were the first ones to lead the crusade against abortion, using the cause to professionalize their work and to raise their status as medical experts. To achieve this goal, they had to convince the public of a contradictory assertion. Luker explains that "Ironically, what the physicians did, in effect, was to simultaneously claim both an *absolute* right to life for the embryo (by claiming that abortion is always murder) and a *conditional* one (by claiming that doctors have a right to declare some abortions 'necessary')" (39). Private decisions regarding abortion suddenly required expertise and intervention, with choice moving from mothers to medical professionals. This shift permanently changed the way abortion would be

debated in the United States. State control over the practice and discussion of abortion impacted literary representations that maintained propriety by discussing it in veiled terms.

Perhaps these doctors' new positioning helped to bring abortion rates down at the turn of the twentieth century, though Marvin Olasky (1992) cites evangelical preaching, homes for single, pregnant women, and, perhaps most important, birth control as contributing factors (chapter 10). Though it existed for many centuries, the phrase "birth control" was first coined by Margaret Sanger, a visiting nurse who saw how a lack of access to prophylaxis could be fatal to women through backroom abortions and pregnancy complications.<sup>7</sup> She spearheaded the campaign to make birth control available to women despite the Comstock Law, publishing *The Woman Rebel*, a radical tract that argued for women's reproductive freedom (246). The resistance to her campaign, the Comstock Law, and legal prohibitions on abortion highlight how attempts to control the female body drive women to seek abortions from untrained professionals. Plays and novels that discuss abortion reveal the results of this trend: state regulation of birth control does not stop women from having sex, getting pregnant, or obtaining abortions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Sanger's role as a feminist working for a woman's control over her reproductive decisions is complicated by her eugenicist leanings: she advocated birth control as a way to prevent "the hordes of the unfit" from reproducing (qtd. in Olasky 258).

<sup>8</sup> Birth control faced various degrees of resistance; though some believed it would be liberating, others saw a potential danger in the practice. Olive Banks (1981) notes that in Great Britain and the United States, some feminists believed contraception would encourage men to seek out prostitutes and demand more sex with their wives. She writes, "Far from seeing artificial birth control as a step towards their emancipation, they perceived it as yet another instance of their subordination to man's sexual desires" (74). Writing in 1909, George Bernard Shaw, linking women's happiness to maternity, would reflect on possible negative effects as well. "A wife could thus be put in a position intolerable to a woman of honor as distinguished from a frank voluptuary. She could be condemned to barren bodily slavery without remedy" (Preface-1909 xlii). Women of the lower middle class were particularly vulnerable to this danger since, according to Shaw, "Her real hope of affection and self-respect lies in her children. And yet she above all women is subject to the danger that the dread of poverty, which is the ruling factor in her husband's world, may induce him to deny her right and frustrate her function of motherhood, using her simply as a housekeeper

Abortion emerged as a recurring theme in the early twentieth century as modernist writers attempted to come to terms with a rapidly evolving world. Christina Hauck (2003) connects modernism to abortion in her article “Abortion and the Individual Talent,” a study of T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” Hauck says that in order to understand the ways that Eliot equates his poetry with abortion, it is also necessary to understand how “reproductive failure ” was a tremendous “crisis ” in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American culture, a crisis with different outcomes for men and women (225). As such, abortion represents modernism’s failings as a literary project. She writes that “abortion can be understood as revealing a momentous interpretive conflict at the site of maternity. For the culture at large, maternity constituted the epitome of femininity, the physiological, psychic, and social fulfillment of every woman” (232). Thus, anxieties about social and technological change became displaced onto the female body. Hauck’s ideas about femininity and maternity account for the larger point I make in this chapter that characterizations of women are reliant on nineteenth-century ideals; the new preoccupation with representations of abortion speak to an underlying crisis about family and identity.

Stylistically, modernism leaves its imprint on these texts to different degrees. The two works that artistically represent the experience of women, *Voyage in the Dark* and *The Girl*, are both characterized by a rapidly unfolding point of view where perspective is disjointed and marked by gaps. The author of *The Unpossessed*, Tess Slesinger, was influenced by Virginia Woolf as is marked by her attention to the internal lives of her characters. The experience of pregnancy and

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and a mistress without paying her the market price of such luxuries or forfeiting his respectability” (Preface-1909 xliii). In a similar way, the representations of abortion in this dissertation allow the male partners to engage in sexual behavior without consequences.

abortion is expressed through modernist techniques that provide deeper insight into the emotions involved than could be provided by mere description. In the earliest texts under discussion, *Abortion*, *Waste*, and *Votes for Women!*, melodramatic elements are at work, like a past secret arising to affect the present, but these plays are primarily social commentaries that reveal the nature of gender relationships at the turn of the century.

It is useful to draw on Ann Kaplan's description of complicit characters in discussing women pressured into choosing abortion since the act negates their threat to the male characters. In some cases, the threat is on an individual level: male characters will lose economic or social privileges if their female partners bring their pregnancies to term in *Votes for Women!*, *Abortion*, *The Unpossessed*, or *The Girl*. For *Voyage in the Dark*, a continuation of pregnancy threatens the state with incomplete family units. Similarly, a resistance to pregnancy outside the nuclear family motivates the abortion in *Waste*. From the male point of view, the woman's sacrifice of life or happiness works to negate her influence. Furthermore, these categories are flexible, so that *Votes for Women!* shows that abortion can move characters along the spectrum from complicit to resisting. *The Girl* pairs complicit with resisting characters to emphasize how women can find strength from one another.

The narrowly conceived representations of women's role in abortion go beyond a Victorian conception of women's identity. Ideas about women's relationship to their reproductive function are deeply entrenched in Western society. Faye D. Ginsberg and Rayna Rapp's edited collection, *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction* (1995), takes a cross-cultural approach to frame social theory in terms of

reproduction. While this text's focus is on contemporary life, Annette B. Weiner's "Reassessing Reproduction in Social Theory" contextualizes how women's reproductive capacity has been used to marginalize women. Weiner proposes that feminist theory is polarized into essentialist and non-essentialist perspectives based on women's reproductive function due to the lack of attention to reproduction's role in "social life" (407). In the West, she says, "the economic and political necessity to control private property within the nuclear family resulted in the conflation and marginalization of women's reproduction and sexuality. The focus on the nuclear family to the exclusion of other kin relationships made women's roles as wives critical to this legitimization" (407-08). She explains that the roots of this thinking date back to Plato, who promoted gender equality in the *Laws* but still suppressed women by insisting on their roles as wives and mothers, and early Christians like Augustine, who associated sin with procreation (408). This long history explains why it was unnatural for either male or female writers to imagine women actively seeking out abortions. At the same time, as kin relationships shifted in a post-industrial world, abortion must have seemed necessary to maintain nuclear family ties that had always been inseparable with maternity.

**Pre-suffrage Visions of Abortion:  
*Votes for Women!* (1907), *Waste* (1909), and *Abortion* (1914)**

In early twentieth-century texts, abortion highlights standard family roles. In the representations under discussion, the woman is compelled to abort because of outside influences: either a specific male request, rooted in a male character's social and economic concerns, or her inability to live outside of the nuclear family norm. The reader is led to believe that the pregnant woman opposes abortion but submits to male desire or convention. Thus, she maintains her purity by being a victim to an abortion she

does not want. It is not surprising that female characters are framed as victims of their domestic decisions—women’s rights in the public sphere were imagined as restricted at home as well. Three texts that emphasize this victimization, Elizabeth Robins’s *Votes for Women!*, Harley Granville Barker’s *Waste*, and Eugene O’Neill’s *Abortion*, are all plays, suggesting that theater was the medium through which writers felt most comfortable addressing emerging social issues.

Today’s criticism about *Votes for Women!* centers on the suffragist movement and relies on Elizabeth Robins’s biography, particularly about how her stage work in Ibsen’s great roles influenced her writing. Claire Hirshfield (1987) contextualizes the play as part of a movement away from lighthearted, commercial fare toward theater that advanced ideas and political agendas. *Votes for Women!* was the first of many plays that used the victimization of female characters to gain support for women’s issues. Until the outbreak of World War I, when focus shifted elsewhere, one-act plays became a way to publicize the feminist agenda as part of a larger activist campaign (2, 5-6). Since the focus of contemporary criticism is the use of the play as a political tool, the importance of Vida’s abortion to the plot is often ignored or discussed in euphemisms. In Hirshfield’s article, for instance, she simply categorizes Vida as someone with a “past”; in this past “are betrayal by a lover and the loss of their child” (2). Other analyses highlight the playwright’s influences. In “From ‘*Hedda Gabler*’ to ‘*Votes for Women!*’” (2004), Penny Farfan discusses how Ibsen affected Robins’s feminist ideas. Jane Marcus decides in “Art and Anger” (1978) that Robins’s writing is not as good as her friend Virginia Woolf’s but is still an example of “one of those ‘mothers’ of fiction we think back through” (72). Though rarely staged today, *Votes for Women!* was produced widely



through England as a political tool for suffragists; Robins dramatizes the need for women's right to vote through the plight of the lower classes and women's sexual exploitation.

Angela V. John's biography of Robins, *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life 1862-1952* (1995), contradicts Hirshfield's assertion that the play was not received well by audiences. *Votes for Women!* was initially slated to play for eight matinee performances, but the run was expanded to include two additional matinees and an evening performance slot. Once John Vedrenne and Harley Granville Barker's occupancy at the Court Theatre came to a close, however, *Votes for Women!* had to close as well. By this time, thirteen evening performances had been presented. One audience member was astonished to overhear discussion of Robins and the play on a train headed to London as well as to witness a sold out matinee performance, leaving many without tickets (148). Another biographer, Joanne E. Gates (1994), supports the idea that the play was popular; Robins was pleased to see that for most performances, boards announced sold out shows. The publisher Methuen also must have been convinced of its popular appeal, as a drama to be read as well as seen, for they advanced Robins one thousand pounds in return for her submitting the novel to them by September 1, 1907 (162).

Vida Levering is an active suffragist with a secret buried in her past: years earlier her lover, Stonor, pressed her to get an abortion, resulting in the end of their relationship. Though scarred from the incident, Vida eventually transforms this negative event into energy for her activism. By the play's end, her abortion experience provides a useful means to exact a political promise from her former lover.

Naïve Jean<sup>9</sup> learns from her aunt, Mrs. Heriot, that Vida was found sick in a Welsh farmhouse many years ago. As typically occurs in abortion narratives, a treacherous doctor is involved: “There had been no one to see her except a man down from London, a shady-looking doctor--nameless, of course. And then this result” (27-28). Though the owners of the barn wanted to turn her out, Mrs. Heriot interceded and helped her to recover. Despite this compassion, Vida’s attitude toward the affair irks her; in addition to keeping her lover’s identity a secret, Vida had the nerve to be “ashamed-- . . . ashamed that she ‘hadn’t had the courage to resist’--not the original temptation but the pressure brought to bear on her ‘not to go through with it,’ as she said” (28). Vida’s regrets show how much the decision to abort was not her own but was forced upon her. Nevertheless, Mrs. Heriot assumes her shame should come from the act that got her pregnant, not the one that ended the pregnancy.

Robins establishes Vida’s worldview and concerns before she even sets foot on the stage. Her history as a young woman coerced into an abortion forms the backdrop of the larger struggle to earn the female vote in England. Unaware that Stonor, a rising Conservative politician, was the one attached to Vida, his fiancé Jean is more in awe of Vida’s experience and activism than repulsed, as her aunt may have hoped. But when the couple hears Vida speak at a rally that replicates those frequently staged in London, the connection between Vida and her fiancé becomes clear.

Jean and Stonor’s confrontation about his past reveals how men and women were expected to respond to abortion issues at the turn of the century. Similar to the

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<sup>9</sup> This is her name in the printed edition. Her name in the stage production is Beatrice.

conversation Jack Townsend and his father will have in *Abortion*, they discuss what happened circuitously, without once naming the act.

**Jean.** Geoffrey, I know her story.

**Stonor.** Whose story?

**Jean.** Miss Levering's.

**Stonor.** Whose?

**Jean.** Vida Levering's. (*STONOR stares speechless. Slight pause.*) (*The words escaping from her in a miserable cry*) Why did you desert her? (86)

Stonor insists that it was Vida who ended the relationship, which relieves Jean, but she is less sure when he claims "I couldn't marry her--and she knew it" (87). She questions his motives, and he defends himself: though marriage did not seem to be on Vida's mind, he "still hoped--at **that** time--to win my father over. She blamed me because (*goes to window and looks blindly out and speaks in a low tone*) if the child had lived it wouldn't have been possible to get my father to--to overlook it" (88-89). Though he was thirty when his affair with Vida ended, he did not defy his father's wishes; losing his inheritance was far worse a fate than losing the woman he loved. At this moment, Vida is a complicit character whose abortion obeys patriarchal rule and nullifies any threat to her lover's position. Stonor seems unaware that his refusal to recognize the pregnancy makes Vida lose faith in him as a partner. He feels he is the one who has been jilted since he acted out of necessity to obey his father.

Jean demands that he make amends to Vida by asking for her hand in marriage. Even with the possibility that she may lose her fiancé, Jean cannot stay with someone who has wronged a woman. Stonor does not understand Jean since it was a "miserable old affair I'd as good as forgotten--" but he cannot finish his thought . . . Jean is too aghast that he could dismiss such a significant event in his life, so that he has to explain

“you’re torturing me so I don’t know what I’m saying” (89). Stonor has clearly put the abortion behind him.

It is unclear whether Vida has been able to forget it as well. During a moment alone, Jean and Vida discuss the situation. Vida makes Jean see that they can use the past as a way to manipulate Stonor for their political ends. Vida explains that “he can’t repay the dead. But there are the living. There are the thousands with hope still in their hearts and youth in their blood. Let him help **them**. Let him be a Friend to Women” (95). Jean believes that Vida must still pine for Stonor, but when Lady John makes the same claim, Vida objects. “You don’t seriously believe a woman with anything else to think about, comes to the end of ten years still **absorbed** in a memory of that sort?”; for her, “he’s simply one of the far-back links in a chain of evidence” (97). Despite her protestations otherwise, Vida’s bitterness clearly is on the surface. After reflecting that Stonor “turned the best thing life can bring, into a curse for both of us” (99), Vida proceeds to dismiss another man who has arrived to help the cause of women’s suffrage. Lady John, and the audience, must wonder if she still does hold a grudge against Stonor, and by extension all men (102). The suspicion frames Vida as a man-hating feminist.

Vida is aware of the economic considerations that motivated Stonor to send her to the abortionist. By angering his father, Stonor would have risked his inheritance and future security, neither of which was worth the price of continuing the pregnancy. As he now offers marriage to Vida as a means to make amends, she uses the language of currency to evaluate his offer and their relationship, perhaps echoing back the underlying thinking of his youth. She rejects his proposal, proclaiming that he should “Go away and live in debt! Pay and pay-- and find yourself still in debt!-- for a thing you’ll never be

able to give me back. (*Lower.*) And when you come to die, say to yourself, 'I paid all creditors but one'" (104).

Stonor defends himself and expresses his sense of desertion when she returned his letters without reading them and refused to see him when he called. As Vida explains her reasoning, it is once again difficult to tell if she simply plays on his emotions to secure his support for suffrage or if she honestly feels the pain of being wronged by him. Vida can admit that as far as the decision to separate, "I had my guilty share in it--but the barrier (*her voice trembles*)--the barrier was your invention" (106). Stonor protests that his father was intractable, but he misunderstands her: she is angry that he even needed his father's consent. She wonders "What chance had a little unborn child against 'the last of the great feudal lords,' as you called him" (106). It is this unseen, all-powerful patriarchal force that she attempts to fight as she acts on behalf of women, but these feelings that so influenced her a decade before still seem close to the surface, no matter what she claims to her friends.

It takes a long time for Stonor to understand just why Vida harbors so much bitterness toward him, but finally, with "*a light dawning*" he seems to understand and she opens up to him more. "When I was most unhappy I would wake, thinking I heard it cry. It was my own crying I heard, but I seemed to have it in my arms. I suppose I was mad. I used to lie there in that lonely farmhouse pretending to hush it. It was so I hushed myself" (107). She does not imagine that a man could understand the trials that she suffered to end the pregnancy. "It must have looked quite simple to you. You didn't know that the ghost of a child that had never seen the light, the frail thing you meant to sweep aside and forget--**have** swept aside and forgotten--you didn't know it was strong

enough to push you out of my life” (107-08). Once his guilt is in place, she can manipulate him into supporting suffrage, especially when he believes that Jean’s love for him is at risk with a refusal.

Even with its progressive goals, the story depends on nineteenth-century premise that women define themselves through their childbearing capacities. The plot can only be resolved when Jean and Vida—united by the pain Vida suffered—work together to alter the course of Stonor’s actions. Their feelings about the abortion appeal to his emotions and he is motivated to help the suffragist cause as he considers the suppression of women. Despite his remorse, however, only Vida will suffer in the future. When he wishes he could redress the wrongs against her, Vida pines that he can never return her child (113). She reminds him that “You will have other children, Geoffrey--for me there was to be only one” (115). Though the abortion may have left him with regret, the course of his life can progress without change; for Vida, abortion permanently marks her course in life, both emotionally and physically. Whether the reason she cannot have children resides in psychological trauma from the abortion or rather some bodily injury is unclear. Either way, Vida’s scars are far different from the ones experienced by Stonor.

Iveta Jusová (2005) evaluates Robins’s body of work, including her acting and writing, and notices that her focus is on middle- and upper-class white women, even when there seems to be a connection among women of other races and classes (128). Indeed, *Votes for Women!* relies on its wealthy protagonist to effect change. In fact, it is unlikely that Vida would have been able to transform her negative experience if it weren’t for her upper-class privilege. Further, while I agree with her point that Robins politicizes abortion and highlights how a woman’s experience can be used for political

ends, her reading of the impact of the abortion on Vida is somewhat incomplete (118). Jusová writes that “Although she fits the category of the ‘woman with a past,’ Vida also subverts it by refusing to accept a sense of guilt for her past extramarital affair and abortion” (117-118). A close reading of the text shows that though Vida is unapologetic for the affair, she does feel guilty about the abortion. Vida thinks that she has been a victim of Stonor’s reliance on his father, a patriarchal model that she fights against on a larger scale through her life. However, her discussions with Stonor also reveal the sense of loss and disappointment that the abortion has brought to her. She wishes that there was a way to, as she puts it, “repay the dead” (95). Not only does it change the course of her life, but the abortion also precludes her from having children. Whether she would ever want them is beside the point; unlike Stonor, abortion has made the choice to be a mother impossible.

*Votes for Women!* did not receive a warm reception from the British press. The play was more of a success with activists who liked the idea of using the theater for change than critics who were put off by what they considered zealous suffragism. Though reviewers could discuss abortion abstractly, relating it to specific characters must have been deemed inappropriate, resulting in creative euphemisms to discuss Vida’s experience. Arnold Bennett, the novelist and critic who signed his reviews E.A.B., explains that “For the sake of her lover and his position she consents to a crime by which their child is not born into the world” (E.A.B. “Votes for Women!” 12). Other reviewers use ambiguous phrasing to express sympathy regarding the effect of the abortion on Vida. According to the *Times* of London, “As a young girl she was betrayed and deserted—or, rather she had herself separated from a betrayer whom she had learned to despise and

detest because, for his sake, she had to forgo the consolation of motherhood” (“Court Theatre” 5). This critic seems to think that having a child could make up for the failure of their relationship. *The Pall Mall Gazette* put the onus on Stonor, since he “had relations with Vida Levering, in the course of which he qualified for penal servitude” (“Suffragette Play” 2). The morning after its opening, *The Morning Post* avoided the whole issue of abortion by simply stating that a baby died; just as Stonor is beginning to achieve success, “there rises up against a man his past in the shape of a woman who years ago bore him a child, long since dead” (“Court Theatre” 5). Robins’s plot confounds the critics by presenting an issue they could only tackle indirectly.

Bennett takes the unusual perspective that *Votes for Women!* maligns men and concludes that “if there is a cry of justice for women, there should also be a cry of justice for men. We need it in these days” (E.A.B. “Votes for Women!” 12). Especially disturbing to Bennett is that her hostility towards men seems equal to her compassion for women. Considering the obvious advantages that men experienced in regards to both the law and social customs, this early twentieth-century reading seems especially limited. Nevertheless, *Votes for Women!* confirms Bennett’s anti-feminist suspicions that women should never vote since they cannot think abstractly and so confuse the personal with the political. Bennett does not realize that confusing the personal with the political leads to his own conclusions.

Since Bennett feels that men are ill used through the play, it exasperates him that Robins frames abortion as a form of masculine dominance. “What is unfair in Miss Elizabeth Robins’ treatment,” he says, “is that she implies men usually act as Stonor acted. As a matter of fact it is the other way about, and Vida’s experiences are the



exception and not the rule” (E.A.B. “Votes for Women!” 12). Bennett is unclear if he means that women usually seek out abortionists by their own volition or that most men are pleased with pregnancy, even out of wedlock. A week after Bennett’s review appeared, William Archer, who could be critical of Robins despite their long-term, secret affair, declares that, to the contrary, “One has to remember that women, in common with the rest of society, have tolerated conduct such as his for a good many years or the end of the play would be another tragedy” (“The Theatre” 460). Stonor’s refusal to acknowledge the child without his father’s consent left Vida with few options. Archer seems to be unique in his defense of Vida’s actions as other critics felt slighted by the play as well; the reviewer for *Era*, for instance, complained that “Miss Robins has taken care to give the women all the best parts in the piece” (“Votes for Women!” *Era* 13). A drama presented from a female point of view unsettled these reviewers because they found their standard perspectives challenged.

Despite these reservations, audience members were reported to have enjoyed the production thoroughly. The *Times* of London critic observed that the audience followed the play closely and applauded enthusiastically. Rumors of a pro-suffrage rally in the theater did not come to pass and the audience was under control (“Court Theatre” 5). One *Pall Mall Gazette* review provides another perspective and suggests that it was “received with roars of laughter by a crowded house” (“Theatrical Notes” 1). This viewpoint is especially significant since the play is described as an “amusing skit,” a far less important designation than Robins’s own subtitle of “A Dramatic Tract in Three Acts” (Robins, *Votes for Women!* title page). Though the critic from *The Illustrated London News* generally found the play “not so interesting,” the audience’s response to the

political rally was so enthusiastic that it “may be safely counted upon to draw the town” (“The Playhouses” 546). It may be that the audience was especially interested in these issues and thus was predisposed to support the drama.

The most revealing aspect of the British reviews is their resistance to viewing women as agents of change. Reviewers seemed to think that actresses can be properly evaluated by how well they gratify the audience’s senses, not by how well they act.<sup>10</sup> The unnamed reviewer in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, for instance, cannot think of Vida as “credible,” though this critic decides that Wynne Matthison’s “picturesque refinement . . . is the next best thing.” (“Suffragette Play” 2). Such a critique suggests that even if a heroine is not convincing, audiences can be satisfied if she is aesthetically pleasing. The *Times* reviewer gives more extensive perspective on this point of view. Vida’s man-hating ways puzzle the critic: “Her resentment, legitimate enough, against one man seems to make her hate all men. If men were not made deaf by their incurable vanity she could tell them some truths. They are absurdly wrong in believing that all women are yearning to be married” (“Court Theatre” 5). The dismissive assessment undermines Vida’s experience, while the language points to the worldview, often left unsaid in reviews cited throughout this dissertation, that all women do indeed long for marriage. The confusion seems to be connected to Vida’s appearance; it is easy to imagine that a rendering of the militant feminist as a manly-woman would make her perspective believable. However, Vida is feminine and alluring, making her rejection of marriage ludicrous and prompting

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<sup>10</sup> The belief in women’s intellectual inferiority may also explain why the popular suffrage rally performed in Act 2 was often attributed to male influence by critics like Arnold Bennett (E.A.B. “Votes for Women!” 12) and *The Morning Post*, whose critic decided “It is certain that no one could write such a scene, and the rumour that the details were evolved by Mr. Granville Barker at rehearsal, the actors and ‘supers’ being encouraged to ‘chip in’ whenever they saw a chance, is probably correct” (“Court Theatre” 5). While Robins certainly sought advice for that scene, as she did for the rest of the play, it is significant that she is removed from having any part in the creation of the most acclaimed part of the production.

an aside that questions, “(Why, by the way, does Miss Levering take such care to make the best of her good looks and pretty figure and wear such charming frocks? Is it to please other women?)” (“Court Theatre” 5). A mocking bemusement reveals the perceived scope of women’s needs at the turn of the century. Clearly, either lesbian desire or personal vanity is not a possibility since adornment of the female figure could only be for men’s viewing pleasure. If women want to gain the vote, the *Times* critic continues, suffragists should be “as fair to look upon, as agreeable to hear, and as beautifully dressed as Miss Wynne Matthison” (“Court Theatre” 5). Even as a joke, the comment reaffirms that women are better suited to beauty than to thought; in fighting for suffrage, women had to challenge deeply entrenched gendered ideologies that are still an obstacle today.<sup>11</sup>

The *Times* concludes, as would other publications, that the abortion narrative and other related social issues undermine the play’s suffragist aims. Arnold Bennett, as well, was unabashedly mystified by the connection between the two issues, though he viewed abortion as the larger and more pressing matter, albeit one unfit for theater. He writes, “In any case it is not easy to see what Vida’s deprivation of motherhood has to do with the suffrage movement . . . for the life of me I do not know what it is meant to advocate, unless it be that motherhood is the counterblast to womanhood [sic] suffrage, and that men must learn to treat women as human beings with souls” (E.A.B. “Votes for

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<sup>11</sup> The stage directions read that Vida is “*an attractive, essentially feminine, and rather ‘smart’ woman of thirty-two, with a somewhat foreign grace; the kind of woman whom men and women alike say, ‘What’s her story? Why doesn’t she marry?’*” (13). Suffragists sometimes had to resort to using women’s appearance as a tool to help their cause. Still, Vida’s beauty makes her decision not to enter into a relationship provoking, since the implication is that she would be able to pair off if she desired. Further, it was bold of Robins to make her heroine, albeit an attractive one, in her thirties. The actresses who played Vida were not young starlets: Edith Wynne Matthison was in her early thirties when she played Vida in England and Mary Shaw was close to fifty when she took the role in the United States in 1909.

Women!” 12). Bennett’s tone in the article leads the reader to believe that this final point is not necessarily a given. His mistaken belief that personal experience does not affect his political views prevents Bennett from understanding how suffrage might give women autonomy by providing a voice in the public sphere. He only resolves his confusion by finding a category for Vida that comfortably fits his understanding of gender roles: she is a woman who, naturally, needs to mother but is thwarted in this natural goal. His point of view and description of mothering as a “counterblast” once again emphasizes the cultural mythology that all women long to be mothers. Radical methods to obtain the vote are diffused when Bennett directs them into motherhood.

William Archer uses this same logic in his review to describes how Wynne Matthison’s acting conveys that Vida’s real tragedy

was the wrong done to her motherhood rather than his cowardly selfishness in dealing with the woman who loved him that so embittered her against Geoffrey Stoner [sic]; that her honour should be sacrificed to his unmanly fears of his father’s anger was bearable, that the life of her unborn child should be sacrificed was another matter, though she had not realized this until the evil was done. (“The Theatre” 459)

In these analyses, the reviewers attempt to shape Vida’s actions into something they can understand, ignoring the possibility that she can divert her former pain to help her current mission. These reviewers can only see one side of Robins’s portrayal. It is harder to address the ambiguity Robins uses in characterizing Vida, perhaps in an attempt to address multiple audiences. In one scene, she tells Jean and Mrs. Heriot that she has long put her feelings for Stonor to rest, so that now she only needs to recall the past to use it against him. When she confronts Stonor, however, the devastation of the abortion still seems raw and near the surface. Employing Ann Kaplan’s terminology, Vida uses her

position as a complicit character to become a resisting one in the course of the text; nevertheless, her actual feelings are difficult to pinpoint.

Generally, American critics were even less receptive to *Votes for Women!* than were English critics when the play opened at the Wallacks Theatre on March 15, 1909. The day after the play opened in New York, *The New York Times* featured four different articles about the issue of women's suffrage. The contentious environment that activists faced can be imagined by reading a short letter to the editor by someone who found the conflict between the suffragists and the "Solemn 'Antis'" amusing. With much derision, the letter compares suffragists to children, who must have what others have: "'Give us the vote, men. oh! give it to us. You have it and we want it.' There really seems to be no other argument" (F. 5). Though the other articles printed in the issue seem to be in favor of the measure, this letter highlights what the New York cast faced in staging the play.

Despite the general public's attitude, the star Mary Shaw was greeted enthusiastically by women's suffrage groups.<sup>12</sup> These women, from an array of organizations including the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women, the American Suffragettes, the Interurban Council of Women Suffrage Clubs, and others, made themselves known at the first performance, waving banners, wearing buttons, and applauding enthusiastically throughout the show. The action did not stop at intermission when women from the Harlem Equal Rights League displayed signs that read "'Women vote in 4 Western States. Why not in New York?'" (Schanke, "Mary Shaw" 93). The opening night audience expressed enormous energy, but was mostly comprised of

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Shaw had also starred in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and would go on to play other roles featuring feminist themes before turning her attention to different outlets for feminist causes (Schanke, "Mary Shaw" 94-95).

devoted followers, ready to see the play. Though U.S. critics responded well to Mary Shaw, they were less enthusiastic about the play itself.

Infantilizing women as petulant children must have been the common strategy for those who opposed women's suffrage, as the critic for *The New York Dramatic Mirror* uses a similar analogy to describe the abortion plot:

Like a wan, lost, hysterical little child, a tiny story wanders helplessly through the three acts. When it seemed to have wandered for good and all out of the stage door of Wallack's, Miss Shaw, with tear stained face and motherly emotion, led it tenderly forward again. It was a most unwelcome and ill trained little brat. One almost hoped that it would really wriggle out of Miss Shaw's clutch and disappear forever. It had very little to do with the play. ("Reviews of New Plays" 3)

The metaphor of a lost child, used to adhere to Comstock's decency laws, represents the way Vida's abortion weaves itself through the drama; it proves to be more disturbing than a straightforward description would have been. This critic has pity for everyone present. The audience was subjected to "much talk of 'suffering sisters.'" The real sufferers were on our side of the footlights." According to this writer, suffragists would not be well served by the drama. The reviewer was bored. Even Mary Shaw did not escape sympathy as her acting "was so much better than the play that one felt sorry for her" (3). *The New York Times* also appreciated Shaw's acting, if not the play, as expressed in their headline: "Mary Shaw Superb in 'Votes for Women' . . . Interesting Study of a Crowd, but Play Unconvincing as Drama or Argument" (9). This reviewer addresses Vida's abortion even more cryptically than is the case for *The New York Dramatic Mirror*. The critic explains that the play is the "familiar story of the appearance in a man's life of a woman who, years before, had been his victim"; Vida Levering is one who "has made a mistake in her youth" (9). Mary Shaw's acting in the final scene is so fine that "she is able to win over to the cause the man who years before had wronged her" so that it will

help “one to forget the improbability of Miss Robins’s story and the weakness of its structure as drama or as argument” (9). Censorship obscures the underlying issues presented in the play so that it is difficult for critics to satisfactorily critique the drama beyond deeming it unconvincing. It is instructive to compare these New York reviews to the ones written in London. Though both cities had to follow strict censorship rules, it seems that London critics actually had more latitude to discuss the issue of abortion. For critics in both cities, however, the personal and political seemed antithetical so that the abortion plotline was a liability to the plot.

Though Robins obtained the Lord Chamberlain’s approval to stage the play in England,<sup>13</sup> Harley Granville Barker, who produced *Votes for Women!*, faced difficulties when this office demanded that he purge references to abortion from the script of his own play, *Waste*. Though the term is not mentioned once in the script, abortion is integral to the storyline and Granville Barker refused the ridiculous request (Purdom 73-74). Like Stonor, the main character Henry Trebell is a rising politician. His brief affair with the married Amy O’Connell—so brief that she mentions they were together only for half an hour—results in her pregnancy, one that she ends against his protests because he will not marry her.

Although Trebell and Amy’s attitude toward abortion seems different from the other characters in this chapter, their values really break down along common gender lines. Even if Trebell expects Amy to continue the pregnancy, he wants no role in the child’s life beside an economic one. While Amy has never wanted children with her

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<sup>13</sup> Though she did not adapt all their suggestions, Robins turned to men—Harley Granville Barker, Bernard Shaw, and Henry James—to help revise *Votes for Women!* Granville Barker suggested the title to help emphasize its suffragist themes. Shaw and Granville Barker had each experienced their own difficulties with censorship and their advice may have had this potential difficulty in mind (Stowell 15).

husband, she imagines continuing this pregnancy only if Trebell would love and marry her. He therefore affects her decision by making it cruelly clear that their sexual encounter has meant nothing to him: she effectively disappeared from his mind until he learned of her pregnancy. Without shame, he admits “I look back on that night as one looks back on a fit of drunkenness . . . Wouldn’t any other woman have served the purpose . . . ?” (34). Despite his disdain, she imagines, forgetting her current marriage, that they could go away together, away from scandal, and make a family out of this accident (35), but this is an option he will not entertain in the 1907 edition.<sup>14</sup> His degradation thus works as powerfully on her decision to abort as coercion worked to motivate Vida, and, as will be clear later in the chapter, *Abortion’s* Nellie and *The Unpossessed’s* Margaret Flinders as well.

Just as Robins’s imagines the fetus as a developed child, Granville Barker’s characters discuss the fetus as if it is already born. Trebell claims that though the child will mean nothing to him, it will be significant to her; but when she makes clear that without marriage, she would commit suicide before continuing her pregnancy, his real feelings become obvious. Shocked that a woman could make such a claim, he looks at her as if she is “some unnatural thing” (35) and makes a plea that parallels contemporary arguments against abortion. She responds with an argument that reflects today’s pro-choice point of view.

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<sup>14</sup> The 1907 edition of the play paints Trebell as a far more self-centered, heartless character. Granville Barker softens his characterization in the 1926 revision, so that he is gentler when Amy reveals her pregnancy, even as it is still clear that he does not love her. Further, as the play concludes, his emotions weigh more with remorse about the abortion itself than bitterness at Amy for going through with it. According to a letter included with the revised text, “So it is a thing I had – dramatically – to say twenty years ago, said as I’d say it now. But now I’d have something different to say.” (*Waste* 1926; 123).



TREBELL. [\_Logical again.\_] Won't you realise that there's a third party to our discussion ... that I'm of no importance beside him and you of very little. Think of the child.

AMY \_blazes into desperate rebellion.\_

AMY. There's no child because I haven't chosen there shall be and there shan't be because I don't choose. You'd have me first your plaything and then Nature's, would you? (35)

With his refusal to make a family with her, Amy seeks an abortion from someone she “picked . . . out of the directory” (32) and loses her life. Trebell's viewpoint becomes more passionate when he mourns the abortion, though he has no pity for Amy, whom he believes killed *his* child (87), and so left him with no option but suicide. He explains to his sister Frances, who just wants him to get over the whole affair, that, “The man bears the child in his soul as the woman carries it in her body” (87). Trebell is an unusual character with his equation of maternal and paternal connections, making his earlier declaration that mothers care more for children than their disinterested fathers an obvious dissimulation. In fact, his regret could have been expressed by Vida Levering, as he wonders what happens to a man who looks inside himself and “only finds there a spirit which should have been born, but is dead” (86). Just as he had no desire to go away with Amy, he does not want to go away with and be rescued by his sister, and so he kills himself, his career ruined, but more important, his will destroyed by the abortion.

It must have been difficult for Granville Barker to understand why the abortion theme prevented his play from being given a license while *Votes for Women!* was allowed to play uncensored. During the 1909 Committee on Censorship, Granville Barker alluded to this strange discrepancy and obliquely referred to *Votes!* as one work he produced that featured an illegal procedure (Stowell 37-38 fn 4). Even if neither play names abortion outright, *Waste* still may have seemed problematic, especially since the

male character dies as a result of the abortion, not just the female character. Though Amy and Vida crave affection, Amy seeks out an abortion when Trebell refuses to commit to her while Vida is forced into the act against her will. Additionally, Vida's abortion is buried ten years before the opening of the play while Amy's is carried out during the action onstage. By the time of his testimony, however, Granville Barker had already refused to revise the play so that only two performances by the Stage Society at the Imperial Theatre would be produced in November 1907. It would not be presented commercially until 1936 (Kennedy 85 and 87).

Abortion helps to position Amy in Ann Kaplan's designation of a complicit character: Prevented from forming a nuclear family unit by Trebell, death removes her threat to social institutions as a married woman giving birth to another man's child. Nevertheless, abortion also works as a destabilizing influence, and Trebell mourns, not for Amy, but for the father he will never be. A similar pattern can be found in *Abortion*, by Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill would finish writing the boldly titled play in 1914, less than a decade after *Votes for Women!* and *Waste* were written.

*Abortion* is the story of a college hero, who, much like Stonor and Trebell, is admired for his ethics and his tremendous potential. Upper class Jack's relationship with working class Nellie serves as an invisible emotional life underneath the surface of his rarefied world of college rallies and baseball games. He too finds his lover pregnant and must deal with the consequences of her death after her abortion. Despite the title, abortion is referred to in hushed euphemisms and cast as a shameful reality that cannot be addressed openly, threaded through the story as representative of the larger issue of women's submission to men. Even the 1958 introduction to the play seems to

circumvent its subject. Lawrence Gellert describes the plot while delaying reference to the title, calling it initially “The first play in the volume” (8). O’Neill himself was not proud of the play and it was not staged during his lifetime even though it was one of his first attempts at drama; it is more significant for what it says about the young O’Neill’s concept of fate and ideas about abortion than for its impact on the viewing public. While other O’Neill plays may be more subtle and complex, *Abortion* is a revealing artifact of early twentieth-century perceptions of this subject.

The play is rarely discussed today except to highlight stylistic development or biographical connections across O’Neill’s plays. Timo Tiusanen (1968), for example, discusses the technical aspects of the play, particularly how the climax of Jack’s suicide is made compelling by the fusion of stage elements like lighting and the crescendo of the crowd, the latter of which O’Neill would use in later works (44). In the same year, Ima Herron (1968) treats the play in her chapter about small town characters in O’Neill. She too sees elements of the dramatist’s later style in the dualisms present in the play, for example, between the townspeople and the college students (280-81). Jack Townsend is examined as a college athlete by Robert J. Higgs (1981), who posits that Jack’s “death has little or nothing to do with his extinction” since his character type lives on in *Strange Interlude*, another O’Neill play that includes a college athlete-hero who dies, in this case, before the action of the play (56). For Thierry Dubost’s (1997) catalog of the interpersonal relationships and inner worlds of O’Neill’s characters, it is not necessary to privilege the more accomplished late plays since “there is a direct continuity between *Abortion* and *The Iceman Cometh*” (4); as such, the relationships in *Abortion* are recorded next to O’Neill’s better known works. This brief overview of critical treatment shows an

attempt to understand the play in terms of the style or themes of O'Neill's later work. These critics do not view the play as a social artifact or analyze the text in terms of its main theme.

Even though it was not produced, and so has no measurable social impact in the early twentieth century, its composition represents O'Neill's understanding of how abortion could affect young people. His biographer Louis Sheaffer links the characterization of Nellie and Jack with O'Neill's experiences: both O'Neill and his father had sons with women they soon abandoned. Schaeffer calls Nellie's death "unconscious wish-fulfillment" only atoned by Jack Townsend's suicide (149).<sup>15</sup> The playwright's relationship with Jenkins is a starting point for many other contemporary critics who consider the text. Ima Herron (1966) connects *Abortion* to "his guilty feelings about his unhappy marriage to Kathleen Jenkins and his disregard for their son, Eugene, Jr." (275). Travis Bogard (1988) says even though the play "possibly reflects some of his concern" over his first wife's pregnancy, "It is not . . . an autobiographical play" (*Contour* 23). While these interpretations vary, they all speak to the idea that O'Neill uses abortion as a way to work through his conflict about being a father. Given the powerful consequences that abortion, as a plot device, gave O'Neill, it seems more

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<sup>15</sup> Rather than break off his relationship with girlfriend Kathleen Jenkins before a trip to Honduras, O'Neill secretly married her. She wrote while he was gone to say she could no longer keep the marriage secret as she was expecting a baby. Right after O'Neill's return from Honduras, an article ran in the *New York World* reporting the birth of their son; their marriage was secret no more, much to his famous father James's displeasure. The paper eagerly followed up that Eugene O'Neill was back in town but had never contacted his wife (Gelb and Gelb 137-41). O'Neill was motivated to continue his distance because of his father's reaction, but there are conflicting reports about his real feelings about his son. Gelb explains that "A friend has recalled that Ella later told her that Eugene had wept when the full implication of his responsibility struck him, soon after the birth of Eugene Jr." (140). On the other hand, not only did he boast about leaving Kathleen Jenkins when he discovered she was pregnant, he also claimed not to miss the boy since he was "just an accident of nature." (qtd. in Sheaffer 263). This sentiment seems parallel to Trebell's flip comment that "Nature's a tyrant" (32).

likely that he used it as a dramatic element rather than some kind of alternate possibility for himself.

Women's status as a commodity to be traded and exchanged winds through the discussion that Jack and his father John have about abortion; the sanctity of their economic and social position and Nellie's lower-class status preoccupy them. After determining that the abortion was complete, John vocalizes traditional fears about paternity: "Are you sure – you know one's vanity blinds one in such cases – are you sure, absolutely sure, you were the father of this child which would have been born to her?" (23). Jack immediately defends the girl's purity, whom he claims he would have married had he not been in love with fiancé Evelyn. Despite Jack's proclamations of affection, Nellie seems sordid in comparison to his external life. When he remembers Evelyn, "the other affair seemed so horrible and loathsome," and this disgust justifies his decision to break off contact with the girl once the abortion is secured (23). He adapts his father's worldview since social class stifles his feelings for Nellie and casts a negative light on their time together.

Jack attempts all manner of sloughing off responsibility for the act onto an outside source. He cites his father's dalliances in college, invoking a hereditary flaw; he claims he did not have the affair—it was the prehistoric man inside him, not the one who loves Evelyn; he blames society's ethics "which are unnatural and monstrously distorted," viewing evil where it doesn't exist and forcing him "into evasions." Finally, Jack decides that "the whole thing seemed just a pleasant game" (24-26). The meeting becomes a moment for father and son to bond, comparing experiences and reaffirming their status as moral, upright, and superior. Jack is reassured by their conversation and proclaims that

now he can now be a better man for all that *he* has suffered. His economic position and gender allows for an easy resolution to the troubling situation. “I have had my glance into the abyss. In loss of confidence and self-respect, in bitter self-abasement I have paid” (26). Significantly, Nellie’s “glance into the abyss” will never be represented since her life ends before the curtain rises. Economic powerlessness eradicates her voice; this choice turns out to be no choice at all.

Economic considerations determine John’s perception of the affair since he is less distressed by the abortion than by his son’s choice of women. He chastises his son, wondering, “What I cannot understand is how you happened to get in with this young woman in the first place. You’ll pardon me, Jack, but it seems to me to show a lack of judgment on your part, and – er – good taste” (25). The whole debacle would be more understandable if he chose someone of his own class, though Jack’s attraction to Nellie may have stemmed from the thrill of interacting outside his own social network. Here again, class differences evoke suspicion from his father. After asserting that the woman “was hardly of the class you have been accustomed to associate with, I presume,” he becomes even more disappointed when he hears of the family’s precarious financial situation, as they are supported by Nellie, who is a stenographer, and her brother, a machinist. Considering the possible long-term implication of the affair, John ensures that no one in her family could learn about the abortion.

What remains unspoken is what her refusal to abort would have meant. “And she and her brother support the others?” And Jack, “*Avoiding his father’s eyes*” admits that they do. John’s “*expression stern and accusing, starts to say something but restrains himself*”; all he can say is “Ah.” (25). This interaction can be read in two ways: Jack has

taken advantage of a woman of little means who could not resist his advances; perhaps more alarming for father and son, her refusal to have an abortion would have linked the two families, forever sullyng their reputation and making them financially responsible for an unwanted child and Nellie's entire family.

The abortion seems to relieve all these troubles and is obtained easily once Jack acquires the capital of \$200.00 from his father. Jack admits that without asking his dad, "I couldn't get it in any other way very well. Two hundred dollars is quite a sum for a college student to raise at a moment's notice" (26). The jest returns the father to his place of pride, and he declares "The wages of sin are rather exorbitant" (26). Father and son shake hands, and though Jack wants to pay him back, John insists they put the whole affair behind them. For this family, economic power has allowed them to easily discard the emotional consequences of the end of the relationship and the pregnancy.

Jack uses his financial power once again when the girl's brother Murray returns to exact vengeance for the dead girl's life. In order to preserve the respect of his family, particularly of his mother and his girlfriend, Jack begs Murray to remain quiet about the affair; these are the innocent that he cannot bear to disappoint. "You say the doctor gave you money? I'll give you ten times as much as he did . . . I'll see that you get so much a year for the rest of your life. My father is rich. We'll get you a good position, do everything you wish" (32). Here, Jack has misread his adversary. Money cannot return Murray's beloved sister and he draws a gun and exclaims "You want – to pay me – for Nellie!" (32). Murray ultimately decides to get the police, and Jack, unable to face the disappointment of his family and peers, shoots himself, just as Trebell was compelled to commit suicide in *Waste*. The play doles out punishment to the unformed nuclear family

unit on two fronts: if Jack has prevented its honest formation with the working girl, neither will he have the luxury of establishing one with his fiancé.

Murray easily perceives the commitment to class that has been the root of Jack's actions, despite his protestations. "Yuh think yuh c'n get away with that stuff and then marry some goil of your own kind, I s'pose . . . Yuh come here to school and yuh think yuh c'n do as yuh please with us town people. Yuh treat us like servants, an' what are *you*, I'd like to know? – a lot of lazy no-good dudes spongin' on your old men" (30). Behind the anger about his sister is a lifetime of resentment against the social system that divides the "townies" from the university students. Too ashamed to let the purity of his external life be crushed by his involvement in the young girl's death, Jack takes refuge in suicide. Quelling his affection for Nellie has allowed him to maintain membership in his own social class, in the attachments which have helped form the core of his identity; when these are threatened, life is no longer worth living. While Jack and Trebell of *Waste* have the same fate, their motivations are different. Jack kills himself because of the disconnect between his reputation and his actions; Trebell, whose reputation is also sullied because of abortion, is more concerned with the loss of his potential child.

O'Neill overtly states the play's subject in the title, *Abortion*, yet the word is never once uttered by the characters throughout the action of the play, even by the brother who returns to seek revenge. O'Neill can break a taboo with his title, but he cannot put the words into the mouths of his characters. The father refers to it clinically as an "operation." Yet, abortion has the power to disturb even when it is not mentioned. When Murray comes to confront Jack, their conversation actively avoids mentioning the procedure. Jack pretends to not understand what Murray is talking about:



MURRAY. "Don't give me any of that. Yuh know what I mean. Yuh know how she died." (*Fiercely*) "Yuh know who killed her."

JACK. (*His voice trembling - not looking at Murray*) "How she died? Killed her? I don't understand - "

MURRAY. "Yuh lie! She was murdered and yuh know it."

JACK. (*Horror-struck*) "Murdered?"

MURRAY. "Yes, and *you* murdered her."

JACK. (*Shuddering*) "I? What? I murdered? - Are you crazy?" (29).

In this short exchange, murder becomes synonymous with Nellie's abortion, revealing the powerful taboo placed on the act.

While *Abortion* may seem like a mere melodrama to our twenty-first century sensibilities, it would have been quite a radical piece for its time. *The Cambridge History of Law in America* reveals that the United States had been policing both contraceptive and abortion activities since the 1860's; these laws eventually sought to censor any discussion of reproduction, contraception, or abortion. Such legislation, codified in the 1873 Comstock Law, served to make the very word "abortion" a profanity. Anthony Comstock had a long career defending the purity of the nation, staying active until the end of his life when, as Special Agent of the U.S. Post Office, he seized birth control activist Margaret Sanger's publication *The Woman Rebel* in 1914 and then shut down a birth control clinic in New York in 1916 (Grossberg and Tomlins 243). This late activity in the career of Comstock coincides with the composition of the text of *Abortion* in 1914. Though abortion appears in texts in the early twentieth century, this play's title and open discussion of sex and human desires would have made it indecent under Comstock's laws.

Chester Clayton Long (1968), in his extensive analysis of the play's characterization, structure, and organization, comments on the underlying tension abortion creates, noting that "The society presented in the play (imitated in it) makes no

provision for the darker side of the nature of the characters that inhabit it. Appetency simply is not accorded any public recognition either in law or custom. But as a matter of fact it exists in this imitated social milieu, as it did in the actual society which was the object of the imitation of the dramatic milieu” (39). In fact, the world that O’Neill is imitating is likely one from his own experience. If it is true that it was taboo to publically express desire, this may account for Jack’s inability to visit Nellie after the abortion was performed. The abortion becomes a tangible symbol of the appetites he should have transcended in his status as an upper-class, white college hero.

Long goes on to describe how abortion functions to protect Jack. “He thinks an abortion will solve the threat of society’s Nemesis; but since it must be performed in secret under improper conditions, it involves the risk of death for the woman. That even death must be risked to avoid exposure is monstrous; that Jack’s training apparently had deprived him of the knowledge of contraceptives is probably the final absurdity” (40). It does seem unlikely, however, that Jack would understand the danger that abortion presented to Nellie. As far as he could tell, he secured the best doctor that money could buy, the only one he “could find who would do that sort of thing” (26). With Jack’s faith in institutions, he must have thought that she was in the best medical care. And once his part was finished, he felt free to sever that relationship.

While enrolled in English 47, a playwriting class at Harvard with George Pierce Baker, O’Neill seems to have returned to the one act *Abortion* with the hopes of expanding it into something longer. He writes his girlfriend Beatrice Ashe that if staged, “the authorities will cast me into the deepest dungeon of the jail and throw away the key” but that he would continue work on it since, “one writes what one *must*, what one *feels*.”

All else is piffle. I will be [an] artist or nothing” (Bogard and Bryer 36).<sup>16</sup> Despite these bold statements, O’Neill’s desire to have a published play overtook his desire to be an “artist.” By early 1915, he writes specifically about the status of *Abortion* in another letter to Ashe.

You know I told you a few weeks ago about my giving one scenario for a long play to Baker. It was on the subject of abortion and was written with my peculiar mental twists in plain evidence. He said he thought it would make a very powerful play but advised me not to write it for this course. It would stand no chance of production in this country or England, he said—only on the Continent. But he told me to write it by all means as the idea was great, but to lay it aside for the nonce, so t.s. (Bogard and Bryer 52).

While O’Neill was able to consider writing about abortion without apprehension, he needed to cast the topic aside to further his own career. Even if this play would never find a central place in the canon of O’Neill’s works, the treatment of its subject matter showed a great deal of boldness on the young playwright’s part.

*Abortion* was one of the first plays written by Eugene O’Neill, long before he received the Nobel Prize for literature or four Pulitzer Prizes for drama. Believing that the early plays would never be of worth or interest, O’Neill decided not to renew his copyright, leaving the texts open to other publishers. A year after the Citadel Press published *Abortion* along with other early plays in 1958,<sup>17</sup> the plays were produced at the Key Theatre in New York at St. Marks Place. Arthur Gelb, who co-authored O’Neill’s biography with his wife Barbara, ruthlessly evaluates the play for *The New York Times*,

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<sup>16</sup> I should note that there is some debate as to which play he refers to here; it seems to either be a longer version of *Abortion* or else *The Second Engineer* which would later be *The Personal Equation*.

<sup>17</sup> This was not the first printing of the play. His father James O’Neill published one thousand copies of five of his one-act plays in 1914; in 1950, New Fathoms Press, Ltd., discovered that the collection’s copyright had expired and published the plays to the emotional dismay of critics, who called its publication “reprehensible and shameful” (Brown 31) and commented “I feel sorry for anyone who thinks he has a treat in store for him” (Clark 7-8), primarily since O’Neill didn’t want them printed.

opening the review with the observation that “There are several good reasons why the so-called ‘Lost Works’ of Eugene O’Neill have never been done before in New York. The production of three of them at the Key Theatre last night does not invalidate any of these reasons” (“O’Neill’s ‘Lost Works’” 40). He can’t decide if the performances are worse than the plays and concludes that they “can have no valid interest except for scholars” (40). By the end of the review, it is difficult to know what exactly Gelb finds objectionable; he is clearer when it comes to criticizing the specifics of the acting. The most significant revelation of the review is that the suicide scene was deleted from the stage version, to which Gelb could only quip “What was needed was more shooting, not less” (40). It is unclear why this production relieved the audience of Jack’s suicide, although this decision falls in line with a compulsion to rewrite the ending of works that cause discomfort.<sup>18</sup>

One obstacle in discussing plays that concern abortion occurs when critics conflate abortion with infanticide, two terms with distinctly different meanings—namely that one is concerned with an unborn fetus and the other with an infant who has been born. As such, arguments that lump the two as one are one are flawed. Peter L. Hays (1990) makes such a false analogy in his essay “Child Murder and Incest in American Drama,” where he traces how infanticide functions in drama and is often accompanied by

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<sup>18</sup> The play received little critical notice when it was revived in 1999 as part of a festival featuring every one of O’Neill’s plays, staged to celebrate the reopening of The Provincetown Playhouse. Praise did come from the online *CurtainUp*, which claimed “The stunning surprise is ‘Abortion,’ an emotional roller coaster of a play that in less time than any single act of *A Long Day’s Journey Into Night* demonstrates that O’Neill already had his hand on the devastating playwriting throttle that served him, and his audiences, so well” (Gutman 1).

incest plots, citing O'Neill, Edward Albee, and Sam Shepard.<sup>19</sup> The fact that infanticide and abortion function differently within his argument shows that there was space to make a clearer distinction.

Within his analysis, he terms characters who have sought abortions “child murderers”:

O'Neill's first use of child murder in *Abortion*, written in 1914, is largely for shock effect and melodramatic subject material . . . The abortion of the child here has no large symbolic meaning except to foreshadow the death of both of its parents. It is certainly not a sacrifice of the future for the sake of the present, since Nellie and Jack are not to have a future together: Jack has made that clear and is trying to protect his future with his fiancée. The child's death comments, as does O'Neill, on sex versus love, and on social reasons for not marrying beneath one's class in presumably egalitarian America. But primarily, the multiple deaths are no more than shrill and colorful markers in O'Neill's melodramatic portrait of the ironies of life. (435-36)

Hays makes some important observations about the way that abortion functions in the text of this play. O'Neill, in this early stage attempt, uses abortion as a tool of his melodrama. Jack's hidden secret has come back to destroy his future happiness in the form of an aggrieved, consumptive brother waving a gun. Nevertheless, equating the fetus with an infant is in itself a political statement. He must have been aware that he was treading on controversial ground as he justifies the slippage between infanticide and abortion in a brief footnote, claiming that “Three of the infanticides to which I refer are abortions. I do not want to enter the controversy of whether a fetus ought to be regarded

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<sup>19</sup> Hays writes that “But in the six plays that I have mentioned, infanticide seems to be simply a brutal plot device in at least two (by O'Neill), but a gruesome and painful symbol of the sacrifice of an extension of self, of perverted values and thwarted development in self and in others in the remaining four” (3). The two instances of “brutal plot device” occur when a character has an abortion (in this case, he refers to Eugene O'Neill's *Abortion* and *Strange Interlude*). What he deems an example of a “gruesome . . . symbol” in the other plays (O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, Edward Albee's *American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*) seems so because the depiction of infanticide results in greater emotional range than is the case for abortion. The third play under discussion that includes abortion is in *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Hays only quotes George's intimation that Honey's hysterical pregnancies were really abortions.

as a living being, or any legal or ethical argument in this essay. For these plays, abortion results in the death of a child as surely as does the murder of a live-born infant, and the symbolic result for the plays is identical” (447 fn 1). This justification undermines the author’s argument. Putting abortion under the rubric of infanticide does not make his argument any stronger, though it does make the general category he wishes to discuss—child murder—a little more tidy. The fact is that there is no need for him to enter any kind of ethical or philosophical debate about the fetus. Had he made his terms more distinct instead of trying to use an umbrella term, his argument may have been more nuanced. Hays states quite clearly that abortion functions as a plot device—as he phrases it, a “plot complication”—in *Abortion* and *Strange Interlude*. On the other hand, playwrights use infanticide to “critique society,” an excellent point that could be fleshed out more fully and deeply (446). It seems that in the effort to build the weight of his argument (i.e., American playwrights often portray infanticide), he misses out on the chance to say something more specific about the characters’ motivations.<sup>20</sup>

*Abortion* gives insight into the limited options available to women who found themselves unmarried and pregnant. Nellie agrees to have an abortion, and as a result, nullifies her threat to Jack, becoming a clear representation of a character complicit, in Kaplan’s terms, with patriarchal ideology. Bound to a stenography job that supports her family, Nellie must agree to Jack’s desire to abort the pregnancy since he does not offer marriage and its attendant economic benefits. Her voice is never heard on stage throughout the course of the short drama; as is the case for other complicit characters, her only strength comes in the form of a male protector, her brother, who seeks to right the

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Kaplan (1992) comments that in the late twentieth-century, the fetus “is discursively constructed as if it already were a *subject*, and one which once again supersedes the *mother’s* subjectivity” (14). Similarly, Hays’s point of view frames the fetus as a subject.

situation for her. According to Murray's description of Nellie's love for Jack, like Amy and Vida, she would have continued the pregnancy if she had her lover's promise of marriage. Without his support, she can only passively comply with his decision to abort the child. Further, since she has no capital, she cannot choose the person to perform the abortion and must rely on Jack's choice of doctors—one whom he seems proud to have found. Bringing her pregnancy to term would have been impossible because of her family's dependence on her income. Pregnancy wrests away control of her body and passes it to the men of her family: her lover, brother, and doctor. Her death erases the threat to Jack's potential family unit, but O'Neill cannot let Jack move on without retribution, punishing, in turn, his immediate family and the larger college community. Additionally, abortion is made to have wider implications since it can result in men's deaths as well.

Although Kaplan's categorization of characters as complicit or resisting relates to mothers, it can easily be applied to other contexts under discussion here. Vida is complicit as she follows Stonor's directions to have an abortion instead of her own instincts, but she eventually moves along to take a fully resisting stance, rejecting family life in favor of activism. Though Amy's characterization in *Waste* is largely undeveloped since she is silenced by death, she clearly is a complicit character—even as she decides to abort her child—because of the limitations on what she believes comprises a family. Amy refuses to enter into the bonds of motherhood without the contract of marriage; children cannot be born out of wedlock. Nellie, too, is a complicit character as her class removes control of her reproductive decisions. Vida's status as an upper-class woman allows her to survive the abortion and continue to work for women's rights. She has

access to family and capital that gives her a voice despite any gossip from those who surround her.

On the other hand, the middle-class, British Amy and the lower-class, American Nellie—each of whom only had access to questionable doctors—are as disposable as their male lovers, so that they serve no function after their abortions and are all silenced through death. These patterns conform to Judith Wilt’s 1990 *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct* (1990), which suggests that novelists provide “some kind of aftermath” as a price for having an abortion (4), a point similar to an assertion made in Amelia Lynn Cuomo’s 1999 dissertation.<sup>21</sup> Abortion therefore results in some kind of sacrifice in these plays.

I have chosen these plays as artifacts that reflect abortion’s meaning to both men and women early in the twentieth century, where a woman’s inability to make decisions in the public sphere was mirrored in her private decisions. Long used as a force for social change, theater was the first genre that authors used widely to express the theme of abortion. The implication in each portrayal is that the characters who have abortions long, in some way, to be mothers in a stable family relationship. When stable families are unavailable, abortion solves the problem of how to resolve pregnancy outside the nuclear family, with awful consequences, and it therefore becomes the tool by which literature holds tightly to more retrograde forms.

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<sup>21</sup> Cuomo writes that in works that discuss abortion,

Each of the narratives depicts a male character who is made to suffer because of his lover’s abortion. Each narrative displaces the pregnant woman and eventually removes her from the text. Her needs, wants and desires are eclipsed by her male counterpart. All of the women who become pregnant and choose to abort are punished both for their illicit sexual actions and their decision to have the ‘illegal operation.’ While the women are punished for their promiscuity, the central male figures are punished by the actions of the women. (233)



### **Displacement and Vulnerability: *Voyage in the Dark* (1934)**

Jean Rhys's novel *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) provides a useful link between representations of abortion before and after women achieved suffrage since its composition occurred during both time periods. While texts that deal with abortion early in the twentieth century are plays, the theme was frequently represented in novels as the century continued. The initial material about a failed love affair was recorded in Rhys's diaries when she was almost twenty, before World War I; she returned to these journals in the early thirties to craft them into her semi-autobiographical novel. Thus, the inspiration for the novel has its basis in her experience as a young woman in the early twentieth century, while the published version is molded by her later experiences and the editor's conception of what the public would deem acceptable in the 1930's.

Nancy Rebecca Harrison (1988) considers how revision plays a part in the final version of *Voyage in the Dark*.

In writing that life in her diary she 'remembered' what he *said* and what she *felt*; however, in re-viewing it as a reader of her own life in order to shape the novel, what Rhys accomplishes is the *re*-constitution of the self that was and the constitution of the self that now writes the life. This constitution of self interweaves the two into a 'shared text,' and it is the text that expresses their continuous present. Both are present in the process and the result of that self-constitution. (112)

According to this reading, as Rhys revisited her earlier writing to craft her novel, her mature self and her young self merge in the final draft. I would extend this premise: the dual composition process means that the lived experience of two different time periods are present in the novel as well. While *Voyage in the Dark* was written and is set before World War I, it is also shaped by Rhys's experience of living through the 1920's and part

of the 1930's, making it an appropriate link between the two groups of texts under discussion.

Even though many decades had passed since Granville Barker experienced his own censorship dilemma, Rhys also faced strong editorial infringement, to which she, unlike Barker, agreed. Rather than have the heroine die from a botched abortion, Rhys agreed to a more ambiguous ending that spares the heroine's life. These changes were especially difficult since her personal and emotional experiences shaped the narrative. Like Anna, Rhys was born in the Caribbean, in Dominica, and she moved to England in 1907. Three years later, while at work as a chorus girl, she experienced a love affair that ended painfully. She was encouraged to adapt these incidents into a novel after Ford Maddox Ford read her journals and had them typed. When finally complete, the manuscript would be rejected three times before it was accepted for publication with a revised ending that differed widely from the original (Howells 373 and 375).

Rhys would refer back to the revisions over the course of her life. In a letter to the writer Evelyn Scott, Rhys complains on June 10, 1934, "I suppose I shall have to give in and cut the book and I'm afraid it will make it meaningless. The worst is that it is precisely the last part which I am most certain of that will have to be mutilated . . . I *know* the ending is the only possible ending. I know if I tinker around with it I'll spoil it, without helping myself a bit, from the being popular point of view. Oh Lordy Lord" (Wyndham and Melly 25). Years later, the feeling that the book was marred by this change stayed with her and she continued to refer to the experience in her letters. In June 1963, Rhys writes "Had to cut it a good deal when I wrote it and was sad . . . maybe they were right –but I was furious at the time" (Wyndham and Melly 224). Later that year in

August, Rhys reflects again on the process of being forced to change the end, now deciding “I still think I was right, and they were wrong, tho’ it was long ago” (Wyndham and Melly 233). Despite all these reservations and complaints, Rhys never ended up revising the original, even though she would have had the opportunity when the book was rereleased in the 1960’s.

Anna Morgan, sent to live in England after the death of her parents, finds she is as much of an outsider in London as she was as part of a colonizing family in the Caribbean. Her colonial status turns her into an outsider in both places, a dislocation that makes her dreamy and distracted: her landlady and boss Ethel calls her “half potty” (124) and one lover asks her if she takes ether (131). Feeling unmoored to anything she can believe in, Anna’s life as a chorus girl shifts toward prostitution when an affair with a man named Walter destroys her emotionally. Unskilled and alone, Anna floats without direction, seemingly powerless against the forces of life in a busy city. Each new jarring experience only brings back sharp memories of the Caribbean, adding to the vague and preoccupied state that others find so strange. The last scene concerning her abortion is thus made poignant and pathetic since she has nothing to believe in or strive for; it is just another incident in the various experiences that make up the jumble of her life.

*Voyage in the Dark* lends itself to contemporary analysis and therefore is the most frequently discussed of those in this chapter. Maren Linett (2005) identifies three approaches often taken when examining Rhys’s characters. One method is to read the fragmentary style as a destabilizing force that creates a subversive position for either Rhys or her characters. Another approach is to understand the characters’ powerlessness by identifying how they are socially oppressed. Critics also examine the trauma Rhys

experienced in her own life as a way to understand her characters (Linett 461). For my purposes, the fragmentary style allows Rhys to represent the experience of abortion expressively. Sue Thomas, in *The Worlding of Jean Rhys* (1999), discusses the biographical tactic of identifying “the Rhys woman.” This figure is characterized by narcissism and self-absorption and is often equated with Rhys herself (3). Celia Marshik (2006) discusses Rhys’s work in terms of Britain’s social purity movements that attempted to protect young women by regulating behavior. *Voyage in the Dark* at once “confirm[s] as well as contradict[s] social purity narratives, thus suggesting that irony and satire are inadequate responses to the purity movement” (170). Marshik says this dual function occurs because Rhys has the concurrent goal of creating a sympathetic character while remaining realistic about this character’s future (178). Rhys’s published fiction received mixed reviews from 1924 through 1939; critics could appreciate her style but felt that her subject matter was distasteful. After 1939, her work went out of print and she did not publish again until the 1960’s (Howells 372-375). It was not until later in the century that her work found critical acclaim; it could be that her gritty subject matter was too graphic for contemporary audiences or that her modernist style was more in sync with what was being written a decade prior.

The original ending of *Voyage in the Dark* begins with her mother’s death and ends with Anna’s own. Immediately after her mother scolds her for not sitting still for a photographer, the moment jumps to the day of the mother’s funeral: “A big girl like you I’m ashamed of you Mother said just one second and you are ten years older Meta was fanning her with a palm leaf fan to keep the flies away and she was too young to die Meta said with tears running down her face but I was only thinking of my new white

dress and the wreath I would carry”<sup>22</sup> (382, extra spaces reflected in text). A series of disjointed memories continue throughout this conclusion: a suggestion of her father’s death; hiding under her bed; carnival masks; snippets of conversation; memories of Walter and her clients; falling off a horse, with pain that “was like waves and the sea” (388). The sensation that she is falling, in both the original and the revised text, parallels the real life urgings of Laurie who tells her to give this pretext to the doctor. This dissimulation makes Anna’s original characterization especially pitiable since she is forced to maintain propriety, even at the moment of her death.

The original version is more graphic than the published edition. Signaling Anna’s impending death through the characters’ words, the charwoman Mrs. Polo complains in both the original and the published versions that she does not “want to be mixed up” in Anna’s situation (Rhys 157 Howells 389), but the original continues, “Look at those sheets. And it isn’t stopping. And her wanting the gramophone played. I never heard of such a thing. I don’t want to be here when the doctor comes. And look at that mattress” (Howells 389). The original also includes a description of what happens after the abortion is complete. Glad that she is alone, Anna describes that

It started very gently; and I thought ‘Well, that’s that, now it’ll be all right.’ I got up and did everything she had told me (‘You’ve got to be careful when it happens’), and I thought ‘So this is what it’s like. Well, it’s not so bad.’ Then I lay down again and it was so still—so still and lovely, no gramophone or talking, and I thought ‘I’m glad nobody’s here because I hate people.’ (Howells 383)

This scene may have seemed too revealing and inappropriate, especially when combined with Anna’s characteristic detached attitude; she is as removed from the situation as she

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<sup>22</sup> Rhys reveals the personal nature of this original ending when she uses the photography scene to open her autobiography, *Smile Please*.

was after her mother's death. Perhaps it was Anna's attitude toward abortion that motivated the publisher to ask for the "happy ending" that will save her life. No matter how bleak the future may be for Anna in the published edition, life still holds hope as the light falls under the door and she considers mornings and new beginnings. On the other hand, the ray of light in the original only marks the final moment when "blackness comes . . ." (Howells 389). It was Rhys's instinct that there will be no new beginnings for the woman whose body has been purchased, ill used, and discarded.

Apparently, pregnancy is the expected outcome to Anna's lonely experiences in England. Ethel Matthews demands, soon after meeting her, "Are you in trouble? Are you going to have a baby or something? Because if you are you might as well tell me about it and I might be able to help you" (94). Anna is still naïve enough at this point for the question to take her off guard, and she marvels, "What an idea!" (94). Pregnancy seems like someone else's problem, not her own. Her friend Laurie makes a similar inquiry; when hearing that Anna is depressed, Laurie questions, "Are you going to have a baby or something?" (99). Anna's peers realize these sexual exchanges with men, which can leave them pregnant, are rooted in economics—Laurie herself reminds Anna not to wait too long until she asks Walter for money. Anna's situation may be even more precarious than her friends' because of her dislocated identity. Growing up in Dominica, Anna identifies with her British family and the black servants who were her companions, but finds she does not completely fit in with either group. Now in England, she still finds herself an outsider: she is neither well-suited or financially able to be the lady her family expected her to be, nor is she prepared to support herself independently. Thus, this nation that was destined to be her home provides no refuge, forcing her to retreat to the

inaccessible Dominica of her memories. While class issues are a factor for other characters that obtain abortion in this chapter, only Anna deals with this extreme cultural isolation, an isolation that is invisible to the other characters.

Anna's internal and external worlds seem to run on parallel but separate tracks, especially when she comes to the slow realization that she is indeed pregnant. This reality induces an ill feeling that rivals the morning sickness she already suffers, so despicable she can only think about it in terms of ellipses and fractured thoughts. "Like seasickness, only worse, and everything heaving up and down. And vomiting. And thinking, 'It can't be that, it can't be that. Oh, it can't be that. Pull yourself together; it can't be that. Didn't I always. . . . And besides it's never happened before. Why should it happen now?'" (138). The physical symptoms of early pregnancy and considerations of how it happened are punctuated with violence as her client forces himself upon her and then curses her when she hits his bandaged arm. The man's physical presence disturbs her inner life, making her withdraw to memories of her childhood and reflections on her current situation after he leaves.

Once she acknowledges her situation, her pregnant body becomes the site of financial transactions structured by men. While economic insecurity and job prospects make motherhood impossible for Anna, lack of funds also prevent her from ending the pregnancy. Working within her budget, Anna attempts to bring on a miscarriage by taking pills. The matter becomes so preoccupying that even as she discusses a disgruntled letter from Ethel with Laurie, her thoughts are really on the pregnancy.

"I don't owe her any money," I said. "It's the other way round. She borrowed nearly three quid from me and she never paid it back. I don't know why she should write all that to you." And all the time thinking round and round in a circle that it is there inside me, and about all the things I had taken so that if I

had it, it would be a monster. The Abbé Sebastian's Pills, primrose label, one guinea a box, daffodil label, two guineas, orange label, three guineas. No eyes, perhaps. . . . no arms, perhaps. . . . Pull yourself together." (144)

The price of each pill is converted into a birth defect for this child that seems unreal and outside herself. Laurie grasps the futility of taking these abortifacients and considers how, "Those people who sell those things—they must make a pot" (145).

Laurie also feels frustrated with Anna's inaction, scolding her for not having "done something about it" earlier. Anna has pawned her fur coat, one of the few tangible remnants of her time with Walter, but Laurie advises it will not be sufficient to cover the cost. Still refusing to name either the pregnancy or the abortion, she chides, "My dear, she'll want about fifty. Don't you know anybody who'll lend it to you? What about that man you talked about who used to give you money?" (144). And so she advises her to write for Walter's help—on good notepaper, so Anna doesn't give him the impression she is "down and out" (144-45). These rituals help to maintain Anna's dignity as she taps the only resource that will give her the means to end the pregnancy. Laurie understands the going rate and protocol for abortion, initiating Anna into this well-defined process.

Financial considerations continue to shape Anna's decision making process as she learns that the price is forty pounds in gold, which Walter's cousin Vincent, who has come to represent him, readily agrees to pay. Their meeting unfolds in a business-like manner. In exchange for paying for the abortion, Anna must return all the letters that Walter has ever sent to her and so make impossible any chance to expose their affair, either for emotional or economic demands. Vincent makes clear that Walter is willing to support Anna, though he cannot understand why she disappeared for so long. When she sarcastically replies "So much ever [sic] Saturday . . . Receipt-form enclosed," he



silences her, countering, “It’s no use talking like that. You’re going to be pretty glad of it now, aren’t you?” (149). His dominant social and economic position allows Vincent to suppress Anna’s bitterness.

Vincent advises Anna that she has to make a concerted effort to move ahead and forget about the experience once it is finished. Like Jack of *Abortion*, who must ask his father for the full cost of the procedure, Anna’s discussion leads to a humbling discussion of her motives and future prospects with her benefactor. Vincent even knows someone who had an abortion who described it as “nothing much” (148). Anna explains that it isn’t the abortion that worries her; “It’s that sometimes I want to have it and then I think that if I had it, it would be a . . . It would have something the matter with it. And I think about that all the time and that’s what I mind” (148). The prospect of a monstrous baby is a greater concern to Anna than the reality that she has no way to support the child. Like other characters under discussion in this chapter, she expresses an underlying desire to continue her pregnancy though she never considers motherhood before this point.

It is not clear, therefore, whether she would have taken the initiative to set up this meeting if it were not for her friend Laurie. She is carried through all the experiences England presents—her relationship with Walter, their break up, her foray into prostitution at Ethel’s home, and finally, this pregnancy—as if without agency. Though she is not a mother, Anna can be classified as Kaplan’s complicit character, one not strong enough to battle the forces that press against her. Her behavior only reinforces the status quo, where women’s bodies are the commodity men can use for satiation and discard without guilt because they have the ability to “fix everything up.” Under the power of such a social structure, it is unclear whether there is much hope for Anna as her life continues.

As opposed to other texts written earlier in the century, where abortion occurs either off the stage or between chapters, Rhys relies on the modernist technique of recording incidents as they occur to capture the experience of Anna's abortion. As a result, the impact of the procedure becomes less of an abstract social consideration and more of a disturbing personal experience. Anna shuts her eyes as the abortionist prepares the tools, seeming to keep them closed as she approaches. The woman assures her that she will stop if Anna asks her to and then

The earth heaving up under me. Very slowly. So slowly.  
 "Stop," I said. "You must stop."  
 She didn't answer. I couldn't move. Too late now to move, too late.  
 She said "La," blowing out her breath.  
 I opened my eyes. I went on crying. She went away from me. I sat up and everything was different. (153)

Once she is out on the streets, she is assaulted by fear: the houses may fall on her or the street may come up to hit her. The worst part is the fear of passing others, who, knowing she is dying may push her down or stick their tongues out at her. This expressionistic sensation seems to subside as she visits Laurie, but it is replaced with a fear of being alone once the abortion takes effect (153-154).

It is the abortion that reinforces Anna's current isolation as a woman adrift in the world, far from home or safety. Heavy bleeding provokes a string of thoughts that unite the streams of her life. With a lightheaded sensation of floating, the present moment mixes together with memories of her childhood and a former client at Ethel's home. It may be better that she is incoherent because no one seems to have any vested interest in Anna's fate. The charwoman does not want to be involved if "there's a row;" Laurie wonders why she is called since the problem does not involve her; the doctor can only

scoff at her naivety and imagine that with a second chance at life, she will be “Ready to start all over again in no time” (157 and 160).

On a larger scale, abortion emphasizes Anna’s alienation in the mechanized realities of twentieth-century England. Qualified to do very little, her only prospect seems to be to return to prostitution, which necessitated the abortion in the first place. Without family to support her emotionally or financially, few viable options exist for Anna. Though the publisher was concerned that the book would alienate readers by ending with her death, the published ending provides just as bleak a forecast for her future. As Deborah Kelly Kloepfer (1985) notes in her reading of mothers and daughters, “Ironically, the (male) literary establishment’s insistence upon Anna’s affirmation at the end of the novel is a way not of saving her but of killing her textually” (459).

Contemporary critics are divided about which ending is more effective. Teresa F. O’Connor (1986), for instance, deems the published ending preferable both in tone and structure (129-30) while Peter Wolfe (1980) sides with the editor’s decision, considering Anna more engaging “as a member of the walking dead than . . . as a corpse” (117). Although Anna dies in the original and not in the revision, both endings are actually quite similar. The underlying intimation of the revision is that soon enough, Anna will find herself in the same situation—it seems unlikely that Anna has the resources to master the forces that surround her.

Though Cora Ann Howells notes that criticism of Rhys’s work in the 1930’s is marked by “a distinct moral bias against her ‘sordid’ subject matter, together with a grudging admiration of her style” (374), most of the reviews that I have found for *Voyage in the Dark*, both in England and the United States, do not appear to have a grudging

tone. Many do comment that Rhys can write with beauty even when broaching gloomy subjects. Some U.S. reviewers also comment on the similarities among Rhys's work, even as they praise her. *The New Republic* critic Hazel Hawthorne considers it "a variation on a theme, for it is the story she has always told . . . about a helpless tired creature," yet she also calls Rhys "one of the finest writers of this time" (260). Another reviewer makes a similar claim; Rhys is "steadily successful" in her characterization of Anna, a figure who is often the topic of her novels: young women who have come to London or Paris from somewhere far away "and who are either about to go astray or already in that indefinable state" (T. P., Jr. 556). In her jubilant review, Florence Haxton Britten takes time to characterize Anna as "such a baby," but predicts that followers of the book will be "fairly limited, but extremely enthusiastic" (10). The most perceptive of all these reviews comes from Jane Spence Southron of *The New York Times*, who perceptively describes Rhys's use of the past. She writes of Anna's memories that "By means of these brilliant, exotic pictures, evoked ever and again in the midst of the sordid grayness of the scenes through which the girl is moving, the pattern of the past is woven bit by bit into the tapestry of the present, accounting for much in the given moment that would otherwise be inexplicable and heightening the drama by vivid contrast" (Southron 7). Perhaps this critic's understanding of how Rhys merges past and present in her writing allows her to be open about the abortion, the doctor's cynicism, and Anna's status as a dreamer.

While many reviews overtly mention Anna's progression from ingénue to prostitute, only this last one makes mention of her abortion, a topic frequently broached, albeit obliquely, in reviews about *The Unpossessed*, a novel released about the same time

which also features abortion as the primary concern of the conclusion. As I will show in the next section, Margaret Flinders refers specifically to the effect abortion has on her and how it inspires deep bitterness for her husband. Perhaps Anna's status as a colonial, displaced and unmarried within the British Empire, makes the subject more taboo for reviewers. The reviewers' nationality may also make a difference, since the reviews I found that broach the subject of abortion in *The Unpossessed* are from United States.

Rhys, like Granville Barker and O'Neill, equates abortion with the death and victimization of the heroine. Without a family structure in place, motherhood seems like an impossible undertaking. While O'Neill never made changes to his script, since it was never up for production because of Comstock's restrictions, Granville Barker had to wait thirty years to see his play staged in London. Rhys bent to pressure, however, with the goal of getting the work published, even in a "mutilated" state. In the case of Rhys and O'Neill, at least, the manuscripts were partially based on personal experience so it is especially notable that they both saw fit to shape these events with death.

Anna's thoughts dart through the past and the future as she attempts to come to terms with and take action to end the pregnancy. As she recovers, her mind is on both her childhood and the future so the reader does not know how the experience will shape her, except to become one of the many memories that haunt her throughout the text. This portrait, conceived in the days when women fought desperately for universal suffrage and published after this right had been established, is significant: greater opportunities for women may not make much of a difference for a character like Anna. Despite women's steady efforts to gain a voice in the public sphere, it seems that these rights did not translate into more power over their domestic decisions. Anna still does not have access

to a safe abortion; she has few resources if she wants to continue her pregnancy; reproductive decisions are controlled more by men than women. With her parents both dead and the remainder of her family's fortune, accumulated through colonial rule, dismantled after five generations, she has neither the financial, family, or cultural resources to support and guide her. Rhys's editor may have saved Anna's life at the end of the novel, but her future prospects after recovery are very dim.

**Abortion in a Post-Suffrage World: *The Unpossessed* (1934) and *The Girl* (1939)**

Playwrights used abortion to characterize social issues early in the twentieth century. *Voyage in the Dark* uses the medium of the novel, with its ability to access the thoughts of its characters, to show how women's victimization can be represented by abortion. Other novels of the thirties feature abortion to emphasize issues important in leftist politics. As in the earlier texts discussed in this chapter, *The Unpossessed* and *The Girl* use abortion to characterize women's relationship and subordination to their male counterparts, though they take a leftist perspective to the subject.

*The Unpossessed* satirizes the New York intellectual life of the left in the 1930's. Characters whose lives overlap narrate each chapter, highlighting the conflict between the political ideals embodied in a radical magazine they attempt to publish and their personal lives—both of which seem to end in failure. Despite endless talk and an elaborate fundraiser, the magazine will never be published; the principal parallel story of Miles and Margaret Flinders ends aloof and cold, the couple torn apart by the decision not to have children. To create these stories, Slesinger drew from her experiences with left leaning intellectuals in New York associated with the magazine her husband edited, *Menorah*

*Journal*; this publication shifted from a focus on Jewish humanism to Marxist ideas as the Depression overtook the U.S. (Sharistianian 362).

Tess Slesinger's parody of New York is more often bundled with contemporary novels than it is considered on its own. In "Are Three Generations of Radicals Enough? Self-Critique in the Novels of Tess Slesinger, Mary McCarthy, and Marge Piercy" (1991) Philip Abbott discusses how Slesinger's critique of her generation can be divided into three types that help readers understand how its radicals failed. The critique that is most relevant for my purposes is the feminist one: he describes how American radicals fail because men do not "acknowledge the humanity of women" while women fail to resist these men (613). Margaret, certainly, shows no resistance to her husband's decision to abort their child until after she leaves the hospital. Paula Rabinowitz (1991) pairs *The Unpossessed* with other texts that feature female intellectuals in *Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America*. She says that while some of the depictions of female characters are traditional, the book helps advance feminist causes (136). Rabinowitz reads Margaret's character as being cut off from maternity as the wife of an intellectual and cut off from intellectuals because of her womb. She "can possess no genealogy. She can neither look back to a maternal connection nor forward to a maternal collective" (149). Indeed, much to Margaret's despair, marriage to Miles and friendship with women who share his values blocks the ordinary channels through which women communicate about motherhood. On the other hand, in economic terms, Margaret's character differs from the others in this chapter since she has both a husband and a degree of economic security. These factors eliminate the practical impediments to pregnancy suffered by women who have little means to support themselves. Despite this security, however,

patriarchal constraints still limit her decision making. Her husband does not want a family, so she will not have children. This portrayal highlights how a decision that appears to fall to women can still be within the scope of men's power.

Two years before the novel was published in 1934, the last chapter concerning Margaret and Miles's decision to have an abortion appeared as "Missis Flinders" in the second volume of the journal *Story*, a publication whose stated mission was to publish only high-quality stories: "It has no theories, and is part of no movement. It presents short narratives of significance by no matter whom and coming from no matter where" (title page, 1932 *Story*). At this point, *Story* had moved its printing from Vienna to Spain, where Slesinger found better luck than with the American publishers who rejected "Missis Flinders." Though Miles is called Jean in this version, the story is largely identical to the last chapter of the book. The story was widely praised (Butcher 12) and was subsequently chosen to appear in the tenth anniversary issue of the magazine in 1941, by which point publishing had moved once again, this time to New York. Though it is possible that inclusion of the story is due to its setting in New York, the editors explain that stories were chosen, in addition to literary merit, because they "illuminate the years in which they were published" ("With This Issue" 1). Times had changed in the ten years since its first publication: the editors' note to the reprinted story explains that no other publication would agree to publish "Missis Flinders" because of its subject; in fact, the editors claim that never before had abortion been featured as a subject in a circulating magazine for general audiences (Editors' note 28).

In the 1966 afterword to *The Unpossessed*, literary critic Lionel Trilling, Slesinger's friend, explains that at the time of the novel's publication, many intellectuals



believed that having children and enjoying life were incompatible. He says “The fear of pregnancy was omnipresent and it was not uncommon for young married couples to have a first pregnancy aborted not because they were so very poor but because they were not yet ‘ready’ to have the child” (7). Political views and lifestyles meant abortion could tailor young people’s lives, but Margaret finds this trend disturbing as she deeply desires motherhood.

Joy Castro (2004) makes similar points about abortion, contextualizing Slesinger and other authors within leftist politics. She notes that in this novel, “Abortion represents not the failure of the bourgeois family romance but rather the failure of left-wing politics itself to address the issue of justice between men and women in their private lives and to address the term of the body within social revolution” (27). In general, for leftist women writers, reproductive technology can be controlling rather freeing, especially in “a male-dominated social movement that saw children largely as impediments to class struggle and as fodder for the factory and battlefield. Women who found themselves pregnant could be compelled, in the interests of political ideology, to forego childbirth regardless of their own desires” (18). As such, according to Castro, abortion makes women submissive and commodified, though they can resist and find strength in nature.

Miles and Margaret Flinders’s relationship frames the text, recorded primarily by entrance into their inner thoughts, a world punctuated by their external actions. This detailed narrative method takes the reader through the lows of their marriage—as Miles receives a pay cut and is deeply bitter that his wife earns more than him—and the highs—as he finds new affection for Margaret when his work begins with the political magazine.

The power balance in the couple's relationship, with Miles dominant and Margaret conciliatory, shifts, at least in the rich internal world of their minds, after the couple chooses to have an abortion. Miles decides an abortion will help them to avoid the pitiful existence of the middle class, nuclear family. After a party, he imagines, with an anxiety typical of leftist thinking, that a child would alter their lives: "'We'd go soft,' . . . 'we'd go bourgeois.'" To which she thinks, "Yes, with diapers drying on the radiators, bottles wrapped in flannel . . . --yes, they would go soft, they might slump and start liking people, they might weaken and forgive stupidity, they might yawn and forget to hate" (345). Despite her resentment, she cannot find the strength to resist his politics and his decision to end the pregnancy.

Margaret's feelings waffle as she spars with him internally; she feels disgust with his inability to fulfill this dream of hers, but at the same time pride makes her defend her husband to the gaggle of prying women at the hospital. Full of childbirth and superiority, even the woman who lost her baby can take a stand of mystified, but superior, curiosity.

Baffled, they question her to try to understand her motives:

I just don't understand you, Missis Flinders (if there's really nothing the matter with your insides), do you understand her, Missis Wiggam, would your husband . . . ? Why goodness, no, Mister Wiggam would sooner . . . ! . . . Well, I just have to laugh at you, Missis Flinders, not *wanting* one, why my sister went to doctors for five years and spent her good money just *trying* to have one." . . . "No, I just can't get over you, Missis Flinders, if Gawd was willing to let you have a baby--and there really isn't anything wrong with your insides?" (351-353)

Margaret's stay in the hospital is disturbed by the sisterhood of maternity forged by the women for whom only physical incapacity could justify an avoidance of childbirth. Her decision to forgo motherhood invalidates her bodily experience, so that even if she feels pain from the abortion, the other women dismiss her feelings from a superior moral

ground. “Let Missis Flinders so much as let out a groan because a sudden pain grew too big for her groins, let her so much as murmur because the sheets were hot beneath her—and Missis Butter and Missis Wiggam in the security of their maternity-fraternity exchanged glances of amusement: SHE don’t know what pain is, look at what’s talking about PAIN. . . .” (347-48). Their observation and curiosity, as of some deluded but immoral child, makes her both self-conscious and contemptuous. No matter how silly these women seem to her, if she had her choice, she would be one of them.

Slesinger uses the modernist technique of recording the inner workings of the mind to achieve this balance, a method that works to categorize Margaret within the resisting and complicit scale. When Margaret’s thoughts are directed toward her fellow patients, she assumes the persona of a resisting character, avoiding traditional female roles in order to live life equally with men. She scorns her fellow patients with confidence in her intellectual capabilities. When her thoughts are directed toward Miles, on the other hand, she becomes a complicit character, albeit a bitter one. She heaps insult upon insult on him in her mind but seems unable to do anything but comply with his wishes. She therefore becomes the willing target of his oppression. A character like Margaret Flinders challenges Kaplan’s figuring of mothers as resisting or complicit since she does not fit neatly in either category. Though to all appearances, she resists the status quo, her submission to her husband makes her a complicit character. As such, she makes a show of flouting cultural norms in regards to her role as a married woman of childbearing age, when in reality she wants to obey her husband’s whims at the expense of her own desires.

The way that her thoughts are filtered differently whether she directs them at the other patients or her husband is most obvious when she considers the economic motivations to have an abortion. As she addresses her thoughts to the patients, she justifies the decision, all while placing herself on a higher moral and intellectual ground:

But there was a night last week, my good ladies, on coming home from a party, which Mister Flinders and I spent in talk--and damn fine talk, if you want to know, talk of which I am proud, and talk not one word of which you, with your grocery-and-baby minds, could have understood; in a régime like this, Miles said, it is a terrible thing to have a baby—it means the end of independent thought and the turning of everything into a scheme for making money; and there must be institutions such as there are in Russia, I said, for taking care of the babies and their mothers; why in a time like this, we both said, to have a baby would be suicide—goodbye to our plans, goodbye to our working out schemes for each other and the world—our courage would die, our hopes concentrate on the sordid business of keeping three people alive, one of whom would be a burden and an expense for twenty years. (349-50)

Thus she justifies the political and economic premises adapted from her husband's leftist attitudes in mock defense of her own superiority. For Miles, whom she cannot contradict but only placate, parenthood is no more than an economic burden that would threaten their livelihood in the harsh climate of the Depression. Human emotion is removed and the child becomes the symbol of a variety of social and psychic ills: it is a parasite, demanding financial expenditures for two decades; it deflects dreams; it turns life into a battle to make enough money to sustain the family. When the same thoughts are directed at her husband, they take on a harsh tone as she considers "giving up a baby for economic freedom which meant that two of them would work in offices instead of one of them only, giving up a baby for intellectual freedom which meant that they smoked their cigarettes bitterly and looked out of the windows of a taxi onto streets and people and stores and hated them all" (345). In the harsh daylight of the street, her submission to her husband's desires takes a grim and depressing light.

In reality, Miles's economic argument seems to be a veil for the insecurity that plagues him throughout the novel: in the first chapter, we learn he has suffered his second pay cut, making his wife the greater breadwinner in the family. He lashes out at her with both contempt and a plea for pity, and in her attempt to comfort him emotionally and physically, he too becomes bitter towards his wife's caressing consolation. "What sort of woman had he got that offered her man the breast when he needed the sword and the power behind him of her own resentment? And what sort of weakling was he, standing meek while he was *cut* (cut so his wife, earning more than he did, was left more of a man than himself) to come bleeding home and forget his wounds" (22). In the traditional family structure, he would continue to work as she naturally stayed home with the baby; Margaret herself acknowledges this reality. With his diminished salary and the likelihood of a layoff, however, avoiding fatherhood may have several benefits. On one hand, he can evade his insecurities about his ability to provide for a family; on the other, he can punish Margaret for being "more of a man than himself" and exert control over her body by preventing her from having a baby.

The maternal instinct runs strongly in Margaret, so much so that without a child, she diverts her energies into mothering Miles. On returning home with groceries, she infantilizes him, thinking, "he had come home, like a child, for his supper. He took off his glasses and his eyes opened and closed several times patiently like a baby's growing used to her light" (11). Although he despises her maternal impulses, he desperately craves them as well, partially relying on her "to slowly give him all the childhood he had missed"; she fulfills this need with her minute attentiveness, going so far as to read and show him pictures in the storybook *Pinocchio* after a friend calls him a puppet (18-19).

Margaret is well aware of this aspect of her nature, believing that while it is inherent in all women, it is not enough to maintain a relationship since “two people cannot live together without giving birth to a third entity, at once a part of themselves and greater than the whole” (178). Yet even while this conviction is ingrained, “having had it simply nourished by her mother who was born for nothing else,” (179), Margaret cannot muster the strength to fight against her husband’s will and she is left only with acrimony and resentment; the abortion, she feels, unsexes both of them. She puts the onus of the act on Miles, although she agreed to it willingly, thinking that he “was no more man than she was woman. She would not do him the honor of hurting him. She must reduce him as she felt herself reduced. She must cut out from him what made him a man, as she had let be cut out from her what would have made her a woman. He was no man: he was a dried-up intellectual husk; he was sterile; empty and hollow as she was” (348). Margaret parallels the feelings she has about unfulfilled motherhood to his intellectual failures, lost dreams that seem to make their lives meaningless.

While she may not realize the extent to which her greater success in the workplace and her maternal instincts bother Miles, Margaret views the abortion as something done to her purposely, by him, to excise part of her essential nature. This realization is made worse by considering the women who create something more important than a political magazine:

He was a man, and he could have made her a woman. She was a woman, and could have made him a man. He was not a man; she was not a woman. In each of them the life-stream flowed to a dead-end. And all this time that the blood, which Missis Wiggam and Missis Butter stored up precious in themselves every year to make a baby for their husbands, was flowing freely and wastefully out of Missis Flinders—toward what? would it pile up some day and bear a Magazine? would it congeal within her and make a crazy woman? (350-51)

Her mother's example has infused Margaret with ideas about maternity, but obedience supersedes agency and she now regrets putting aside principle for the sake of ministering to her husband's needs. With her essentialized view of gender roles, Margaret believes her compliance has undercut Miles's masculinity. In contemporary terms, without bearing children, both lose their gendered identities and almost, it seems, their humanity.

Abortion becomes a taboo word for Miles, even though it was primarily his desire. In an awkward and clumsy attempt to care for Margaret, he questions her decision to smoke, asking, "But ought you to smoke so much, so soon after—so soon?" Miles said, not liking to say so soon after what. His hand held the cigarettes out to her, back from her" (346). She takes the cigarette, joking that it is bad for pregnancy—something she no longer has to consider. Margaret, with her bitterness, is able to name abortion—a term not yet mentioned in other texts discussed—as something that they did together, considering that "she could see he was unhappy, as miserable as she, he too had had an abortion" (353). Significantly, the word is only mentioned in her mind and is still never uttered aloud.

It is unlikely that Miles mourns the end of the pregnancy, but rather he is responding to Margaret's resentful attitude. Even though he reminds her that they made the decision together, the unspoken accusation is that this was something he decided on his own. He wants to make it up to her but only proves how inept he is in dealing with her feelings of loss and sterility: the gift he presents her at the hospital is a huge basket of fruit that only underscores the decision he has pushed her to accept. They have trouble inducing the nurses, patients, or even the taxi driver who takes them home from the hospital to share the fruit with them, as if no one wants anything from that poison vine.

As do *A Doll's House* and *A Man's World*, the novel ends with the close of a door, but significantly this is no door slam of purpose. After watching Mr. Strite drive away, they “went in the door and heard it swing to, pause on its rubbery hinge, and finally click behind them” (357). It is the sound of hesitation and finality. Behind this door of their one room apartment, they now only have each other and their gin and cigarettes. This is not a dramatic flourish but a sorry whisper that concludes the novel.

*The Unpossessed* received generally favorable reviews, though some criticized the modernist elements and deemed it more of a collection of interrelated stories than a novel. J. Donald Adams, for example, of *The New York Times*, notes the influence of Virginia Woolf but believes that “in places it is overdone—at times too flashily executed” (BR6). Though reviewers easily revealed details about the male characters’ struggle to create a political magazine, the female characters are often an afterthought. Many seem uncomfortable with Margaret and Miles’s abortion and think of creative ways to describe it. As Adams discusses their relationship, he simply states that they were “both fearful of having a child” (BR6). The critic from *The New Republic* is even more obscure, writing “She is plausible, if not profound, with the woman who denies her birthright for a mess of masculine pottage” (Matthews 52). Philip Rahv’s mixed review in *New Masses*, a left leaning publication that may have objected to Slesinger’s satire, pokes fun at Margaret’s situation, giving it a context within the entire book. “And the plot. The chorus sings and sobs: *Why Can't We Have a Magazine?* while Margaret fills in with her tremulous solo: *Why Can't I Have a Baby?*” (26). His mockery invalidates Margaret’s pain. Similarly, George Stevens of *The Saturday Review of Literature* sneers at Margaret’s decision: “his wife spinelessly submits to him and has an abortion instead



of a baby” (701). These reviews assume that women should use their maternal drives to fight against the pressure to abort.

Though U.S. critics are oblique in their discussion of abortion, they do frequently broach this aspect of the plot. Lewis Gannett’s review in the *New York Herald Tribune* describes how the husbands make their wives “give up motherhood for the sake of their common economic and intellectual freedom” and refers specifically to Margaret: Slesinger’s “only hints of compassion are for the girl who never knew the answer to the question, ‘Why don’t we have children?’” (25). Although a brief summary can never capture the layers of meaning of an entire text, Gannett’s description reduces Margaret to a child and erases the acrid regret of her abortion. For the *New York Herald Tribune Books*, the poet Horace Gregory praises the last two chapters but is only comfortable discussing the one that does not involve Margaret’s abortion (2). John Chamberlain, of *The New York Times*, is equally evasive, referring to Margaret “glowing at the thought of bearing a child” and her dissatisfaction “that Miles won’t bring a child into this world, this lousy world” (17). Robert Cantwell, who thought the novel “fluctuates between being good and being brilliant” (57), seems more neutral toward Margaret, and sees that her troubles are linked with those of Miles; they “have an opportunity to have their baby, but they are in the end intimidated, despising themselves and their world” (53).

Other critics consider the book in relation to the short story from which it grew. Having read “Missis Flinders,” their perception of the novel as a whole is affected. Ferner Nuhn of *The Nation* feels the whole text is “built back” from the story, thereby making the theme and structure choppy. It seems to him that Margaret’s character vies for the role of protagonist with Bruno, whose attempts to establish a magazine form the

second major plot line of the novel. Seeing no parallels between the two, he compares Bruno to Hamlet, while Margaret's problems boil down to "sex, 'womanhood,' and her salvation supposedly lies in the most bourgeois of resources—having a baby" (598).

What Nuhn ignores is the connection between the failure of the magazine and the inability to reproduce; the male characters' politics is infertile ground for the intellect or emotions and results in intellectual and emotional sterility.

Most curious is the response of critics who prefer the characterizations of "Missis Flinders" to that of the final chapter of *The Unpossessed* or who see them as very different. Nuhn complains "incidentally, Margaret's story is not improved by its larger treatment; a certain sentimentality has crept in which was wholly absent from the short story" (598). *Chicago Daily Tribune* critic Fanny Butcher reads the short story as "shaking out the thoughts of a young married woman who has just had an abortion for economic reasons" (12). The comment is unusual since the short story and the last chapter are virtually the same. Perhaps the genre makes a difference so that the story reads differently as a single entity than as part of a larger context. Aside from economic concerns, the reader of the novel knows that politics have formed a smoke screen for emotional sterility.

Greater rights in the public sphere do not end up empowering Margaret in her own marriage and so abortion wraps up the narrative with a note of despair, similar to the experience of Anna Morgan at the end of *Voyage in the Dark*, also published in 1934. However, Margaret is in a much better position to weather any difficulties she may soon confront. Even if her marriage ends, she has a social network to support her; a steady job in the difficult economic climate of the Depression; memories of her mother to guide her,

even if it is only about “calming men and scalloping potatoes” (177). Economic stability also means that she has access to safe medical care. Nevertheless, the emotional outcomes are the same as for more impoverished characters. Like Anna, Margaret is at the mercy of the men in her life. Margaret might not suffer the isolation that comes from being a colonial, an outsider in her own society, but as a female in the 1930’s, she still does not have full control over her reproductive decisions.

Even as the 1930’s and the Depression came to a close in the United States, an explicit account of abortion could still be suppressed, especially if the politics of the author were under scrutiny, as was the case for Meridel Le Sueur and her 1939 novel, *The Girl*. In her 1978 afterword, Le Sueur explains that the narrative was shaped as she and other members of the Workers Alliance came together to record their stories to help shape their difficult experiences. The act of writing down these tales gave the women a voice that would have been long forgotten without this novel (149). The Girl, the unnamed heroine, has moved to the Minneapolis/St. Paul area to support herself and reduce her burden on the large, impoverished family she has left behind in the country. In the course of the text, she develops an inner strength that allows her to resist attempts to regulate her childbirth decisions, even if she cannot avoid the sexual and physical brutality experienced by the other characters. Through a disjointed narrative style that keeps the gaps in her understanding intact and lacks the usual conventions of dialogue, the violence and hardships of the Depression are artfully rendered. With little experience of the world, she records sensations as she experiences them, whether it is hunger, loss, sexual desire, or love. In a climate that demands survivalist instincts, abortion seems like a necessary act for those who have a difficult time supporting themselves, let alone any

dependents. The Girl's experiences confirm, with more graphic details, how childbearing decisions continued to rest in the hands of the state or women's lovers.

Le Sueur published her poetry and prose in the 1920's and 1930's in publications ranging from *Mademoiselle* to the *Kenyon Review*, but once McCarthyism was underway, only Communist journals would consider her writing. Excerpts from *The Girl* were published from 1935 to 1945, but it was not until her writing was revived in the 1970's and 1980's by the West End Press and the Feminist Press that the entire novel was available to the public. The Communist political beliefs and the McCarthy era politics were the primary reason for *The Girl's* publication's delay. In the 1920's and 1930's, the first crest of her publishing career, Le Sueur was criticized by both radicals, who wanted her texts to focus more on mobilizing people to organize than her lyric rendering of experience, and traditional journals, one of which suggested that she should pattern her writing after Hemingway's. Both spectrums of critique had a single goal: that she should write more like a man (Obermueller 47). But even if her political beliefs meant that publication had to be delayed, her own Communist Party objected to the content of *The Girl* as well. In fact, after reading the manuscript, Communist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn could not categorize *The Girl* as a proletarian novel since she did not write about righteous Communist women, but prostitutes instead. The characters do not adhere to the qualities that would aid the Communist Party in starting a revolution—a commitment to hard work, sexual restraint, or temperance—so the actions of the other characters would have been objectionable as well. Despite resistance to the novel from within or without the Communist party, a delayed publication was at least partly due to the content. Le Sueur must have realized how the book would have been received, since she had already

had another work rejected by *Atlantic Monthly* and *Scribner's* since, according to the editors, childbirth was not a proper topic for publication (Coiner 111 and 117).

Slesinger uses abortion to characterize masculine dominance and the general sterility of east coast radical culture; five years later, Meridel Le Sueur would also associate masculine dominance and abortion with the working class Midwest, where radical tendencies are put into efforts like organizing unions, not writing magazines. In this case, however, a strong female character takes control over her pregnancy, even as she cannot always prevent victimization of her body. Like criticism about Tess Slesinger, criticism of Meridel Le Sueur often groups her with 1930's female writers of the left. In *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (1995) Constance Coiner argues that Le Sueur's and Tillie Olsen's work challenges dominant *and* leftist beliefs (6). This may explain the critique she received from both of these groups. Paula Rabinowitz's (1988) "Maternity as History: Gender and the Transformation of Genre in Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl*" argues that the novel is a reworking of the male-oriented proletarian novel, one that finds a voice through women's memories and experiences. She explains that "Women's revolutionary novels [like *The Girl*] rephrased a rhetoric that encoded the proletariat as masculine by putting female sexuality and maternity into narrative" (546). Blanche H. Gelfant (1991) also focuses on the language of the novel to trace the development of the Girl's speech from silent observer to empowered storyteller. More recently, Erin V. Obermueller's (2005) "Reading the Body in Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl*" looks at how Le Sueur uses the body for "metaphoric, discursive, physiological, ideological, and political" purposes (48).

The narrator of the story is the unnamed Girl who creates a community of strength with the women she meets, which helps support them as they struggle in their passionate relationships with violent men. These female relationships are used by Adrienne Rich (1980) to exemplify her concept of the lesbian continuum, which extends the idea of lesbianism “to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, [and] the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (648-49). Female bonding helps these women survive harsh circumstances, especially since their male partners deem the reproductive choices and behavior of their partners as sources of pride. This territorial approach satisfies a masculinity thwarted in an economy that makes steady work and a respectable wage almost impossible. Hoinck, for instance, who runs the German Village where the Girl works, finds amusement in bragging about his wife Belle’s abortions. He boasts, “She took the rap for me once when I forged a check, and she had thirteen abortions. I give her a spoonful of turpentine with sugar and it’ll loosen anything ain’t that so Belle?” (12). Though everyone seems to enjoy this story, including Belle, the Girl is not amused by any of it. The acceptance of Hoinck’s violent behavior and irrational jealousy may be drawn from Belle’s own experience with a brutal world, where her first sexual encounter ended in an abortion arranged by her employer. She tells the Girl

Honey, don’t worry, a person ought to have child. I was just a kid, I was keeping house for a dame and her husband got at me. She sent me to the city with a paper with an address. I felt like a worm. I walked those streets, a kid. Then they just shafted the kid and left you to bleed to death. I passed it in a restroom, wrapped it in the St. Paul *Dispatch* and threw it in the Mississippi. And then she began to weep for all the long dead and the coming dead, all the dead in the earth, all the dead in her. (75)

The Kaplan's mother sacrifice pattern is enacted for those complicit characters that simply accept the abortions their partners insist upon. When these characters avoid motherhood, they lose strength and power that then continues to rest with their partners.

The Girl takes her cues from her mother Emily, whose marriage also is marked by aggression and violent devotion. Emily views childbirth as a way to redeem her lust (77). But her father's attitude toward his wife's births is not very different from Hoinck's. With pride, Emily recalls the way her husband admired her when she labored with her children, bragging "nobody has children like Emily, listen to her yell, that's a yell for you, and she'll get up and get us our supper" (43). Though he might suffer through difficult jobs or unemployment, his wife's labors are tangible evidence of his own masculine potency. Her mother eagerly laps up this territorial love, much the way Belle does for Hoinck.

The Girl's mother has instilled in her a belief in family and love that withstands all abuse. The Girl grasps on to this point of view as a special secret that helps to combat the abuses of a tyrannical and abusive partner, Butch (45). So powerful is this belief that she is the one character that resists both society's and a particular man's attempts to make reproductive choices for her based on economic realities. When her friend Clara learns that she is pregnant with Butch's baby, she immediately assumes the Girl will abort it since "if you got a kid you got to get rid of it" (76). Since there seems to be no way to feed the child, Clara simply ignores the Girl's protests that she wants continue her pregnancy. Before going out to "get some money to kill it" (76), presumably through prostitution, she advises the Girl not to tell Butch and so avoid his anger; they can visit someone who will abort it cheaply next week, "an old woman on a river boat" (76).

Upon learning the news, Butch thinks of the elderly abortionist as well, but only after congratulating himself on his virility. He says, "I knew I was pretty good. Rang the bell a couple times before" (77). The satisfaction is short lived and he begins to rant about the impossibility of feeding or keeping a child healthy in this dangerous world. He even claims it is so simple that "I could do it myself with a pair of scissors, there's nothing to it" (78). He eventually drags her from a tavern to the amusement of the crowds who jeer that this is the way a woman should be treated. Butch promises to make a payment in bootleg to the abortionist the next day. "Give her, abort her. Get it out of her" he commands. The abortionist seems pleased and warns that "It won't feel as good coming out as it did going in" (81). Dismayed by this procession, the Girl escapes once Butch departs and the woman leaves the room to gather her tools. If it were not for the strength of her mother's value system, she would not be able to resist Butch's, or, for that matter, Clara's, aggressive efforts to terminate the pregnancy. Butch feels that he can impose abortion on the Girl and both he and Clara agree that the world is not fit to raise children. The Girl's success at resisting their efforts fills her with pride. "On my own I had done it . . . I had stolen the seed. I had it on deposit. It was cached . . . It was in a safe. I had the key" (85). The Girl is a resisting character by deciding to have her baby and enter motherhood outside of the nuclear family, against the desires of her peers.

Only once does she wonder aloud, after fearing Butch hates her and wanting to say the right words to him, "I don't know whether to do it or not, I had a dream I thought I would have the child, and I would go south in the sun to have it . . . I said it's Friday, and I ought to decide if I'm going to do it" (78). The Girl is very clear throughout that she wants to have a baby, propelled by the lessons of her mother, and this is the only



moment in the book that she expresses any misgivings about continuing the pregnancy. It can be easy to overlook the devotion and will power it takes to continue a pregnancy in a world where abortions, often forced upon women, are the norm. Robert Shulman (2000) wonders, “A little while later when she runs away from the squalid abortionist, the girl [sic] does not explain why she has suddenly decided to have her baby”; he thinks, however, that she does not need to, because her “celebration of desire” explains it all (81-82). I believe her reasoning goes beyond desire and speaks to the ongoing journey in the novel to reconcile the beliefs her mother has instilled in her with the harsh life she leads. This belief system distinguishes her from Anna Morgan, who has had an equally difficult life. Without a firm belief system in place, however, Anna is more at the mercy of those who surround her and guide her actions.

This strength also helps her to avoid state-sanctioned control over her body through sterilization. The specter of this reality appears from the opening pages as Clara teaches her how to avoid the police, who can sterilize the women they pick up on the streets (2). The Girl eventually experiences this possibility first hand when she finds a letter on her caseworker’s desk advising that she be sterilized once her baby is born. Rather than agree to sign the sheet that the caseworker presents with a smile, she runs away in a panic, screaming and cursing, finally getting assaulted and arrested by the police (129). Her fighting spirit emerges, drawn from her mother’s ideals, and, though she ends up in a maternity home, she manages to avoid state intervention into her reproductive choices.

In this violent atmosphere, the women can survive by depending on one another and sharing knowledge. On the day Clara dies after being given shock treatment, a

sisterhood converges while the Girl gives birth to her baby. The women surround her, urging and cheering her on. In their faces, she “saw mama in them all, the bearing the suffering in us all, their seized bodies, bent belies hanging, and the ferocity of their guarding. I felt fierce and she seemed to burrow to the nipple as I saw Amelia take the knife she had soaking in alcohol in a beer bottle and cut the cord” (148). Her sense of community is stretched into continuity as she sees that the baby too has “the tiny face of my mother. Like in a mirror” (148). She does not see the face of her dead lover Butch in her daughter’s face, but rather the face that has given her the strength to have her child. The life force that her mother has communicated to her will continue with the promise of this birth; the mother’s survival secret of new life that the Girl has held close has passed along to her, its truth revealed and confirmed with life.<sup>23</sup>

Abortion, so often used as a device to bring a story to its close or to dole out punishment, takes on an entirely different meaning in this text. As in the earlier selections discussed, abortion is characterized in *The Girl* by masculine dominance. When a man wants a woman to have an abortion she has one; this hegemony is mirrored in the state, where sterilization precludes the possibility of pregnancy for those who are deemed undesirable. The Girl, a powerless, penniless figure without even a name, resists these forces so that the celebratory final birth becomes a triumph of choice. Though she may be the character with the least material resources under discussion, the women who guide her provide a powerful network which characters in the other texts under discussion lack. Poverty seems to have erased all differences among these women so

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<sup>23</sup> Significantly, in the 1939 original manuscript, the Girl gives birth to a boy, which means that Belle’s gleeful cry that the baby has “No dingle dangle, no rod of satan, no sword no third arm” (148) was added decades later (Coiner 119-20), reflecting a different kind of feminism.

they can unite together in opposition to men and social institutions, both of which threaten their health and safety.

Ann Kaplan's resisting and complicit categories can once again be used, not as an either/or concept, but as a unit to understand the character's actions. In fact, the novel highlights how Kaplan's terms can be applied in complex ways so that a character can assume complicit and resisting positions simultaneously. The Girl's mother has taught her to be complicit in her obedience to men. Her devotion to Butch is evident, since no matter how Butch speaks to her or abuses her, the Girl's love does not waffle. Nevertheless, she is the only one who has the strength to resist the demands to abort her baby—a true triumph of choice. Her strength is especially obvious when her actions are compared to other complicit characters, like Belle, who submit to abortion.

It the Girl's decision to continue her pregnancy that most complicates Kaplan's terms. Childbirth allows the Girl to radicalize the family, although she faces the exact hardships of the other women who feel compelled to abort because of their circumstances—male dominance; financial difficulties; fear of social stigma; fear of having children outside the nuclear family. While this action reveals her strength, it also means that she is a complicit character as she conforms to the essentialized notions of femininity outlined in this dissertation: it is only maternity that can help her to find her own voice and inner strength.

This triumphant vision of femininity has been criticized since, as Paula Rabinowitz (1988) suggests, “it invokes women's biological capacity to bear children without interrogating the cultural platitudes surrounding motherhood” (545). However, while pregnancy and childbirth serve to connect the women and mark their difference

from the male characters, Le Sueur is progressive in imagining the way these women could come together. Rather than looking to the old patterns that have shaped family structures, the Girl will raise her own girl within the female collective that gathers protectively at the novel's close. This feminist utopian vision will ensure the lessons she has learned from her mother and these women will continue to flourish, allowing for a different model to operate outside the discrete packet of the nuclear family.

In her article "Reading the Body in Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl*," Erin V. Obermueller (2005) looks at how Le Sueur's various uses and representations of male and female bodies successfully record working-class history on political and personal levels:

The female body becomes yet another domain of knowledge through the experience of abortion. Abortion reassigns the pleasure and purpose of sexuality, suggesting a new reading of the female body . . . The language of intrusion highlights the work of outside forces upon the body echoed throughout the narrative by bleeding and death. Le Sueur calls upon her readers to recognize the implication for the working-class figure as well as the particular ways the female body functions in this political economy. It is through the penetration of the female body that Le Sueur argues for feminine ways of reading; she suggests that the functions of female bodies are relative and related to other recognized functions of male bodies, such as labor and hunger, present in the larger social structure. (Obermueller 55)

Characters that seek out abortions are generally forced to do so against their will.

Sometimes the women are coerced, as is Vida in *Votes for Women!* or Belle in *The Girl*.

In both these cases, an economic consideration takes the place of a woman's choice;

however, class means that the outcome is very different. Upper-class Vida can leverage

her resources so that her negative experience with abortion transforms into social

activism to help all women. Working-class Belle has few resources, so that by the end of

novel, she is left poor and widowed. Her prospects to create personal, let alone social,

change seem far more limited than Vida's. Other times, women cannot find the strength to question their partner's authority, as in *The Unpossessed*. Margaret only realizes the consequences of her unthinking submission to her husband's need to maintain their current lifestyle. On a broader scale, there are characters that cannot raise a child outside the safe construction of the nuclear family. Amy in *Waste*, for instance, cannot bring herself to continue her pregnancy without the declaration of her lover's affection. In Anna's case, in *Voyage in the Dark*, her compromised economic security means that the continuation of her pregnancy is unfeasible. British society does not have the support structures that will allow her to do more than wonder about the baby and listen to her friend's directions to find the abortionist.

In all these instances, reproductive choice is subject to paternal authority. Rather than coming to a decision about continuing the pregnancy based on their own needs, these characters take their cues elsewhere. Such submission to outside forces makes the Girl's decision to bring her pregnancy to term a radical move. She is not only pressured to abort her child but is also physically dragged to the abortionist by her lover Butch. Yet, drawing from the beliefs and love of her mother rather than physical passion, the Girl freely makes her own decision to keep the child. Blanche H. Gelfant (1991) notes that "Opposition to abortion in *The Girl* may seem incompatible with its feminist themes, but it represents a resistance to the coercive power that pro-choice women see exercised when women are denied control over their own bodies" (205 fn 18).

In contemporary debates over the legalization of abortion, the emphasis rests on whether a woman has the right *to have* an abortion. A more fully expressed viewpoint would add whether a woman has the right to *not* have an abortion—a consideration

denied these characters whose choice is second to economic factors. This distinction makes the Girl's decision to leave the abortionist, ignore dire warnings about her future, and flee from the antagonism of social services so very unusual. Unlike Margaret Flinders, neither Anna nor the Girl has the support of a strong family unit or a secure economic position—nevertheless, the Girl is better placed to survive a violent world.

The primary difference between the Girl and other characters discussed in this chapter is the female network that the Girl has at her disposal. This network begins with her mother, who has provided her with the absolute faith that love, not economics, should determine whether or not to have a baby. Even more important is the community of women who unite to survive in this hostile world. Poor as she is, the Girl fits into her community, taken in from the opening of the novel. In contrast, Anna's female community consists of a nervous landlady, co-workers who call her the "Hottentot," and a friend with better things to do with her time. This fragile network allows Anna to survive the experience of abortion, but she will need more support if she is going to navigate the difficulties she will continue to face.

Referring to *The Girl*, Obermueller writes that "The female body . . . charts the limits of masculine power; women exhibit resistance when they avoid getting abortions, when they have many sexual partners, or when they stand up after men hit them" (*Crusaders* 54-55). While this resistance is certainly at play in *The Girl*, only one character actually has the courage to perform this resistance against abortion, and indeed, through this entire dissertation: the Girl. In her 1955 book about her parents, Le Sueur notes that "It is hard to write about Marian Le Sueur [Meridel's mother], not because she was my mother, but because like myself she was a woman. In many ways her history is

suppressed within the history of the man, the history of an oppressed people is hidden in the lies and the agreed-upon myth of its conquerors” (38). It seems that with the writing of *The Girl*, she tried to open up this history of her mother to provide a literary space where all mothers could be recognized, creating their own history in a language of their own making.

### **Conclusion**

Today’s abortion debate centers on the question of whether national legislation or individual women should have ultimate control over a woman’s decision to have an abortion. Attempts to regulate this choice are viewed by pro-choice activists as an impingement by the state on a woman’s basic right to make decisions about her body. The situation is reversed in these texts as abortion is forced upon women, either by individual men whose happiness is threatened with childbirth or by the conventions of a patriarchal society that determines who is qualified to mother. As such, abortion works to shape the lives of the female characters, ultimately resolving the plot as a whole so that abortion is thematized as a function of masculine dominance.

In her discussion of the rhetorical strategies used by writers who represent abortion, Barbara Johnson (1986) writes that “There is something about the connection between motherhood and death that refuses to remain comfortable and conventionally figurative. When a woman speaks about the death of children in any sense other than that of pure loss, a powerful taboo is being violated” (38). Indeed, though Johnson focuses on the late twentieth century, this idea is implicit in every case of abortion cited in this dissertation; no matter what the narrator’s stance toward the character, the woman who

has an abortion feels a sense of loss, guilt, or regret. It seems that authors cannot separate a woman's expected emotions from cultural norms.

These early twentieth-century portrayals are rooted in a persistent nineteenth-century conflation of maternity and identity. It is presumed that each female character wants to nurture a family and, thereby, preserve a healthy society. If theater was a medium that allowed authors to make social commentary about abortion early in the century, novels allowed authors to explore the characters' attitudes in the 1930's. The reader intimately understands the female characters from the detailed description of their experiences with abortion. These pregnant women are figured as longing to continue their pregnancies, and enter maternity, the natural endpoint of women's development. As Barbara Johnson's late twentieth century thinking emphasizes, this idea continues long after the production of the plays and novels under discussion in this chapter.

The cluster of plays and novels written before and after women's suffrage show that greater rights in the public sphere afforded by the right to vote did not help women gain more control over their private lives. New legislation could not immediately change women's status within society. These representations highlight how female submission to men was difficult to circumvent even when they desperately want children. As women's freedoms expanded in the public sphere, it still was impossible to imagine how a woman could claim control, privately, over her own body, without a strong female network to support her. These networks are generally tenuous in literature representing abortion in the first third of the twentieth century.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Straddling the Two Spheres: Representing Working Mothers

#### Introduction

*However much I may still suspect romantic love as the only basis for marriage and may still consider sound my criteria for the selection of a husband, I have reneged on what was once a preëminent contention of mine, to wit; that a woman is somehow an inferior if she doesn't get out and work.*

*The psychologist will say, I suppose, that I have merely done the next best thing to being a howlingly famous woman – I have transferred my own dreams and ambitions to my son. This may be true; I don't know. But I am sure that my motive is not so bald and simple as that. I am not oppressed by any crushing sense of failure; rather the contrary. What I feel that I want to do is make my successes and, most of all, my aspirations intelligible to him so that he may appreciate them, that he may extend them – and extend my life.*

Jane Allen, "You May Have My Job: A Feminist Discovers Her Home," 228 and 230-231 (1932)

When Jane Allen wrote her article for *The Forum* in 1932, the women's movement, mobilized so long around suffrage, had long achieved its goal. The New Woman of the early twentieth century, flouting convention as she led an independent life, seemed less relevant as the country entered the Depression. Jane Allen explains that although she had absorbed her mother's and society's values for the New Woman, she eventually finds the highest satisfaction giving up her career and caring for her family.

Women lost a common aim once their rallying points had been achieved, when it seemed that their movement had attained all its goals. Betty Friedan would write in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that the daughters of these feminists "had come unknowing to the turning-point in woman's identity. They had truly outgrown the old image; they were finally free to be what they chose to be. But what choice were they offered? In that corner, the fiery, man-eating feminist, the career woman—loveless, alone. In this corner,

the gentle wife and mother—loved and protected by her husband, surrounded by her adoring children” (101). For many women, the latter option seemed the preferable goal.

This attitude toward the family reversed the ambition that took women outside the home earlier in the century, a pattern that was reflected in literature portraying not just women with careers but mothers as well, those who had been destined for a life in the private sphere. While Chapter One looks at characters who forgo motherhood, this chapter focuses on the period where mothers in literature made inroads into the workforce and reinvented conventional family roles by deciding to work. Having a job provides intellectual freedom that would be unavailable if these mothers raised their children exclusively: this is especially true for women whose talent and genius equaled their male counterparts. Working can also provide financial benefits that add new dimensions to their lives or the lives of their family. Of course, portrayals of women working are not uncommon; lower-class women always worked out of necessity and upper-class women used charity as a way to work outside the home. What is new at the turn of the twentieth century is the depiction of middle-class mothers who choose to have a career, an image made possible by the rise of the independent and savvy New Woman.

Some of these representations feature what I call *remote mothers* while others fall into the category of *proximate mothers*. Remote mothers are those women who use financial means to support their children’s upbringing away from home. The financial support they provide guides the child’s life, but the mothers do not participate in day-to-day care, leaving more time to devote to their careers. Proximate mothers work outside the home but also participate in the child’s daily upbringing, which allows the mothers greater influence than remote mothers over their children’s values. In the same way

Judith Butler (1990) shows that gender is a performance and not an essential aspect of our character, these mothers who forge their own paths sometimes feel the need to perform the socially constructed concept of maternity. For remote and proximate mothers, performing motherhood serves as a way to assert authority, protect their work from inspection, or guard their reputations.

Remote mothers take a hands-off approach to child rearing, making many decisions about the child's care from a far—in these texts, the distance between parent and child creates a conflict of values. In the “Author's Apology,” George Bernard Shaw reveled in the consternation and controversy *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1902) caused critics and viewers alike (vii-viii). Though written in 1894, its 1902 London production shocked some audience members and the 1905 New York production ended in the arrest of the cast. In addition to the incest plot between Frank and Vivie that seemed gratuitous and vulgar to some spectators, the public's shock is due less to Kitty Warren's prostitution and more to her dual role as prostitute and mother—one who uses her work to provide the best life for herself and her child. The climax of the play occurs as mother and daughter try to reconcile different value systems. Claire Archer in *The Verge* (1921) has put her artistic-scientific botanical projects ahead of all other obligations in her life, including mothering. Her unwavering commitment to work, expressed through expressionistic dialogue and set, instigated a public debate in the New York press. Critics were especially distressed by Claire's erratic behavior. Claire and her daughter, separated for long stretches of time, also wrestle with opposing ideals. As opposed to novels, which would have been read in private, the stage portrayals of Kitty Warren and

Claire Archer must have been especially vivid to audiences since spectators could see the flesh-and-blood actresses who prioritized their work above their family.

In the second half of Chapter Two, I examine proximate mothers, those who work and have a hand in raising their children; while the work these women do helps support their families, it satisfies them intellectually as well. Frank Ware, in the light melodrama *A Man's World* (1909), provokes chatter and gossip when she gives no explanation about her adopted son's parents. She fights the double standard that separates men and women, never compromising her value system. In Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *The Home-Maker* (1924), Evangeline Knapp feels a great deal of guilt in the deep enjoyment working brings her, but it ultimately makes her a better mother to her family. Both texts expose the inequalities and social structures that keep women dissatisfied, and they generated interest with audiences: *A Man's World* received both favorable and incredulous reviews during its New York run and *The Home-Maker* was a best seller in 1924.

Although these texts had more popular appeal initially than those about remote mothers, they receive little critical attention today. The authors couched their plots in traditional genres—*A Man's World* conforms to the well-made play and *The Home-Maker* takes the form of the popular woman's novel—making new ideas seem less threatening. While Crothers was a relatively new playwright, Fisher was widely known; her reputation may have increased her sales since she had a wide audience, already receptive to her ideas. On the other hand, the ideas implicit in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and *The Verge* seemed so wildly radical when they were first released that their reception was marked by confusion. Nevertheless, these very themes seem to resonate deeply with today's critics who find much to say about these two plays.

Both remote and proximate mothers end up conforming to nineteenth-century models of femininity. Remote mothers do so in their attitudes. Even though she possesses a strong work ethic, Kitty Warren desperately wants her daughter to settle down into a married life of respectability and ease. Claire Archer's convention appears in her own coping capabilities: she does not have the strength to live up to her ideals and fulfill her career outside her expected role as a wife and mother. Proximate mothers are also hindered by nineteenth-century ideals. Though Frank Ware comes closest to rejecting the nuclear family and her expected function, as Judith L. Stephens (1989) has pointed out, her rejection is only possible because she takes on a morally superior role to her lover. Evangeline Knapp loves to work but is too ashamed to let others know that she values this life above being a stay-at-home mother. Despite these ties to convention, proximate mothers are generally more progressive than remote mothers because by the end of the narrative, no matter what their motivation, they flout expected roles.

### **Mothers' Place in the Early Twentieth-Century Workforce**

As the feminist movement traced in the introduction gained momentum, greater access to education at the end of the nineteenth century permitted some women to pursue professional opportunities generally closed to them. The New Woman, as she was called, had greater access to the public sphere even if she did not enjoy all the privileges accorded to men. Deborah Kolb (1975) traces the rise and fall of the New Woman among the various classes of working women.

Accompanying the increase of working women was an increase in the number of female professionals. While many women worked from necessity at subsistence wages, more and more women chose careers as lawyers, doctors, or writers. This rise in professionalism may be treated as a separate topic from that of economic independence, for so it seemed to contemporaries. One did not expect a woman who worked at a factory to develop a passion for her work. Such a woman, it was

believed, worked for her family and out of necessity, since obviously no woman would choose a factory job as a pastime or for self-fulfillment. But a woman who wanted to be a doctor or lawyer was viewed as "unnatural," and the spread of professionalism threatened the very existence of the family. People feared that a female professional would lose interest in family matters and respect for the man as head of the household. (156)

I have chosen portrayals of this “unnatural” species of women who found satisfaction in work despite their social function as mothers. While the characters sometimes devote themselves to their careers to the exclusion of mothering, as is the case for remote mothers, proximate mothers try to combine their work and their mothering. In neither case, however, were mothers simply working for pin money; their work was a core element of their identity.<sup>24</sup> These emerging representations prefigure the work-family conflict that is still a pressing issue for women a century later.

The texts I investigate fall outside the broad categories of lower-class working women and upper-class ladies of leisure to focus on representations of mothers who work for pleasure, whether the source of this pleasure is economic, intellectual, or both. Kolb explains that while the New Woman may have assumed the duties of wife and mother, there was a new focus on her economic independence, what Kolb terms the professional feminist movement, which grew from about 1890 through 1920. After the early 1920's, the focus on women's careers dissipated until the 1960's (149). Within this brief period, works of art reflecting mothers who worked increased as well. Kolb writes that “The

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<sup>24</sup> Pin money originated in the 1600's as a legal term: it was a set amount of money British wives, usually upper-class, would receive for their own use. Eventually it came to refer to extra money that women earned outside the home (Zelizer 62). Though Catherine Grace Francis Gore's popular *Pin Money* (1834) deals with the intricacies of the pin money contract within a marriage in its original sense, there are few representations of women working for pin money, perhaps because of its origins—if a woman had to work for extra income, her husband was not able to provide for her satisfactorily. In *A Doll's House*, Nora has to pretend that she spends all her pin money when she is paying back the debts from her husband's medical bills.

treatment of the New Woman's economic freedom led ultimately to a consideration of the professional independence of the woman who worked not simply from necessity, but from a desire for self-expression or self-fulfillment. With the concurrent demise of the feminist movement in the mid-twenties, the New Woman on stage also suffered a downfall" (149). The same demise was seen in other genres like the novel. But even when the historical moment allowed for the representation of working mothers, it did not necessarily follow that these portrayals would be taken seriously. The conception of mothers' place at the core of the family, not in the world of work, was an ideal that could not be toppled in the decades that saw an increase in working women.

Women's participation in the workforce was always linked to their social class. Around the time of the Industrial Revolution, it was expected that lower-class women would work in fields like the textile industry and domestic service, the latter of which expanded as the middle class grew and the need for domestic labor increased. According to Anne Summers's study "Public Functions, Private Premises: Female Professional Identity and the Domestic-Service Paradigm in Britain, c. 1850-1930" (1998) the domestic service model, where an upper-class lady guides and molds a lower-class domestic servant, was transplanted from the private sphere of the home into the public sphere of industry. Religious leaders helped promote the idea that middle- and upper-class women needed to guide and teach the lower classes, not just through charity, but also by assuming unpaid supervisory positions in institutions like hospitals, factories, and prisons. These women's qualifications were based solely on their social class, not upon their professional training since very often the men who appointed the ladies "could not conceive that instruction could be effectively communicated between women, except

within the framework of a hierarchical social relationship” (362). The belief that social class qualified women for particular positions not only continued during World War I but persisted after it. Further, it continued to shape relationships, ultimately to women’s detriment, since upper-class women could not compete with men because of their different qualification sets and lower-class women could not progress because of beliefs about their inherent limitations.

In the United States, women entered the workforce in great numbers from the end of the nineteenth century, according to Sarah Eisenstein’s unfinished study *Give Us Bread But Give Us Roses* (1983). The majority of the female workforce was young and single—they generally worked from about age fifteen to about twenty-five, though married women also worked when their husbands could not provide for the family. Women who worked, even from necessity, were viewed with suspicion, perceived as weakening the social order or lacking morals (17-18). This disapproval was framed in terms of three arguments:

Women working was seen as inconsistent with maintaining a home and raising children – going to work was viewed as, in some sense, an attack by women on the home and the institution of marriage. Second, it was argued that women did not really need to work, that they did so to earn ‘pin-money’ or to finance their wardrobes. This was connected with the third argument, that women competed unfairly in the labor market, bringing down wages and lowering conditions in the shop. (19)

Although these suspicions actually contradict the work that these women were doing—their very presence in the labor market was often based on their families’ needs—the fears reflect U.S. society’s apprehension about men’s status within the family. Even with these misgivings, women’s enrollment in college increased and upper-class women began to enjoy greater freedoms in charitable and leisure activities that brought them outside the



private sphere of their homes. No matter how much these opportunities were increasing, work still seemed to undermine women's position as wives and mothers. This standard judged working-class women even more harshly as their activities seemed especially antithetical to the feminine ideal (49-50). By the time of the Depression, these values became so embedded into American consciousness that married women in various trades were routinely fired, causing even more economic distress for families (B. Cook 427).

World War I opened yet another space for women to work at the beginning of the twentieth century, though this surge was a temporary one. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1989) take an optimistic outlook on the benefits the war brought to women. It allowed women the ability to move out of their normal spheres and gain employment in ways that were impossible in the past. They write that the war "liberated women not only to delight in the reality of the workaday Herland that was wartime England or America but also to imagine a revisionary worldwide Herland, a utopia arisen from the ashes of apocalypse and founded on the revelation of a new social order . . . it became a dream of global regeneration, a vision of patriarchy defied and denied" ("Soldier's Heart" 303-304). According to these authors, women believed that permanent changes in women's status would result from these opportunities.

Gilbert and Gubar may correctly note that World War I changed gender relationships, but their reading may be overly positive. Sharon Ouditt (1994) is one of a number of scholars who take this position. Ouditt writes about two spheres of work in which women were suddenly needed during this period: on the front and at home. Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses appealed to women's desire for "militaristic discipline and . . . civilian femininity" (16). Although these roles gave women satisfaction and

employment, there was the sense that their work was of secondary importance to men's work; further, it was clear that these jobs would be short-term, so that gendered ideas about women's role would be reinstated after the war (33). Part of this secondary status lay in the distribution of work between men and women; while women were allowed to help out, men really represented their country since they could give their lives for the cause, not just their time. Ouditt concludes that, "Women are not asked to fight, although they are expected to mop up the ghastly effects of the fighting. They are not asked to die, although their friends, lovers, and brothers continue to be killed all around them. The result is a profound sense of alienation and uselessness; a kind of spiritual death" (45).

On the homefront, women staffed munitions factories and maintained agriculture, despite the prevailing discomfort with women's place in the public sphere. A tension existed between the need for labor that women could provide and the desire to prevent women from becoming permanently employed on a large-scale basis. To reconcile this discrepancy, writers used images of maternity to describe women's work, for example, explaining that within factories, "the womb of the shell has to be loaded with its deadly charge" (qtd. in Ouditt 78) or that "The workers of today are the mothers of tomorrow" (qtd. in Ouditt 80). Another scholar, L. K. Yates, reasons that at least "many of the girls passing through this strange war-time adventure have assuredly gained by their pilgrimage precisely in those qualities most needed by wives and mothers of the rising generation" (qtd. in Ouditt 80). The act of creating weapons thus parallels that of creating children. With such rhetorical moves, male writers helped resolve discomfort the public may have had about women making weapons. Ouditt comments, "The female biological functions ought to be irrelevant here. They are invoked . . . to confirm

women's literal and metaphorical confinement. It is simply the case that munitions work *does not* make sense in terms of maternity" (80). Indeed, their male counterparts resented women's new place in the working sphere of the munitions factory and could only tolerate their presence with the knowledge that the benefits they received came with the understanding that they would no longer continue when the war was complete. The need to employ women for cheap labor to run the war machine conflicted with the widely held view of a woman's proper place. Deeply entrenched ideas about maternity were summoned to make sense of the new reality of women's presence outside the domestic sphere.<sup>25</sup>

These diverse ruptures in traditional patterns of women's work created a space for representations of working mothers in literature. It was suddenly possible to imagine that work could be a source of pleasure for women, work that either displaced maternity, as it did for remote mothers, or worked in conjunction with maternity, as was the case for proximate mothers. Writers of popular fiction or drama were very often women themselves, so perhaps imagining a woman with satisfying work was less of an imaginative leap for them. The restructuring of the nuclear family depicted in these representations was quite revolutionary; women in literature did not usually have the concurrent task of bearing children and working out of both necessity and personal satisfaction. The texts I examine portray women in jobs that fulfill them deeply, whether

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<sup>25</sup> Ouditt explains that in order to preserve femininity in the Women's Land Army, members were asked to follow a manual that made them "'promise'" to follow certain guidelines, such as how much sleep to get each night ('eight hours') or how to behave ('quietly'). Women were also asked not to smoke publically, go to bars, or walk with their hands in their pants pockets, all unladylike behaviors that their wartime experiences might inspire in them (qtd. in Ouditt 56). The regulations for VAD's were even more rigorous (55). Clearly, even with the reassurance that women's new roles were temporary, regulating their personal behavior served to diffuse anxiety about their work outside the home.

artistically, as in *The Verge*, or financially, as in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*; however, it seems authors avoided portraying mothers who worked during the war, relegating these portrayals to single women.<sup>26</sup>

The texts under discussion here represent a narrow slice of Western society during the first quarter of the twentieth century; these portraits are of low- to upper-middle class whites. Even those characters that initially lack economic security, like Kitty Warren or Evangeline Knapp, still have access to cultural capital and privilege brought on by their race and their nationality. Issues faced by people of color and immigrants whose work was demanded by their families were not depicted as frequently. Furthermore, analysis of such texts would necessarily reach different conclusions because, often, working was not a choice but an obligation. The characters under investigation here are anomalies because they privilege their work as either more important, in the case of remote mothers, or equally as important, in the case of proximate mothers. Despite the differences in these two types of mothers, their interest in self-fulfillment and economic independence came from the pens of authors sensitive to women's issues: Glaspell, Fisher, and Crothers were concerned with exposing inequalities that structured every day life for men and women, while Shaw, the one male author discussed, was particularly sensitive to women's position in society. Though examining these texts can give some sense of the larger underlying conflicts about mothers' shifting roles, it is necessarily an incomplete and transitory picture.

While representations of abortion feature Ann Kaplan's figuration of complicit characters, representations of working mothers feature resisting mothers, though, once

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<sup>26</sup> For example, some later examples include *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall or *Not So Quiet . . .* (1930) by Helen Zenna Smith.

again, these designations can be fluid. Although Claire of *The Verge* and Frank of *A Man's World* remain resisting characters throughout the text, other characters shift their roles. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Kitty Warren appears to be a resisting character, but by the end it is clear that she is complicit, portrayed as the phallic mother, even though her flouting of convention is belied by a conservative worldview. Evangeline's course in *The Home-Maker* moves in the opposite direction; when the text opens, she is a complicit, overbearing mother, but she moves closer to a resisting position after employment takes her away from the toils of housework.

**Remote Mothers: *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1902) and *The Verge* (1921)**

Remote mothers' actions are similar to what could be expected from any male character. These mothers are preoccupied with their work. It is their trade that defines them, not their children. Having left the day-to-day rearing to someone else, encounters with their children result in a conflict in personalities and priorities, as the mothers' work-centered viewpoints clash with their children's ideals. Remote mothers' actions fall neatly into Kaplan's resisting category. While they can be the object of male characters' surveillance and desire, they are driven by their own appetites for success, however that might be defined. Not only do they resist normative expectations, they actively defy them to reach their goals. What differentiates Kitty Warren and Claire Archer's resisting status is their attitude toward their daughters: while Kitty desires a conventional life for her daughter, Claire is disgusted by her daughter's conventional ways.

Kitty Warren is a brothel owner who has used the profits of her profession to give her daughter Vivie a privileged upbringing and education—an education that ultimately leads Vivie to reject her mother. Mrs. Warren's success in the business end of

prostitution is further marred by the intimation that she engaged in the trade of young girls; the British public was particularly sensitive to this issue due to late nineteenth-century media exposés. One pamphlet, for instance, by Alfred S. Dyer entitled “The European Slave Trade in English girls – Memorial to the Foreign Secretary, 1880” reports that for young girls unwillingly forced into prostitution in Brussels, “Her condition is that of a slave to the lust of all who will pay the brothel-keeper’s charge for permission to violate and outrage her, until disease renders her unprofitable, or death shall afford release” (qtd. in Innes 199). The purity of a generation of young girls was at stake with this unseen menace.

William Stead’s 1885 four-part account of the forced prostitution of young girls “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” in the *Pall Mall Gazette* further excited the volatile issue.<sup>27</sup> This exposé outlined, in explicit detail, how great numbers of young girls were tricked or forced into prostitution to feed the insatiable appetite for virgins by men in all stations of society. The young women supposedly found it nearly impossible to escape due to the extensive network of people involved—including officials and the girls’ own mothers” (Mulpetre “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon &c”). Although the connection between Kitty Warren and this lurid trade diffuses Shaw’s social aims, he ends up creating a new kind of character. Mrs. Warren is a female manifestation of the men portrayed in the newspapers who victimized young girls. Innocent women may be exploited, as any male might exploit the workers in a factory, but Kitty continues to advance her own material needs and provide comfortably for her daughter. In this regard,

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<sup>27</sup> Extensive information about prostitution in late nineteenth-century England can be found on historian Owen Mulpetre’s “W.T. Stead Resource Site” including a full transcript of “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” ( <http://www.attackingthedevil.co.uk/index.php> ).

Shaw challenged spectators' expectations about female maternal behavior while playing upon their concerns about young girls' chastity. Presented alongside less desirable ways to earn a living, such as raising large families or engaging in burdensome factory work, Shaw frames prostitution as a feasible alternative. Once a poor girl with little money, Kitty Warren is now so wealthy that she leads a privileged lifestyle with enough left over to support her daughter due to her years of hard work and her keen business acumen.

In describing his role as a playwright, Shaw once wrote that he was "breaking through the very tough crusts that form on the human conscience in large modern civilizations. Indeed, a man is hardly considered thoroughly respectable until his conscience is all crust and nothing else. The more respectable you are the more you need the pickaxe" ("Bernard Shaw Resents" 1). The pickaxe certainly was the weapon of choice in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, where broaching the volatile subject of prostitution and the traffic of girls was insufficient for Shaw; he added to the plot an incest relationship between Kitty's daughter Vivie and her half-brother Frank. As controversy mounted, Shaw told a reporter that the play "exists because libertines pay women well to be evil, and often show them affection and respect, whilst pious people pay them infamously and drudge their bodies and souls to death at honest labor" ("Shaw to Comstock" 9). However, it is clear that the incest subplot is as important to his critique as is prostitution, prompting a *New York Times* critic to moralize "it is a convention of civilized society, and the convention is founded on fact, that there are social subjects which cannot be discussed in public, for the very reason that the public discussion of them tends to pique the prurient curiosity which the question is of restraining" ("Shaw vs. Comstock Again" 8). Over the course of several decades, however, the inflammatory

issues presented by the play would fail to incite public outrage, and performances of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* could be presented without much debate.

Women's status in and out of the home was a subject Shaw considered prior to writing *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, especially the absurdities of the "Womanly Woman." In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891/1913), he imagines how courtships unfold, the groom wooing a bride with his business prospects, which end up keeping him out of the house and her dissatisfied in the house once they marry. Discontent is only alleviated by the arrival of children, giving her life some greater purpose outside herself. Shaw disputes the inevitability of a woman's self-sacrificing position, writing, "If we have come to think that the nursery and the kitchen are the natural sphere of a woman, we have done so exactly as English children come to think that a cage is the natural sphere of a parrot: because they have never seen one anywhere else" (45). He writes "it is not surprising that our society, being directly dominated by men, comes to regard Woman, not as an end in herself like Man, but solely as a means of ministering to his appetite" (41). In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw dismantles all these rituals with his fearless representation of societal taboos.

As a remote mother, Mrs. Warren has passed the day-to-day caretaking of Vivie to others, allowing her to continue her work unfettered. Vivie reflects on Kitty's hands-off approach, deciding that the arrangement suited her:

I hardly know my mother. Since I was a child I have lived in England, at school or college, or with people paid to take charge of me. I have been boarded out all my life; and my mother has lived in Brussels or Vienna and never let me go to her. I only see her when she visits England for a few days. I don't complain: it's been very pleasant; for people have been very good to me; and there has always



been plenty of money to make things smooth. But dont imagine I know anything about my mother. I know far less than you do. (165)<sup>28</sup>

While Vivie realizes that the arrangement has left her ignorant of her mother's life and habits, the decision to raise her daughter from a distance was calculated; sheltering Vivie from her own path, Mrs. Warren crafts a life for her daughter free from the dingy lows and sordid highs of her own life. By exposing her to the best resources available to a young girl in England, and limiting their interaction, Mrs. Warren actively regulates her development, albeit from afar. Despite this approach, Mrs. Warren engages in stereotypical, overly-protective maternal behavior when they are together: the first words she utters to her daughter when they are reunited after month's absence are "Vivie : put your hat on, dear : youll get sunburnt" (167), as casually as if they see each other daily. Vivie does not respond well to this sudden onslaught of maternal affection, ignoring and barely tolerating her mother's ministrations. Her disinterest is obvious after a late night walk with Praed brings her mother's wrath.

MRS WARREN. Wherever have you been, Vivie?

VIVIE [*taking off her hat and throwing it carelessly on the table*] On the hill.

MRS WARREN. Well, you shouldnt go off like that without letting me know. How could I tell what had become of you -- and night coming on too!

VIVIE [*going to the door of the inner room and opening it, ignoring her mother*]

Now, about supper? We shall be rather crowded in here, I'm afraid.

MRS WARREN. Did you hear what I said, Vivie?

VIVIE [*quietly*] Yes, mother. [*Reverting to the supper difficulty*] How many are we? [*Counting*] One, two, three, four, five, six. Well, two will have to wait until the rest are done : Mrs Alison has only plates and knives for four. (182-83)

Mrs. Warren's protests seem out of place after her daughter has had a lifetime of freedom from her care. With a sense of superiority and distance based on her upbringing, Vivie

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<sup>28</sup> Please note that the 1906 edition I use has some irregular punctuation and spelling, especially for contractions.

finds it easy to ignore her mother's complaints as she arranges for dinner. For her part, Mrs. Warren feels it is her right to exercise this authority, forgetting that her power over Vivie is far different from the interpersonal relationships she is used to managing at her brothels.

The excessive display of maternal care, where Mrs. Warren parrots mother-child discourse she may have observed herself, is merely the external façade for her true mothering style: as a working mother with an international business, she has had to manage her daughter's care indirectly, farming out day-to-day supervision to others. Unhindered by the daily routine motherhood brings, Kitty was able to devote herself to her business, earning enough to give her daughter the best care, education, and opportunities available—thus managing Vivie more as a valuable equity than as a person. Her separation from her daughter is an integral part of Kitty's child-rearing strategy; separated from her mother's lifestyle in a life free from economic care, privilege and entitlement seem to be Vivie's birthright. Even when she rejects her mother's financial help and decides to earn her own living, it is the education afforded by her mother, along with the hardworking drive that she inherited, that provides a respectable trade with which she can support herself.<sup>29</sup>

Kitty discovers in the course of the play that there is a price to be paid for providing her daughter with a rarefied education: with her independence, intelligence, and self-sufficiency, Vivie does not depend on Kitty, something that becomes clear as Vivie challenges her mother's authority to control her decisions. To assert her power over Vivie, Kitty unsuccessfully aims to control her daughter's life, demanding that she

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<sup>29</sup> It is instructive to compare this privileged upbringing to the privileged upbringing of Anna Morgan of *A Voyage in the Dark*, one that did not lead to independence.

put aside the “airs” earned from her success in school (189-90). Then she tries to appeal to Vivie’s sense of social justice when she is unable to secure her daughter’s sympathy. Using her personal history to her best advantage, Kitty divulges information about her career . . . but stops short of telling her she is still involved in prostitution as a brothel keeper:

*[She suddenly breaks out vehemently in her natural tongue — the dialect of a woman of the people — with all her affectations of maternal authority and conventional manners gone, and an overwhelming inspiration of true conviction and scorn in her] Oh, I wont bear it : I wont put up with the injustice of it. What right have you to set yourself up above me like this? You boast of what you are to me — to me, who gave you the chance of being what you are. What chance had I? Shame on you for a bad daughter and a stuck-up prude! (192)*

Speaking with the manner and tone of her working-class past, Kitty successfully taps into her daughter’s sense of justice regarding prostitution. As a result Vivie pities her mother and becomes affectionate and solicitous toward her.

That her decision to be a working mother was a conscious one is clear as she reflects on her own profession. “Why am I independent and able to give my daughter a first-rate education,” she asks, “when other women that had just as good opportunities are in the gutter? Because I always knew how to respect myself and control myself” (197). By prioritizing earning money, she kept her daughter’s best interests in mind. Working away from her daughter—even after she made enough money to support them—Kitty could minimize her personal influence and give her daughter wide-ranging experiences. And now that Vivie has grown, she wants to ensure her lifelong security—through marriage. Kitty tells her that “The only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her. If she's in his own station of life, let her make him marry her; but if she's far beneath him she cant expect it”

(197). Marriage seems like the only path to security for Vivie. What Kitty does not realize is that her own devotion to work and the education it provided gave Vivie the independence to rely neither on her mother's nor a husband's wealth and to find her own way in the world. Mrs. Warren, with her practicality and rough life, cannot imagine that this is possible.

If running a brothel has taught Kitty to view people as commodities, Vivie is Kitty's most precious possession. Throughout the play, she negotiates and values her daughter as she deals with the men in her life. Kitty's managerial mothering style, especially for the old-fashioned business of finding her a suitable mate, becomes more obvious when Vivie is offstage, not on. After Frank admits that he is courting her daughter, Mrs. Warren is perturbed; "Now see here : I wont have any young scamp tampering with my little girl. Do you hear? I wont have it" (178-79). Though Kitty playfully flirts with the young man only a moment before, her Vivie must not be involved with him; as she has done all her life, Kitty manages her daughter's relations without her input, attempting to mediate between Vivie and any sub-standard influence. When Crofts reveals Frank is penniless—perhaps to advance his own viability as Vivie's spouse—the matter is settled in economic terms. "Your love's a pretty cheap commodity, my lad. If you have no means of keeping a wife, that settles it : you cant have Vivie" (181). Vivie will not end up in the impoverished position in which Kitty saw other young women suffer. Instead, Kitty plans to settle in with her daughter and guide her toward a respectable match. Mrs. Warren's valuation of her daughter as a superior, prized product is deeply connected to her sense of pride, so that despite her snubbing of Frank as a

possible mate and the knowledge they may be half-brother and sister, she balks when Reverend Gardener suggests that the two cannot marry (180).

Mrs. Warren is so vigilant about her daughter's potential spouse that she even rejects Crofts' proposal, with his promise of lifelong prosperity. Unused to seeing Kitty in the role of doting mother, Crofts finds her mother act hard to believe, so that when she protests, "My girl's little finger is more to me than your whole body and soul," the stage direction tells that reader that "*Crofts receives this with a sneering grin. Mrs Warren, flushing a little at her failure to impose on him in the character of a theatrically devoted mother*" (185-86). It is no matter that he does not believe her devotion; even when he throws around the promise of a comfortable life and a large check, Mrs. Warren repulses his advances on behalf of her daughter. This rejection is significant in light of her work ethic. Mrs. Warren has made her way by feeding off others—her daughter is the one constant attachment, despite their many years apart, that she will not exchange. Of all the ways she manages her mothering, this is perhaps her greatest show of love and respect for her daughter.<sup>30</sup>

While the life of a madame suits Kitty very well, she wants Vivie to have a life of propriety and ease, something that she never aspired to for herself. The unintended consequence of choosing to be a remote mother, however, is that Vivie has learned her ideals from the respectable people who denounce Kitty's line of work. Once Vivie condemns her mother for continuing her profitable work in the sex industry, Kitty unsuccessfully tries to explain how the people who raised Vivie were ignorant of her parenting goals: "What do the people that taught you know about life or about people

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<sup>30</sup> Referring to this scene, Celia Marshik (2006) notes that Kitty "has refused to sell" Vivie to Crofts, which "reveals that Warren and Crofts are used to placing an economic value upon virgins" (50). Thus, a seemingly unremarkable rejection is really very significant.

like me? When did they ever meet me, or speak to me, or let anyone tell them about me? — the fools! Would they ever have done anything for you if I hadn't paid them? Haven't I told you that I want you to be respectable? Haven't I brought you up to be respectable?" (230-31). But in one more contradiction, the life of leisure she wants for Vivie does not suit her own needs. Kitty explains, once again trying to earn her daughter's approval, that "The life suits me : I'm fit for it and not for anything else. If I didn't do it somebody else would; so I don't do any real harm by it. And then it brings in money; and I like making money. No : it's no use : I can't give it up — not for anybody" (232). She cannot discard her economic power, not even for her daughter. Although Kitty remains committed to her own ideals throughout the play, the consequence of remote motherhood is that her daughter can cast her aside with logic and without love. Another consequence is that Kitty herself cannot give up working, which remains her first passion. Vivie connects the two women's drives: "I am my mother's daughter. I am like you : I must have work, and must make more money than I spend. But my work is not your work, and my way not your way. We must part. It will not make much difference to us : instead of meeting one another for perhaps a few months in twenty years, we shall never meet : that's all" (232).

This off-hand rejection makes Kitty question, for the first time, whether being a proximate mother would have been a better path for her. With the reality of the contradictions that her mothering has brought forth, she imagines how she would have raised Vivie if she could do it again: "I'd bring you up to be a real daughter to me, and not what you are now, with your pride and your prejudices and the college education you stole from me — yes, stole : deny it if you can : what was it but stealing? I'd bring you

up in my own house, so I would” (232). But Vivie sees that this sudden avowal is false, making Mrs. Warren defend her decision to be a working mother in an illegal field. “I tried honest work; and I was slave-driven until I cursed the day I ever heard of honest work. I was a good mother; and because I made my daughter a good woman she turns me out as if I were a leper. Oh, if I only had my life to live over again! I'd talk to that lying clergyman in the school” (234). None of this regret erases the disparity between her personal values and those she set for her daughter, so that Vivie gets the last word, proclaiming, “If I had been you, mother, I might have done as you did; but I should not have lived one life and believed in another. You are a conventional woman at heart. That is why I am bidding you good-bye now” (234).

Kitty Warren’s rejection by Vivie is directly caused by the conventional ideals that she attempts to impose on her daughter. The conflict between her life on the fringes and her quiet ambitions for her daughter create a tension that can never be successfully reconciled. Raising her daughter from afar as a remote mother has made her daughter independent and more devoted to moral right than economic gain; the very conventional mindset that Kitty wants for her daughter, ironically, makes her participation in her daughter’s life impossible.

Shaw’s first effort to stage the play in London proved generally unsuccessful. The Lord Chamberlain’s Office rejected *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* when Shaw first submitted it in 1893. Five years later, the play was finally published after a single copyright performance. It wasn’t until 1902, almost ten years after the play was written,

that the London Stage Society<sup>31</sup> presented two private performances with Harley Granville Barker at the New Lyric Club, after being turned down by nearly twenty other venues. Critics were universally appalled by the content of the play, even progressive reviewers like J. T. Grein. The play was not seen again in England until Edith Craig's 1912 production with the Pioneer Players; the first public performance would not come until 1925 (J. Fisher 37-38).

Competing influences, including the incest subplot, Shaw's use of the theater as a means of social reform, and the public's underlying fear of young girls' chastity at the hands of brothel keepers, pimps, and conniving mothers, combine to create the scandal that accompanied *Mrs. Warren's Profession's* first performances. Kitty Warren has rejected all the normal channels of self-fulfillment available for her. She has not married; the identity of her child's father is not clear; she is a sex worker; the success of her career is predicated on the exploitation of others. Layer upon layer of social anxiety is heaped upon her so that Shaw's forward-thinking characterization was lost on audiences preoccupied with her trade. Celia Marshik (2006) notes that "Mary Shaw and Bernard Shaw failed to understand that their contemporaries saw the body of the prostitute on stage as inherently sexualized. Because a prostitute's body is her worksite, she becomes her job in the eyes of many observers . . . By playing a prostitute, Mary Shaw put sex on stage even as she spoke like Lady Macbeth and wore her own hair. She embodied sex in spite of herself" (57-58). While Shaw may have understood the practical reasons that drew women into prostitution, turn-of-the-century audiences could not see beyond Mrs. Warren's trade, obscuring whatever social point Shaw wanted to put forth.

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<sup>31</sup> Since the London Stage society was really a club and not a public institution, this performance was only open to members (Harrington 41-42). Aside from reviewers, therefore, this audience would have been more open to this progressive drama than the general public.



Another facet of the drama that disturbed its first audiences and puzzled critics is the speculation that Kitty's daughter Vivie is the half-sister of her suitor Frank. When William Archer criticized this aspect of the plot, Shaw defended his decision to include this taboo theme, writing, "The incestuous part of Mrs. Warren is a genuine part of the original plan"; he cites several instances where adults become involved with the offspring of their former lovers, including a man who wanted to marry his grown sister after having been interested in his mother as a youth (Laurence, *Collected Letters* 574). Shaw claims that "A certain inevitability about these cases had struck me as being dramatic long before I wrote Mrs Warren, also a certain squalid comicality consisting partly, I think, in the fact that there was such an utter absence of any tragic consequences when there was no exposure [of prostitution]. These and many confirmatory observations made the solid mass of 'Mrs W's P'—there is really no side issue" (Laurence, *Collected Letters* 574-75). Rather than some tangential secondary plot, Shaw views the incest angle as integral to his play since relationships among family members become a viable possibility with the prevalence of prostitution in modern society. As incest was such a great taboo, this plot point challenged spectators to see prostitution from many angles. It was not enough to show the economic imperatives that made prostitution necessary for some women; Shaw believed the ancillary theme of incest deepened his social commentary.

It is difficult to envision Kitty Warren's profession as a career choice, but prostitution and, even more important, brothel keeping, has served as fulfilling work that allows her to live comfortably and freely while avoiding the perils reserved for most working-class women. As a remote mother, not harnessed to her daughter's side throughout her life, Mrs. Warren has been able to use her entrepreneurial skills to build

houses of prostitution throughout Europe. Neither her success as a business woman nor Shaw's new angle on prostitution is presented as a one-dimensional success story; it is surely not a manifesto in favor of prostitution. Had she married at a young age, however, her daughter would not have had the education and cloistered upbringing that leads her to look down on her mother's life.

*The New York Times* eagerly tracked the controversy associated with the production of the play. Years before arriving in New York, critic E.A.D. complained about the play's London production, claiming it "has not enough wit or dramatic interest to justify its dirty subject" ("Amusements in London" 7).<sup>32</sup> Production plans still progressed, to the dismay of some vocal audience members. One wrote a letter to the paper in April 1905, calling it "nauseating" and declaring that if the play represents art, "there is something rotten with the artists" (Marshale 10). Another reader took exception to Marshale's comments, having gleaned from the play the lesson that "if a transgressor does not himself suffer death the punishment will surely fall upon his children" (L.S. 8).

*The New York Times* continued to chronicle the dissension as it escalated when a librarian removed *Man and Superman* from the shelves of the New York Public Library. With his characteristic wit, Shaw wrote a letter to the paper, claiming "Comstockery is the world's standing joke at the expense of the United States." His fundamental aim to help audiences undermine conventional thinking and values is emphasized in his disgust that "The one refuge left in the world for unbridled license is the married state" ("Bernard

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<sup>32</sup> Given Shaw's interest in Ibsen, it is not surprising that this critic was dismayed by *A Doll's House* as well.

Shaw Resents” 1).<sup>33</sup> Shaw challenges audiences to acknowledge the inequalities in the social structure that leads to a situation like Margaret’s. In response, Anthony Comstock, secretary of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, claimed he neither knew Shaw nor understood what he was talking about (“Who’s Bernard Shaw?” 9).<sup>34</sup>

After the play’s U.S. premiere in Connecticut in October 1905, Mayor John P. Studley, under pressure from his constituency, closed the play, claiming that “New Haven . . . simply wouldn’t stand for the show” (“Daly’s New” 1). The papers set the tone for public discussion. *The New Haven Register* critiqued the play by insulting the audience members, writing, “The fatuous sophistry, by which Mrs. Warren defended her conduct to her daughter, was greedily observed and approved of by an element that clearly wished to believe in it. A spectator at last night’s performance who failed to note and be impressed by this quality of the audience must have been densely ignorant of human nature.” *The New Haven Leader* agreed with this assessment, calling it “the most shockingly immoral dialogue ever publicly repeated” (qtd. in “Daly’s New” 1).

Despite the New Haven scandal, the play moved along to a New York premiere. Critical reception was just as harsh as it was in Connecticut. In condemning language that mirrors reviews of other texts discussed in this dissertation, *The Herald* deems the play “morally rotten” and goes on to dramatically critique its content.

The only way successfully to expurgate “Mrs. Warren’s Profession” is to cut the whole play out. You cannot have a clean pig sty. The play is an insult to decency because—  
It defends immorality.

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<sup>33</sup> Shaw’s disdain certainly could be applied to Margaret and Miles Flinders’ marriage in *The Unpossessed*, as their relationship deteriorates under the force of gender inequities.

<sup>34</sup> The *Times* continued to delight in their rivalry, and fanned the controversy further, suggesting that Shaw’s confession of an impure text and Comstock’s threats of arrest served to promote the Irish playwright (“Shaw and Comstock” 8).

It glorifies prostitution.

It besmirches the sacredness of a clergyman's calling.

It pictures children and parents living in calm observance of most unholy relations.

And, worst of all, it countenances the most revolting form of degeneracy by flippantly discussing the marriage of brother and sister, father and daughter, and makes one supposedly moral character of the play, a young girl, declare that choice of shame, instead of poverty, is eminently right. (qtd. in "Critics' Verdict Hostile" 9).

Underlying all these degenerate factors is the displaced family unit, outraged with incest and unnatural family relations.

These harsh condemnations only fueled the spirits of the opening night audience at the Garrick Theatre on October 31, 1905. The house was packed beyond capacity, leaving over 2,000 without tickets ("Shaw's Play Unfit" 9). While the authorities and some critics felt the production violated decency standards, the audience was not wholly convinced of its impropriety. *The New York World* distributed cards as people went to their seats with the question: "In your opinion is 'Mrs. Warren's Profession' a play fit to be presented on the American stage?" Of the 963 people in the theater, 576 people, about 60%, voted; 304 found the play fit while 272 found the play unfit ("Shaw's Play Unfit" 9). While it may have been popular to posture against the play in the press, there was a wide segment of the audience that found the play acceptable. Nevertheless, the opening night audience may not have been a representative sample of the theater-going population. When *Mrs. Warren's Profession* was first produced, Shaw had been writing plays for over a decade but had failed to get many of them produced because of their progressive content; he was best known at the time for his work as a socialist with the Fabian society and as a theater critic for the *Saturday Review* (Mazer 1). His political reputation may have attracted certain like-minded audience members to attend the

opening, which may account for many of those who deemed the play appropriate. Police Commissioner William McAdoo had his own theories about the audience; the only way he could account for the lack of demonstrations or rebellion during the performance was that the audience was atypical, being comprised of those who could afford expensive tickets. He speculated that the great number of people arriving in carriages meant that the audience was wealthy, though he was also amazed at the number of young women in attendance (“Shaw’s Play Unfit” 9).

The day following the opening, a rush on the box office resulted in \$10,000 worth of tickets sold by the afternoon—all of which would be returned when the manager, Samuel Gumpertz, was arrested and the play was forced to close. William McAdoo submitted a report to the courts justifying the action. He comments that the play “is revolting, indecent, and nauseating where it is not boring. It tells working girls that it is much better to live a carefully calculated life of vice rather than of honest work” (“Shaw’s Play Stopped” 2). Hearings continued for months against this play that seemed to threaten working girls’ chastity. By July 1906, the courts decided that the play might be indecent, but not from a legal standpoint. In Justice Olmstead’s prevailing opinion, only one example from the entire play is presented to describe its unsavory character: the incest subplot between Vivie and Frank, dismissed by the judge as little more than a ploy for shock value. Notably, the language of the assent parallels, once again, the harsh critical language heaped onto other works of art discussed in this dissertation. Justice Olmstead writes that the play, “instead of exciting impure imagination in the mind of the spectator, that which is really excited is disgust; that the unlovely, the repellent, the disgusting in the play are merely accessories to the main purpose of the drama” (“Court

Approves” 7). It did not violate decency standards, however, and so could not be banned. Having overcome Comstock’s indecency patrol, the play was on its way to become part of the repertory.

By the 1960’s, three main points were the focus of criticism on *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. Some believed that Shaw put the onus of responsibility for prostitution on society, not women. Others claimed that Shaw was inaccurate in his belief that prostitutes are forced into the business by economic imperatives and not by personal choice. Finally, critics focused on the moral fortitude of the play, despite the scandal it created at the time of production (Berst 390). Recent criticism has built on these ideas. Dan H. Laurence (2004) analyzes the characters in terms of societal mores and writes “Vivie is saved from disaster because Kitty, who has rebelled against Victorian inequities and insensitiveness and has survived by adopting instinctively the Victorian capitalist morality of doing what pays best, loses her daughter by falling prey to the debilitating disease of conventionality, which disenchants and alienates Vivie. One might make a case for the individualist Vivie as the theater’s earliest existentialist” (“Victorians Unveiled” 7). In *British Modernism and Censorship* (2006), Celia Marshik notes that the play “paradoxically keeps intact myths that it elsewhere dismantles” (57) since Kitty argues that prostitution is the best way to support herself, though she and her partner exploit other women. For my purposes, this idea underscores my point that the play acts as a new moment for working mothers. While Kitty’s portrayal certainly “compromises the didactic thrust of the play” (57), she is framed as an uncompromising business woman, akin to characterizations of male businessmen who are ruthless in furthering their careers. Whatever our moral judgment regarding the ethical aspects of her behavior,

the idea that a mother could behave this way was new. Although other women would have had the same motivation to pursue prostitution as Kitty, few would have achieved her financial and managerial success, making this portrayal significant. Further, Kitty's unwillingness to compromise her career for her daughter's affection or her daughter for the promise of stability in Crofts's money makes her a resisting character, despite her desire for a conventional life for her daughter; her freedom or her career will not be sacrificed for the lure of easy security.

It is not surprising that as a remote mother, Kitty Warren overturns expectation and attends to her own needs above anyone else's. The various points of controversy in the play—Kitty Warren's profession, the implication that she exploits other women, and the incest subplot—are only possible because she has taken an unconventional route and ignored all rules of decorum by which women were judged. While the incest subplot often is read as a distraction, this facet adds to the unusual consequences of Mrs. Warren's life choices, one that begins when she rejects her working class destiny. Had she become pregnant or worked herself sick in a factory, her fate would be more tragic, but the ends would have been more conventional—certainly not unwed motherhood and a thriving business as a sex worker. Her willingness to exploit people to advance her business results in her financial wealth; the typical self-sacrificing woman would not trample others for material needs and self-promotion. In fact, this cluster of characteristics seems more associated with the typical male character's actions. Finally, the very possibility that Vivie could be courted by her half-brother is a direct result of her mother's decision to enter into motherhood without the contract of marriage. Had she settled into traditional roles, this connection certainly would have been impossible. In

Ann Kaplan's terms, Mrs. Warren can be classified as a resisting mother since she provides alternative structures that work to reframe women's potential—even though this end comes at the price of exploiting other women. Nevertheless, as the play progresses, the spectator also views Mrs. Warren through her daughter's perspective as the complicit, phallic mother, whose rule Vivie works to overcome.

Shaw was no champion of the nuclear family and the narrow scope of choices it left women, but *Mrs. Warren's Profession* highlights the strange new avenues that open up in a life lived outside custom. As he would write to *The New York Times* in September 1905 regarding the controversy surrounding *Man and Superman*, "you cannot have an advance in morality until you shake the prevailing sense of right and wrong sufficiently to compel a readjustment" ("Bernard Shaw Resents" 2). Each of the disparate taboos suggested by the play seems to undermine the "prevailing sense of right and wrong" for women.

In Susan Glaspell's *The Verge*, we find another remote mother, this one presented in a plot so expressionistic that critics were just as puzzled by the form as they were by the content of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Susan Glaspell was a founding member of The Provincetown Players, a forum for American playwrights that aimed to encourage equality; the group adhered to an underlying philosophy that "art and politics are inseparable" (Duneer 34). Great victories for women's rights had been won since the controversial production of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* earlier in the century, most notably women's right to vote with the Nineteenth Amendment. While World War I had recently ended, the jobs that women had filled while men fought had not yet been completely retracted. Furthermore, fewer women entered the workforce during World War I in



America than in Britain. Since the United States waited to enter the war until 1918, the number of soldiers who were sent overseas was far less when compared to the number sent in Europe. The period marked a time of experimentation that resulted in plays like *The Verge*. Still, some critics were put off by its form and were perhaps looking for the style which had earned her popularity in three previous novels.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, Glaspell had not yet gained the brief but wide notoriety she would achieve after the publication of her later novels or her Pulitzer Prize winning play *Alison's House* (1931). The atmosphere of the Players, for whom Glaspell took up writing at the urging of fellow founding member and husband George Cram Cook, provided Glaspell with the opportunity to expand her style since they valued innovation over commercial success.<sup>36</sup> Still, she considered herself a novelist, and would return to this genre by the late 1920's (Carpentier 92-93).

*The Verge* elicited debate from viewers, even in the open atmosphere of Greenwich Village where it was first produced; in line with the mission of the Players, Glaspell created a character that was true to a particular vision rather than one that would guarantee a commercial success.<sup>37</sup> The play opened the Provincetown Players' season, with a run from November 14, 1921 through December 1, 1921 at The Playwright's Theatre on MacDougal Street in New York. After thirty-eight performances, the Theatre Guild took over the production and ran matinees at the Garrick Theatre from December 6

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<sup>35</sup> Her first novels were *Glory of the Conquered* (1909), *The Visioning* (1911), and *Fidelity* (1915).

<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that the idealism of the Players's mission was strained after Eugene O'Neill found popularity with *Emperor Jones* in 1921.

<sup>37</sup> Glaspell's biographer Marcia Noe reports that she once told a journalist "Of course I am interested in all progressive movements, whether feminist, social or economic, but I can take no very active part other than through my writing" (qtd. in Noe 44). As I will demonstrate for Crothers and Ibsen, writers who tackle women's issues seem hesitant to completely align themselves with feminist causes.

to December 16, 1921.<sup>38</sup> The production was not successful enough to drive sales and it finished its New York run back at the Playwright's Theatre for two weeks (Papke 56). While it is sometimes assumed that the play had a large following of feminist admirers, critical reaction was mixed and its short run did not generate much of a profit for the company.

Like Mrs. Warren, remote mother Claire Archer has put her career in the center of her life; though her field was more conventionally acceptable, it was still unusual. Claire is a botanist who takes an artistic approach to manipulate her plants with experiments that aim to smash conventional patterns and create new forms of life. The attempts to create these new forms come before the needs of, literally, any Tom, Dick, or Harry, the names of her lovers and husband, or her daughter. While science may have been more socially acceptable than brothel keeping, Claire's attitude is far less traditional than Mrs. Warren's: just as she wants to create new forms in her life, so she doesn't crave the conventionality that Kitty Warren quietly wants for her daughter. In fact, Claire's daughter, Elizabeth, has been raised very much like Vivie, away from her mother with access to the best resources. The two plays, written several decades apart, one by a British man, the other by an American woman, feature parallel mother-daughter relationships.

Since these mothers are focused on their careers, months elapse without contact with their children. Examining the moment mother and daughter are reunited provides an instructive perspective on issues central to the relationship. In both cases, the expectation

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<sup>38</sup> *The New York Times* reports that the Theatre Guild usually did not run plays like *The Verge*, which would be squeezed in between scheduled performances at The Garrick ("'The Verge' at Garrick" 22). The experimental nature of the play may explain why midtown audiences were not more interested in the production.

of conformity causes tension between the pair. Whereas Kitty Warren craves convention and ease for her daughter Vivie, Elizabeth's conventionality and gaiety repels Claire. Reuniting after a long period apart is as awkward for Claire and Elizabeth as it is for Kitty and Vivie. Before her arrival, Claire is filled with dread, reflecting, "I knew something was disturbing me. Elizabeth. A daughter is being delivered unto me this morning. I have a feeling it will be more painful than the original delivery. She has been, as they quaintly say, educated; prepared for her place in life" (69-70). Elizabeth is disappointed that her mother won't interrupt her work to meet her in the main house, so she seeks her out in the greenhouse where the experiments are conducted. Claire finally deigns to stick her head out of a trapdoor.

ELIZABETH: Mother! It's been so long - (*she tries to overcome the difficulties and embrace her mother*)

CLAIRE: (*protecting a box she has*) Careful, Elizabeth. We mustn't upset the lice.

ELIZABETH: (*retreating*) Lice? (*but quickly equal even to lice*) Oh - yes. You take it - them - off plants, don't you?

CLAIRE: I'm putting them on certain plants.

ELIZABETH: (*weakly*) Oh, I thought you took them off.

CLAIRE: (*calling*) Anthony! (*he comes*) The lice. (*he takes them from her*)  
(CLAIRE, *who has not fully ascended, looks at ELIZABETH, hesitates, then suddenly starts back down the stairs.*)

HARRY: (*outraged*) Claire! (*slowly she re-ascends - sits on the top step. After a long pause in which he has waited for CLAIRE to open a conversation with her daughter.*) Well, and what have you been doing at school all this time? (74)

Unlike Mrs. Warren, whose awkward and self-conscious attempts to perform the "good" mother role forces her to mimic a doting attitude, Claire feels no obligation to put up this charade, sensing neither an obligation to her daughter nor the social mores her family wants her to perform. In this regard, Claire is more closely aligned to Vivie Warren, who would never display an emotion she didn't really feel for the sake of appearances.

A second, deeper parallel between the two mothers is their inability to share with their daughters the true nature of their work. Working in a career outside the mainstream makes these remote mothers keep their professions, which they are sure their daughters would not understand, to themselves. While Mrs. Warren is fiercely proud of her work and the independence it offers her, the social stigma attached to prostitution and the inevitable scorn it will elicit motivates her to say nothing about it. The desire to keep her daughter in a bubble of conventionality may contribute to Mrs. Warren's need to keep her work private for as long as possible—even indefinitely. The model is reversed in *The Verge*, where Claire has no desire to talk about her botanical experiments with her daughter Elizabeth; in this case, she does not want to preserve her daughter's conventionality but instead wants to avoid it. Elizabeth's devotion to tennis, ice skating, Miss Lane and "All the girls" makes Claire reticent about her experiments.

ELIZABETH: Well, now that I'm here you'll let me help you, won't you, mother?

CLAIRE: (*trying for control*) You needn't – bother.

ELIZABETH: But I *want* to. Help add to the wealth of the world.

CLAIRE: Will you please get it out of your head that I am adding to the wealth of the world!

ELIZABETH: But, mother – of course you are. To produce a new and better kind of plant –

CLAIRE: They may be new. I don't give a damn whether they're better.

ELIZABETH: But – but what are they then?

CLAIRE: (*as if choked out of her*) They're different.

ELIZABETH: (*thinks a minute, then laughs triumphantly*) But what's the use of making them different if they aren't better?

HARRY: A good square question, Claire. Why don't you answer it?

CLAIRE: I don't have to answer it. (75-76)

Harry pressures Claire to give a precise answer about what she is doing with her plants; he is as unsure of her purpose as Elizabeth is. Part of their confusion comes from

Claire's difficulty expressing her ideas satisfactorily.<sup>39</sup> Always polite and respectable, Elizabeth declares that she would love to help her along, but this offer is an intrusion to Claire—mentoring someone who cannot understand what it means to break out of new forms has no appeal. In this sense, her work with plants gives Claire the chance to metaphorically correct her first failure at creating new life forms, ones that break the mold, in the act of motherhood. When Dick asks “But isn't her daughter one of her experiments?” her assistant Anthony can answer definitively, “Her daughter is finished” (72.). Claire cannot now mix the old, failed experiment with the new one and objects to the pressure her family puts on her, diverting their wishes by taking on the role of the mother they want her to be. She wonders, “Why do you ask me to do that? This is my own thing. Why do you make me feel I should – (*goes to ELIZABETH*) I will be good to you, Elizabeth. We'll go around together. I haven't done it, but – you'll see. We'll do gay things. I'll have a lot of beaus around for you. Anything else. Not – this is – Not this” (76). This is the one moment in the play where Claire attempts to perform motherhood, but it is a hollow promise that will never be filled; it merely forestalls Elizabeth's intrusions into her work.

But the half-hearted attempt to placate her family while keeping them away from her work disintegrates as she considers the possibility of this new experiment taking on traditional forms, the same ones realized by her daughter. With regret, she decides, “I should destroy the Edge Vine. It isn't – over the edge. It's running, back to – 'all the girls'. It's a little afraid of Miss Lane, (*looking somberly at it*) You are out, but you are not

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<sup>39</sup> Linda Ben-Zvi (1989) discusses Glaspell's trouble expressing her ideas. She notes “The most common punctuation mark she uses is the dash. It is used when the character is unsure of the direction in which she is going, as yet unprepared to articulate consciously a new awareness or unwilling to put into words feelings and wishes which may collapse under the weight of words” (156).

alive” (77). Her family is horrified that she could so easily discard all this hard work, and she tries, unsuccessfully, to explain the need to create something that can continue to reproduce itself in forms that have never been seen. Elizabeth’s well-bred, polite attitude breaks down once she understands her mother’s modernist impulse to create for the sake of creating, not to better the world.<sup>40</sup> In a rage at her daughter’s inability to understand her, Clare responds in the only way she knows how: if she cannot create, she will destroy, and so pulls Edge Vine, an experiment that has not gone beyond the edge, out from the roots. Even Anthony’s reminder that the plant is the result of many years of work only reinforces her resolve since it, “May only make a prison!” (78). She struggles to explain her difficulty:

CLAIRE: (*struggling with HARRY, who is trying to stop her*) You think I too will die on the edge? (*she has thrown him away, is now struggling with the vine*) Why did I make you? To get past you! (*as she twists it*) Oh yes, I know you have thorns! The Edge Vine should have thorns. (*with a long tremendous pull for deep roots, she has it up. As she holds the torn roots*) Oh, I have loved you so! You took me where I hadn't been.

ELIZABETH: (*who has been looking on with a certain practical horror*) Well, I'd say it would be better not to go there!

CLAIRE: Now I know what you are for! (*flings her arm back to strike*

ELIZABETH with the Edge Vine)

HARRY: (*wresting it from her*) Claire! Are you mad?

CLAIRE: No, I'm not mad. I'm – too sane! (*pointing to ELIZABETH – and the words come from mighty roots*) To think that object ever moved my belly and sucked my breast! (*ELIZABETH hides her face as if struck*) (78)

For Claire, Elizabeth is just another creation that has not moved beyond what has been and should therefore be harmed. Had her family not stopped her, she would have beaten Elizabeth with the huge, thorny vine, taking out frustration on another design that has not evolved to its unseen potential.

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<sup>40</sup> In fact, Claire seems to take Ezra Pound’s credo to “make it new” quite literally.

Glaspell never had any children of her own, but it is likely that she based her characterization of working mothers on two of her friends, one a remote mother, the other a proximate mother. The remote mother was Mary Vorse, a political activist and journalist who was forced to entrust care of children to others—her son was sent to boarding school while her two other children were sent to family in the southwest. Glaspell saw the guilt and frustration caused by this situation, since her children's absence made Vorse feel guilty while care of her children made her long to get back to her work. This real-life remote mother is an important counterpoint to Claire Archer and Kitty Warren, who seem less plagued by the guilt of absence. Writer Neith Boyce was Glaspell's other model, a proximate mother who was able to work and to write since her husband was available to share responsibilities of the children with her. Her situation proved to be just as difficult, however, because her husband resented her work and made many demands. Curiously, the demands made on Boyce seem even greater than those that were made of Claire Archer (Ben-Zvi, 2005, 238)

Claire's sister Adelaide visits her gaping tower, an incomplete, ragged structure built into the stage that serves as Claire's second private space in the house—the first being the greenhouse. Adelaide wants to convince her sister to take more interest in Elizabeth as a way to find some solace and satisfaction in life, but the conversation does not unfold as Adelaide might have hoped it would. She appeals to Claire's duty to her daughter, which Claire rejects since her daughter bores her; Adelaide is shocked, since "A mother cannot cast off her own child simply because she does not interest her!" to which Claire replies,

CLAIRE: (*an instant raising cool eyes to ADELAIDE*) Why can't she?

ADELAIDE: Because it would be monstrous!

CLAIRE: And why can't she be monstrous – if she has to be? (79)

Adelaide cannot conceive that a woman's priorities may reside outside the family, with work, though this model often worked for men at this time. Adelaide proposes that if she involves herself with more people, there will be less time to think of herself as she attends to other's needs. This idea is equally monstrous to Claire: the proposition of being forced to spend time with her daughter is so distasteful that she screams out to Tom for help:

ADELAIDE: *Claire!* I don't see how – even in fun – pretty vulgar fun – you can speak in those terms of a pure young girl. I'm beginning to think I had better take Elizabeth.

CLAIRE: Oh, I've thought that all along.

ADELAIDE: And I'm also beginning to suspect that – oddity may be just a way of shifting responsibility.

CLAIRE: (*cordially interested in this possibility*) Now you know – that might be.

ADELAIDE: A mother who does not love her own child! You are an unnatural woman, Claire.

CLAIRE: Well, at least it saves me from being a natural one. (85)

What Claire wants most is to be left alone, especially as a mother, a role she could easily discard. Claire's apathy provokes the ire of her sister, whose response matches the general attitude toward working mothers at this time.

Nevertheless, Claire's work, which places her outside her family circle even as it consumes her, is not tied to any financial ends. It is not clear how she supports herself or pays for her experiments and her assistant, whether she lives off her family's wealth, her husband's and her lover's money, or the work that she does.<sup>41</sup> The absolute absence of

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<sup>41</sup> The text makes clear that Claire comes from an upper-class family. As Claire demands, "What inside dope have you on what I was meant to be?" Adelaide responds that "I know what you came from" (79). It is this past that Claire attempts to escape in her own life.



financial issues, except in the class markers presented by her daughter's private school education and reference to her New England ancestors, makes Claire an artist figure, one whose work is tied to creative gain.

The only time she expresses maternal desire is when she considers the loss of her son. The high point of her life involves his memory; in one, flying in an airplane with Harry, a thrilling new invention as of 1921, her unborn son stirred in her womb. The second point she can call "life" is the memory of her son asking what was beyond the stars the night before he died. Claire, with her distaste for any human contact that will demand anything in return, shows the deepest human feeling for this boy that she cannot mother but still can love. While her daughter is another failed attempt at breaking through to new forms, her boy died with his potential and her love intact. Perhaps the death of Claire's son in some way contributes to her rejection of Elizabeth. More important, his gender suggests that men had more potential to take on new forms than did women, whose scope was necessarily limited.

Initial response to the play was mixed, though it did cause a stir among audience members, a fact that *New York Times* critic Alexander Woollcott attributes to the actress playing Claire. He explains that interest in the play "is momentarily and disproportionately glorified by the vital and radiant playing of Margaret Wycherly in its central rôle" ("The Play; Provincetown Psychiatry" 27). Greenwich Village crowds and the members of Glaspell's group, the Heterodoxy club, were open to these innovations (Makowsky 61).<sup>42</sup> However, while some critics assume Greenwich Village would be largely receptive to this work, the most extended and polarized debate about the play took

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<sup>42</sup> The Heterodoxy club was a group of over one hundred women, of varying ethnicities, social classes, and sexual orientations, that discussed feminist issues (Duneer 35 and fn 9).

place in the local publication *The Greenwich Villager*. At least seven reviews appeared in this publication in the course of its opening month, which ranged from deeming it too awful to review to proclaiming it a work of genius.<sup>43</sup>

Yet not everyone who came to the play found the disjointed text worth analyzing deeply. After opening night, Alexander Woollcott comments that *The Verge* is “a play which can be intelligently reviewed only by a neurologist or by some woman who has journeyed near to the verge of which Miss Glaspell writes. And by the same token, only these would enjoy it greatly.” More perplexing than Claire are the supporting characters, “the three men who hotly pursue this distressed and distressing lady instead of running from her as if she were plague-stricken” (“The Play; Provincetown Psychiatry” 27). A few days later, Woollcott revisited the play, characterizing Claire as someone who can “talk and talk and talk about herself with the ego-centric ardor and helpless garrulity of a patient in a psychoanalyst’s office” (“Second Thoughts” 74). The overall message eludes him and he dismisses it.

Critics seem to enjoy using elaborate phrases to criticize the play. *The Boston Evening Transcript*, for instance, cites *The Herald’s* assessment that the play “‘is not quite as interesting as a psychopathic ward, but far, far stranger’” (qtd. in “Excited and Obscure” 11). *The New York Call’s* Maida Castellun praises its portrait of the human mind while critiquing the repetitive and vague qualities of the drama; to her, Claire is a Nietzschean “superwoman” or “female Lucifer” (4). Robert Allerton Parker of *The Independent and the Weekly Review* took exception to Claire, though he notes that it is

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<sup>43</sup> For a thorough summary of each review, see Mary E. Papke’s *Susan Glaspell: A Research and Production Sourcebook*. Unfortunately, I was not able to find any public library with a holding of the issues of *The Greenwich Villager* that reviewed *The Verge* in 1921.

impossible to feel indifferently about the play; it evoked passionate discussion, something that most current plays were not doing. The play only succeeds if it is Glaspell's intention to "satirize the type of erotic, neurotic, ill-tempered, and platitudinous hussy who dramatizes herself into a 'superwoman' and even 'puts it over' on her gentlemen friends until they too accept her at her own valuation." On the other hand, if Glaspell's intention was to make a superwoman, she has failed for Claire is a "fraudulent female." He goes on to invalidate Claire's work and her genius since "The authentic scientist today does not indulge in botanical hocus-pocus and melodramatic mutations" (296). Though Ludwig Lewisohn, of *The Nation*, takes Claire's work more seriously, calling her "an experimental horticulturalist" (708), the general response of ornate condescension reveals how dismissive critics were of a woman who took both her art and her experiments very seriously. Such intensity only revealed vanity in a woman, not true art.

The play was also met with mixed reviews when it was produced in London four years later on March 29, 1925, by the Pioneer Players. The Players was a subscription theater company that was founded by Edith Craig; *The Verge* would be their final performance together (Papke 56). The *Illustrated London News* praises and critiques the play through the lens of Glaspell's gender: "What Charlotte Brontë did for the novel, Susan Glaspell is doing for the play. She is making it effeminate. I do not use the word in any derogatory sense. In a word, she has broken away from the masculine tradition" ("The World of the Theatre" 644). The critic believes that Glaspell is the first playwright to present the female point of view; all other woman dramatists have merely been imitators. Other critics were not quite as impressed. J. F. Holms acknowledges that the audience took the play seriously, but his tone is dismissive. As opposed to the *Illustrated*

*London News* critic, Glaspell's gender becomes a liability for her art—the problem with the play is that “It is written, unfortunately, by a woman in deadly earnest.” He concludes that Glaspell would be qualified to write “a really excellent boulevard melodrama” thus relegating her to more appropriate, womanly endeavors (746). The reviewer for *The Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury* dislikes the play as well due to its ““fanatical feminism”” (qtd. in Papke 68).

Out of the many passionate reviews that *The Verge* provoked, not one that I located commented on Claire's deficiencies as a mother; most seemed more disturbed by the experimental nature of the play, especially if the expressionistic elements were foreign to them. Ben-Zvi (2005) attributes this absence to the sophistication of the critics. She writes that “They understood the function of Elizabeth, even when they did not fully understand the struggles of Claire or the import of Glaspell's play” (243). Although critics may have understood that Elizabeth stood as a foil for Claire's personality, I think it is more accurate to say that they did not view Claire as a mother. Claire is so different from the accepted understanding of motherhood that she becomes as expressionistic and unrealistic to audiences as the set and the more poetic sections of the dialogue. Since Claire lies outside what normally might be deemed maternal, they did not even judge her by this standard.

In her overview of Glaspell's plays, Christine Dymkowski (1988) discusses how, with the exception of *Trifles* (1916), Glaspell had been ignored throughout the twentieth century by both theater companies and publishers. After the late 1980's, though, there became increasing interest in her writing, and Glaspell was positioned as the writer whose greatness was somehow eclipsed by Eugene O'Neill. With a few revivals and

Linda Ben-Zvi's 1995 edited collection *Susan Glaspell: Essays on Her Theater and Fiction*, critical attention eventually moved beyond "A Jury of Her Peers" and *Trifles*.

Plays like *The Verge* lend themselves to contemporary feminist criticism.

However, contemporary critics sometimes appropriate the oppression faced by other literary women and apply this critique to Claire without digging deeper into the nuances of her particular situation. Since female portrayals so often are marked by suppression by men, critics assign these same obstacles for Claire though they are not necessarily Claire's greatest hurdle. For instance, critics sometimes point to an oppressive patriarchy at the heart of Claire's madness. Veronica Makowsky (1993) says she is "thwarted by patriarchy" (82). Drew Eisenhauer (2006) claims that "Adelaide and Harry reject what Claire is doing out of hand . . . unwilling to acknowledge a creative force for women outside of motherhood. They offer no alternatives for Claire but for her to renounce her genius entirely" (134).<sup>44</sup> Both these viewpoints ignore her family's frequent attempts to understand what she is doing. They try to draw her back into the family circle, though this desire does not preclude her from continuing her work. Her desire to work autonomously in her lab is obvious, but she has no need to be embroiled in the social network of family that is so distasteful to her. In fact, all compulsory social interaction bothers her. It is difficult for critics to separate this desire to be free of all social constraints from the ordinary suppression that women suffer.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Before Glaspell was revived in the 1990's, one of the few studies of her writing, by Arthur E. Waterman (1966), concluded that "We must realize that Claire has gone too far . . . Claire's final actions indicate that the playwright was making her an extreme case for dramatic purposes" (81). Many of the later critics seemed to be more forgiving of Claire's actions.

<sup>45</sup> Karen Malpede (2002) draws a similar conclusion when she parallels Hedda Gabler and Claire Archer. Malpede attributes Claire's misanthropic attitude to the idea that she "could lose herself in love. Claire, the beautiful, vivacious, brilliant, is pursued by love all through the play. Harry, the husband; Tom, the doomed lover, whose love for her was chaste; and Dick, the man with whom she is actually having an

One advantage that Claire has is not just one but two rooms of her own in addition to enough money to maintain her experiments and her house. The first room is her laboratory greenhouse where her experiments come to life. The second is her jagged tower. Anita Dunner (2006) protests that the space is not her own due to visits by family members, but these visits are a result of Claire's actions that affect the rest of the family. The men find refuge in her greenhouse when she has cut off heat to the main house on a freezing winter's day; Adelaide comes to the tower to make arrangements for Elizabeth. While these visits may be intrusions for Claire, as noted by Dunner (47), it is clear that the space very much belongs to her. In fact, before Claire can remind Adelaide that "It isn't Harry's tower," Adelaide notes that "in the five years you've had the house I was never asked up here before" (79). Even more important, the economic security that comes from her upper middle class background allows her to hire both Anthony and Hattie, who attend to everyday work so that Claire can focus on her experiments.

While Claire is able to go beyond the edge with her botany, Glaspell cannot push these boundaries as well. The viewer is ready to decry the oppression of another woman whose husband wishes his wife would do something more conventional before sending for the psychiatrist. But Claire is not able to favor her science over her expected relationships as sister, mother, and wife and goes insane under the pressure. If Claire

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affair; the daughter Elizabeth, craving a mother's love—all these people lust after Claire, each would claim her for their own, turn her into an image not herself" (126). Malpede's argument attempts to defend Claire's need to alienate. The people who surround her, however, demand little of Claire and give her plenty of leeway to act as her whims take her. Elizabeth, though desiring some time with her mother, is away at school most of the time. Harry gives her so much time to herself that she can indulge in an affair with Dick right in the same home. And Tom, with whom she feels an ultimate connection, actually plans to leave her life forever, just so their emotions don't interfere with the work she needs to do. When he is taken by her beauty, he offers to stay with her, saying, "It shall all be—as you wish" (97). This kind of space seems equal to what the most brilliant of fictional, male characters could hope for as they pursue their own course of study.

could pursue botany, reject her expected role, enjoy her lovers, but still maintain mental stability, *then* she would break through to show that women could possibly be “broken from the forms in which they found themselves” (76). Instead of following the principle to “not be held in forms moulded for us” (64), Claire merely ends up “running, back to – ‘all the girls’” –her own female predecessors who were killed off or made insane when the focus was taken off of motherhood (77).<sup>46</sup>

The most experimental text under discussion in this dissertation is blocked by convention that inhibits the creation of a new family model. Although Claire’s absolute rejection of her daughter allows her to act outside the dictates of society, her portrayal slowly dissolves into that of a madwoman, an artist who, unmoored to personal connections, goes beyond sanity and loses touch with the world as others know it. Although she is as much of a resisting character as Kitty Warren, she is not able to function productively at the edge, making her a parody of the insane artist.

Arguing simply that Claire’s family only wants to feed off of her parasitically diminishes her advantages. It is tacitly acknowledged that economic needs do not motivate her work, as was the case for Mrs. Warren. Her husband chides her for not keeping the house warmer, but in the end seems to let her experiments go on as planned. His one demand, that she see a psychologist for her anti-social behavior, might easily seem to fit into the rubric of the nineteenth-century controlling husband, except that she has gone mad before the psychiatrist has arrived. In reality, a modern chord has been struck in this relationship so that what we expect from the male characters cannot immediately apply. She has enough freedom to conduct her experiments, take on lovers,

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<sup>46</sup> An introduction to a 1987 edition of the play suggests that this model of artist at the brink of insanity may also have been based on her experiences with her husband George Cram Cook’s temperament. He often teetered on the edge of insanity as he pursued his own writing career (Bigsby 21).

and do as she pleases, even if her sister and husband encourage her to take some interest in her daughter. Yet, the pressure to create new forms is too much with her and she kills Tom, the one person she deeply loves, when she thinks he will try to stop her from dwelling at the edge of sanity, a place where she would like to remain. Recent critiques that ignore the nuances of Claire's situation reveal as much about a late-twentieth century critical lens that expects to find certain patterns in works of art where a woman claims the right to independence. But it is her involvement in the bonds of the nuclear family that makes Claire's position more difficult than that of the independent Kitty Warren who is first and foremost accountable to herself. Female characters like Claire who suffer from mental illness forgo the opportunity to affect real change on the structures they so solemnly fight. As Claire prepares to be arrested for her crime, all her work can be discarded as that of one who should have spent more time mothering and less time fiddling. The remote mother's model thus can be nullified and discarded when her work leads to madness and, if not to success, at least, satisfaction. Even though Claire is one of the few characters that fits neatly into Ann Kaplan's resisting category by providing alternate structures to the norm and highlighting inequality, particularly for women, Claire's portrayal is limited because she cannot permanently maintain these alternate structures.

Central to both these remote mothers who operate outside the norm is a conventionality that prevents them from true happiness. For Mrs. Warren, this conventionality is a value system that prizes installing her daughter as the proper, upper-class woman she could never be; she has no desire to instill the satisfaction work has given her, as if such a thing were too base for her daughter. Kitty mothers her daughter



the only way she knows how: with money. For Claire, conventionality comes in her inability to remain sane in a world that questions her work and where nature reveals itself to be surprisingly predictable. Even as she attempts to break out of old forms, Claire herself dissolves into the madwoman of nineteenth-century literature, hiding in her tower, scratching the walls, unable to communicate with those around her. When she realizes her experimental plants have a set form, she destroys the one person with whom she has a psychic connection because he wants to help her.

Like Mrs. Warren, Claire would like her daughter to remain separate from her work, distracting her with assurances that she will take her to do something “gay.” This single instance that Claire performs motherhood is really an attempt to distance Elizabeth; unlike Mrs. Warren, she has no sincere desire to be a part of her daughter’s life and would prefer to be left alone to her work. This feeling is so strong that she expresses a certain relief that her son died young, believing all his wonder would be stamped out by the world. For Claire, an idealized, absent child is possible to love, but not a living one who demands even a little of her time. When Mrs. Warren performs motherhood, she is trying to establish her credibility, but her lack of hands-on mothering experience makes her behavior a parody. In the next section, performance of “good” motherhood becomes more important for Evangeline in *The Home-Maker* than Frank of *A Man’s World*,

**Proximate Mothers: *A Man’s World* (1909) and *The Home-Maker* (1924)**

Rachel Crothers’s relationship with her own mother provides a context for her characterization of working mothers. Marie Crothers had nine children, only four of whom lived into adulthood. Rachel was the youngest of her siblings, born only a year after her mother began medical school when the family ran into financial difficulties.

The young girl seems to have been sent to live with relatives periodically, though this experience didn't affect her schooling and she ultimately graduated from high school early at age thirteen.

In her unpublished autobiographical fragment, *Box in the Attic*, Crothers recalls how her mother was present but seemingly out of reach. She writes, “‘The woman sitting before the fire was my mother who must *not* be disturbed. She held on her lap the biggest book bound in pale leather. Over this book she bent—never looking up. After several years I knew that the book was ‘Gray’s Anatomy’ and that Mother was going to be a doctor’” (qtd. in Curry 62).<sup>47</sup> As Crothers grew older, she became more aware of her mother’s unusual position as a working mother in a male-dominated profession. Marie Crothers found it difficult to establish credibility once she established her own practice in Bloomington, Illinois, but she remained committed to her profession. Rachel understood her mother’s “‘struggle against the strong prejudice and skepticism which prevailed against women in that profession. . . . This shy sensitive woman gave up her personal life and her fastidious housekeeping and became the leading woman physician in that part of the country’” (qtd. in Curry 62-63).

Despite this apparent sympathy for her mother, Crothers consistently emphasizes the important role that all mothers have to play in their households. It is difficult to know whether this reasoning was an attempt to make her own writing seem more conventional—in addition to her interest in women’s social issues, Crothers was always concerned with commercial success—or if it had more to do with her own experiences

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<sup>47</sup> *Box in the Attic* was never published and is now part of the archives at the Museum of the City of New York. I was unable to access the original since the Museum’s research services are temporarily suspended as they relocate their collection. Information about Crothers’s life was gathered from both J.K. Curry’s extensive biographical portrait as well as Chapter 1 of Lois C. Gottlieb’s *Rachel Crothers*.

growing up with a mother who prioritized her profession at least as much as her home duties. Either way, Crothers clearly rejects the remote motherhood that is described in the beginning of this chapter. In a press release entitled “Women’s Place in the World,” Rachel Crothers expresses the impossibility of bringing motherhood into balance with work. When a woman chooses to work,

she must understand that she is automatically giving up the other great privilege—the privilege of being a wife and a mother in the truest sense of the term. She must understand that she is treading on ground that has proven treacherous to others and on which many have come to grief, that is, if they endeavored to play both games at once . . . [A point] I cannot make forcibly enough is that woman should always remember that her duties as a wife and mother come first, that the building of a home and the caring for a family should be, by far, the foremost aims in her life. But, and here is my qualification, if she believes that she is totally unsuited for this plan of life and that she is better suited for the active world, then by all means it is her business to steer clear of matrimony. (qtd. in Curry 64)

Here, Crothers seems committed to the same nuclear family patterns that are persistent in other texts discussed throughout this dissertation; in fact, this viewpoint could have come from the conservative Aunt Adelaide from *The Verge*. What is most curious, however, is that Crothers is one of the few writers able to successfully portray the work-mothering balance that she seems to reject in this press release. In *A Man’s World*, Crothers uses a rejection of the double standard to portray a woman who prioritizes mothering and working over submission to a man and the nuclear family. Even though she is preoccupied with social issues, Crothers finds it expedient to make public claims that the nuclear family is the only feasible family unit.

It is important, however, not to read too deeply into these statements since a close analysis of Crothers’s contact with the press reveals that she was as involved in her own public relations as she was in the other aspects of her plays. Speaking again on the

relation between work and family in 1912, Crothers told the *Boston Herald* that women could indeed combine motherhood and work. She says, “Some people who see the play [*The Herfords*] will go away with the idea that I think it is wrong for married women to work, and this is not at all the idea that I mean to convey. I certainly think that the home should come first in a woman’s life, but I do not see why she should not also have some other occupation besides keeping house and taking care of her children, if she has any” (“Believes Men” 7). Though she now explicitly acknowledges that men should be the “bread winner,” women can work without disrupting the home—so long as the home comes first.

Here, the playwright attempts to direct public opinion about the play that would be renamed *He and She* (1911/1920) in which the power balance of a marriage is threatened when the wife Ann wins a \$100,000 sculpting commission that the husband Tom assumed he would win for his own work. The natural order is restored when their daughter Millicent returns from boarding school with plans to marry the school’s chauffeur. Feeling that her neglect has caused the situation, the mother gives the grant money and the completion of her sculpture to her husband so she can devote herself to her daughter’s care. This is no happy ending and she fears she will one day end up resenting her daughter for this lost opportunity. Crothers emphasizes in her interview that the mother was acting out of devotion to her daughter, not her husband. No matter what her stance is in this article, the plot reveals that within the context of the nuclear family, remote or proximate mothers must make a decision between their jobs and their children. Crothers only steps beyond this portrait when she puts aside the father in her earlier work, *A Man’s World*.

Crothers achieved great notoriety during her career: her plays were adapted for Hollywood films, she was listed on Ida Tarbell's 1930 list of the "Fifty Foremost Women of the United States," and Eleanor Roosevelt awarded her the Chi Omega National Achievement Award in 1938 (Teichmann 85). But at the time of the premiere of *A Man's World* in 1909, the seventy-one performances and productions in other major U.S. cities constituted success for the relatively unknown playwright (Barlow xvii). These seventy-one performances in New York could not have changed public opinion about the double standard between men and women, but they highlight that there was some interest in women's financial independence. Today, however, little is written about the play except in the context of the author's life. Although *A Man's World* was progressive for its time, perhaps its status as a melodrama has precluded it from extensive critical discussion.

Rachel Crothers was known to be far more independent than her female contemporaries—and perhaps even more so than women directors today. She had unusual input in the staging of her plays, work usually reserved for men, including producing, directing, and acting, an unusual combination in the male-dominated world of the theater (Fliotsos and Vierow 127). Crothers wrote, "It became a natural and apparently inevitable thing that I should stage and direct my own plays and I find it infinitely easier to make myself responsible for the slightest details of production and carry the whole burden than it is to delegate different things to different heads, not knowing whether the details are going to fit correctly into the main scheme or not" (qtd. in Curry 59). Her intimate and time-consuming investment in her work, to the point where she even was involved with set and costume design, may explain why Crothers

believed that women should not try to take on the dual task of working and mothering. In *A Man's World*, however, she creates a character who does just that; perhaps, because Frank lives outside the nuclear family norm, even Crothers does not consider Frank a mother, but rather as the other characters do, an honorary man—a woman who is judged by the standards of men, not women.

In style, Crothers's work is traditionally melodramatic. In *A Man's World* a deep secret from the past and a series of coincidences coalesce to determine the outcome of the drama. While *A Man's World* may use conventional stage techniques, Crothers tackles progressive themes that were not readily addressed on stage. With a masculine name that differentiates her from the other female characters, Frank Ware is a working mother who lives in a New York City boarding house among struggling artists. She adopted her seven-year-old son Kiddie in Paris when his mother, abandoned by her lover, died in childbirth. Her status as an adoptive mother does not alter her commitment to or love for her son. Kiddie's father, Malcolm Gaskell, is now Frank's love interest. When the couple discovers this connection, Frank also discovers that Gaskell believes in a double standard for men and women, causing her to end their relationship. Frank prioritizes her love for Kiddie and her work over her bond with Gaskell. Crothers's portrait is of a woman equally devoted to her son and to her career, both of which cause speculation among her admirers that Frank refuses to satisfy. Her reticence sets off gossip regarding Kiddie's parents and Frank's love life. The unspoken rule seems to be that a woman's past and her connections should be part of the public domain.

A second level of speculation concerns her career. Frank is a novelist and a social activist, but both avocations are questioned. Her latest book, about the poverty

experienced by women in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, attracted the praise of critics and the scorn of her admirers. After hearing her work called “the most striking book of the year,” her French friend Emile reflects on her success: “Oh, la, la! She is a very brilliant woman, but she cannot do what is impossible. She cannot write like a man unless a man help her—and no man could make her write like zat unless she love him” (7-8). Another friend disagrees that love is her motivation, but also thinks she could not have written the work. “What if there *is* a man helping her—it might be only a business deal” (8). These male admirers’ perception of Frank is clouded by models they have seen in the past, women like the hapless Clara, who has not had enough training to be a self-sufficient artist but is not beautiful enough to attract a husband. Frank’s raw talent, combined with her role as a mother, makes her critically-acclaimed work seem impossible. The men have no frame of reference to help them believe that her work is authentic.

Her work to establish a home that nurtures the lives of women in need draws skepticism as well. Frank’s rival Lione admits that “I never believed before that you really meant all this helping women business. What’s the use? You can’t change anything to save your neck. Men are men” (57). Frank’s activism seems like a sham since the odds are so against effecting change in a patriarchal society. The man Frank loves, Malcolm Gaskell, makes a similar confession. Relieved to find out that Kiddie is not her biological son, he says, “I begin to see how through your love for the boy—and his mother’s tragedy—you’ve sort of taken up a fight for all women . . . I never thought before that you actually believed that things ought to be—the same—for men and women” (60). Like Lione, he believes that her work is useless, explaining earlier that she

is mistaken to focus on “woman and what she could do for herself if she would. Why—this is a man’s world. Women’ll never change anything” (23). Ultimately, the double standard that Gaskell holds—he feels no remorse for having impregnated a young woman, but could not respect Frank if Kiddie were her own child—will end their relationship; however, he finally understands how mothering is intimately connected to her work. She is driven by the image of Kiddie’s mother, reputation and body ruined by pregnancy and childbirth, suffering shame for an act that was not all her own. Being Kiddie’s adoptive mother gives her work both drive and substance.<sup>48</sup>

Frank has her choice of many suitors and the option to marry and give up her work. As a proximate mother, however, working is not only a task that gives her great pleasure; it also provides a means to effectively mother her child. As she first enters, Frank comments on her relationship to work, telling her artist and musician friends that “You’re lucky dogs to be so poor that you don’t have to work.” Emile wonders at this comment and asks, “Zen why do you kill yourself to get rich?” The reason is clear, to Frank: “I have to get rich for my Kiddie, don’t I?” (10). Before she can even take off her coat, she gives Kiddie a package, tangible evidence that her work gives her the means to provide luxuries for her son. She explains to her friend Fritz how much Kiddie meant to her once his birth mother died in childbirth. “Everything I believe about men and women has been so intensified by him that he has become a sort of symbol to me of what women suffer through men—and he’s given me a purpose—something to do” (21). This unarticulated “something to do” has two aspects: both her mothering and her work. She

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<sup>48</sup> Even reviewers of Frank’s book use her gender to evaluate her writing. Though they were impressed with her previously, the review of her current book reads: “now that we know she is a woman we are more than ever impressed by the strength and scope of her work” (7). Frank, with her man’s name and her independence, proves herself worthy of being an honorary man.



gives Kiddie a safe and secure home; she works to give women a chance to improve their lives against difficult odds.

Frank's ability to channel her writing into a profitable career leaves her oblivious to the fact that her own mothering style, as single parent with no male breadwinner, puts her in an unusual position. Seven-year-old Kiddie notices that they are missing part of the nuclear triangle and asks about his father's profession after hearing other children talk about their dads. Frank tries to invoke her status as an honorary man to soothe him, explaining that "He went away a long time ago—You don't want him. Aren't I a good father? Don't I give you all you need?" Kiddie doesn't seem entirely convinced by this reminder, so she goes on: "I love you as much as if I were your father and mother and sisters and brothers and uncles and aunts. You have to be all those to me, too, you know, because I haven't any. We must tell each other everything and keep close and think all the time of how we can make each other happy" (48). This is a new—and suffocating—conception of motherhood that is all consuming and all embracing. She wants to fulfill Kiddie's need not only for the nuclear family but the extended family structure as well. What makes this demand even remotely possible is her financial independence, an independence made possible not by class but by her ability to support their basic needs. No matter what her ideals, she would be forced to marry—or give up Kiddie—if she did not possess the ability to make ends meet.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Frank is unashamed of the economic benefits her work brings her. Though her friends discuss what it means to put art before money, Frank seems to have been able to combine them both. Her rival Lione comments that she will have it easy now that she does not have to "make any sacrifices" for her work, which Frank denies much to Lione's astonishment (15). Frank, however, is unabashed. "We're all working for money. We'd be fools if we didn't . . . Never mind ideals. I've got a little talent and I'm trying to sell it. So are we all—because we haven't got anything else to sell. It's only genius that forgets money. Only the glory of creating that compensates for being hungry. No—no—talent wants three meals a day—genius can live in spite of none" (16). She ends the conversation by turning to her duty as a mother and putting her son to bed. Frank's friends are unsure how to interpret her comments. They expect her to

As a proximate mother, Frank prefers mothering alone and feels vulnerable when her love for Gaskell threatens the mother-work balance she has established with her son. She tells Gaskell, “My life has been filled with other things you know—with Kiddie—and my work. They absorbed me and satisfied me; and when you—when love began to crowd in—to overpower me—I was afraid. It seemed almost like being a traitor to myself” (50). In loving a man, she has to open herself and her life with Kiddie to someone else, a possibility that she ultimately rejects.

As her artist friends try to understand Frank’s motivations, her suitor Gaskell has a clear opinion of her ideals; he states what will be a refrain throughout the play that “Women are only meant to be loved—and men have got to take care of them” (25). This idea makes Frank uncomfortable and she puts an end to this conversation by turning to her work and telling him she has too much of it to join him later. He refuses to go, though she repeatedly insists that she must work. Despite their differences, love blinds Frank and she dismisses his comments, believing that he is not serious.

Even with her activism and her own guarded independence, Frank does not believe that her path is the one for all women. Clara, who serves as a counterpoint to Frank, is a young woman who lacks the luck or the talent to be successful in the competitive art world and now decides that she would “marry anything that could pay the bills” though she is discouraged since she has never even had a boyfriend. Clara wishes she could be independent like Frank, who advises her that “I believe in women doing the thing they’re most fitted for. You should have married, Clara, when you were a young girl—and been taken care of your whole life” (53). Frank’s advice, anticipating Dorothy

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think like a bohemian artist, living for principles, but she insists that talent, artistic or otherwise, should be channeled and exploited to serve basic needs. With a child to raise, work translates practically into a means of survival.

Canfield Fisher's premise in *The Home-Maker*, acknowledges that her self-reliant model cannot fit every woman; there are those who fit Gaskell's model of the woman who needs a man's care and protection. This progressive portrait is not a universal vision for all women. Nevertheless, there is still hope for Clara, as Frank gets her involved with her project for women in need.

Above all other factors that define Frank's mothering is her commitment to raising Kiddie directly. Although she is not Kiddie's biological mother, as a proximate mother, she is directly involved with all of Kiddie's needs, even with her devotion to her writing and public service. Unlike Kitty Warren and Claire Archer, whose work prevents them from directly raising their children, she wants to guide and protect him herself, no matter what the consequences. She makes this clear when Gaskell urges her to send him away, since he believes the stigma of Kiddie's birth will make boarding school a better option; he explains that she "can't take away the curse that will follow him. He'll have to fight that himself. Don't you see it would be much better to tell the whole business while he's little—too little to know anything about it—and then send him away—put him in some good school?" (61). Despite her feelings for Gaskell, Frank has no intention of raising Kiddie from a distance. It is not until the end of the play that Frank acknowledges Gaskell's belief that the boy's presence will ruin the purity of their relationship because of the double standard. Gaskell is astonished the romance is over, but she assures him, "There's nothing else. It is the end"; reminiscent of the final moments of *A Doll's House*, the stage directions note that "*He goes out closing the door*" (69). Now, however, the heroine remains on the stage, not needing to go out into the world to find herself. She is already found.

Although Frank's ultimate rejection of Gaskell associates Crothers with feminist movements, commercial success was as much a part of her stagecraft as changing society. Crothers was careful not to push social boundaries too far and sometimes tested different endings before establishing her plays on Broadway, marking her as a different playwright from Susan Glaspell, who was willing to take more risks. *A Man's World*, originally called *Kiddie*, included a "happy" ending where Frank accepts Gaskell's point of view, allowing the nuclear family to remain intact, father and son ultimately united. Records indicate that Crothers gave permission for alternate endings like these to be used on the road (Curry 73 and 80 fn. 65). Unlike Jean Rhys, who resented but submitted to the alternate endings of *A Voyage in the Dark* or, as I will show in Chapter Three, Henrik Ibsen, who fought vigorously against the new endings imposed on *A Doll's House*, Crothers seems to see revised endings as a way to promote her plays. For Crothers, it is more important that women's experience is represented, even in an altered form.

With Crothers's understanding of public values, she shaped publicity about *A Man's World* for productions that included the original ending. When the play ran in Philadelphia, members of the clergy were given free tickets with the assurance that ministers in other cities had also enjoyed the play. In the program, she directed the public's attention to the Victorian belief in woman's superior moral status, by quoting Gaskell's declaration that "This is a man's world. Man sets the standard for woman. He knows she's better than he is and he demands that she be – and if she isn't she's got to suffer for it. That's the whole business in a nutshell"; the excerpt became a useful starting point for critics, some of whom quoted this line in their reviews (Murphy, "Feminism and the Marketplace" 85). These subtle actions deflect the power of Frank's

decision to reject Gaskell and the traditional family that his marriage proposal offers her. By aligning herself with conservative values, Crothers made the play appear less radical than it would have otherwise.

It could be argued that this flexibility on Crothers's part means she was more interested in the popularity of her production than with any ultimate message her plays might convey. In a 1910 interview, Crothers explained that she firmly believed men and women should be held to the same standards, though "I am not trying to force that opinion upon the world. The playwright's province is not reform" (Patterson 301). However, it could be said that this method is feminist in itself: by testing reactions to different endings, Crothers could measure exactly how far she could push boundaries without alienating audiences, bringing more people to the theater than if she departed radically from the norm. When her audience was in a safe, familiar environment, it was easier for her to make her single mother reject the safety of paternal protection. Additionally, years of viewing women as the arbiter of all morality may have made Frank's assumption of a higher moral ground somewhat natural, even as she rejects the nuclear triangle and thus takes a resisting stance.<sup>50</sup> This resisting portrayal is particularly powerful because she re-forms the family—without shame—to exclude patriarchal protection.

Despite its progressive vision of maternity, however, the play's social impact was limited, especially since Crothers let touring companies perform the alternate ending that

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<sup>50</sup> Judith L. Stephens (1989) makes a similar point, but she views Frank's rejection within Michèle Barrett's rubric of compensation ("images that . . . elevate the 'moral value' of femininity") and recuperation ("negating and defusing challenges to the historically dominant meaning of gender") (45 and 49). Stephens says that in plays like *A Man's World*, "The representation of the morally superior female projected a powerful figure in Progressive era dramas, but this same representation served to reinforce dominant gender ideology" (54).

reunited the two lovers. The public may not have been ready to accept Frank's decision even if the original had been universally presented. As one *New-York Daily Tribune* critic would report "Desirable as it might be to have this recipe applied to all humankind, the dish of life is likely to be served otherwise for some long time to come. Miss Crothers's play does not move humanity an inch nearer the millennium" (A. W. 7). Crothers could merely reflect the desires bubbling up in some women at this time.

As in the first two dramas under examination in this chapter, reviews did not focus on Frank's role as a working mother.<sup>51</sup> However, they were drawn to the end where Frank rejects Gaskell because of his adherence to the double standard, a rejection that dismisses the nuclear family along with her lover. These critics attribute this anomalous finale to Crothers's gender. Walter Prichard Eaton explains that at the ending "the bewildered and somewhat vexed man goes off forever as the curtain falls. This is a new twist to the old situation; this is the new woman, indeed; and this, a woman's play, faces the old problem without cant or sentimentality, and lands a good square blow" (157). Eaton reconciles Frank's rejection of the family by categorizing and cataloging the play's feminine attributes. He claims the play "misses the masculinity of structure . . . necessary to make it dramatic literature" (156), though its "feminine insight . . . redeems many faults" (161).

The *Hampton's Magazine's* critic takes a condescending, dismissive tone toward the drama as it examines the ending in "Plays and Players." The critic writes, "Tisket-tasket; a green-and-yellow basket. She took an idea into a play and on the way she lost it . . . when Mary Mannering at the final curtain says 'This is the end'—why, nobody

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<sup>51</sup> My focus is on the reviews for the Comedy Theatre performance in Manhattan in February 1910. The play premiered at The National Theatre in Washington on October 18, 1909 (Miller 570).

believes her. The remark is casual, weak, unfortified. ‘This is the end.’ Fiddlesticks! Prove it.” The critic predicts that “Mind you, I think the play will be a tolerable success; women will flock to it. Know why? It advocates the same standard of morals for both sexes. Yes, sir. I’ve got to be as pure as the girl before I have a right to marry her.” The final scene is most curious, for it is cited once again: “‘This is the end,’ she says. Only somehow you can’t believe it. It seems more like the middle” (570). The only line quoted from the play is repeated three times, as if to emphasize how unlikely and ridiculous it is. As in the more positive review by Eaton, its perceived “feminine” qualities are used to denigrate the text. Without prior models to understand why a woman would reject the possibility of a safe and protected future, the wholly negative review in *The New-York Daily Tribune* also examines the end, stating that “you cannot resist the feeling that she will call him back again in a few days or weeks” (A. W. 7). If Crothers mirrored Ibsen’s door slam, with the hero and not the heroine shutting it, the critics mirrored *Doll’s House* reviews as well, finding this last moment unfinished. As I will argue in the next chapter, the belief that a woman could reject the nuclear family seemed even more impossible at the end of the nineteenth-century as it did when *A Man’s World* was released.

A review in *The New York Times* provides further insight into the reasons the ending seems so unbelievable:

If there is one shortcoming in the play it is the abruptness of its termination. The story is wound up so suddenly, with the man retiring before the woman’s insistence upon a single standard, that one has hardly time to be convinced that the end has come. Doubt remains as to the permanency of the separation. One feels that inevitably the man will come again and again to sue for pardon, that ultimately he will be forgiven, that bygones will be bygones, and that these two,

mending the broken china, to use Pinero's phrase, will finally live out their lives together. (Klauber X7)<sup>52</sup>

The "abruptness" arises because this reviewer was unprepared for an ending which was unlike other melodramas. Disbelief from what seemed a sudden end was expressed even in positive reviews from *The New York Times*. Another reviewer writes, "And at the end they part, a somewhat too sudden parting, perhaps, and one which, after all, leaves one to ask the question—to what great end?" ("Splendid" 5). The common thread of discomfort over the ending unites these wide-ranging reviews. In the eyes of critics, it is inconceivable that a woman with a child to raise would reject the easy shelter marriage would bring.

*A Man's World* sparked debate in the press and enough speculation and interest among audience members to prompt a reply from Augustus Thomas in the form of *As a Man Thinks* (1911). This play also addressed the double standard, with many nods to Crothers's play, with one female character advising that "that woman dramatist with her play was right. It is 'a man's world'" (145). Elinor and Frank—note name—Clayton remain married despite a public scandal over Frank's affair with another woman. Elinor has been imposed upon to stay with him, despite evidence that he is still not faithful. Frank, however, decides to dissolve the marriage after Elinor simply accompanies another man into a hotel room. Recalling nineteenth-century morality that associates society's function with women's purity, the family doctor justifies Frank's anger to Elinor. "Every father believes he is a father only by his faith in the woman. Let him be however virtuous, no power on earth can strengthen in him a conviction greater than that

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<sup>52</sup> Although this reviewer does not discuss Frank's working life, he curiously mistakes her real name of Frank *Ware* as Frank *Work*.



faith. There is a double standard of morality because upon the golden basis of woman's virtue rests the welfare of the world" (147-148). With Elinor's humble repentance and Frank's love for his child, the family eventually becomes reconciled.

Yvonne Shafer (1996) has traced the critical response to *As a Man Thinks*, which was so popular with audiences and critics that it ran on Broadway for two seasons. While a few unfavorable reviews did appear, the play was generally celebrated as an important work that established Thomas's greatness. Some critics were moved by the doctor's speeches, which supported the moral code of the day; another critic cried over the poignancy of Elinor's apology for her actions; most agreed with the overall message that it is indeed a man's world, making Frank's behavior justified and realistic (45-49). The eager reception of *As a Man Thinks* gives some perspective on just how progressive *A Man's World* would have seemed to audiences a century ago. Although *A Man's World* received mixed reviews, its conventional format allowed critics to discuss the plot and its resolution in clear terms, unlike *The Verge*, whose innovations made its message incomprehensible for some reviewers.

Women's dependence on men for protection and love in *A Man's World*, as articulated by Malcolm Gaskell, was so ingrained into early twentieth-century thought that the resolution seems like a fanciful, unlikely, or idealized outcome, depending on the particular viewpoint of the reviewer. What these reviewers fail to see is that Frank's economic independence allows her to reject her lover and stay true to her ideals. This quality is what most strongly separates the mothers in *As a Man Thinks* and *A Man's World*. August Thomas must make his heroine Elinor dependent on all the luxuries that her husband Frank Clayton provides, luxuries that Clayton cites when trying to

understand her motive in entering another man's private room: "Neglected? Why, she had this house and our summer place at Newport—a forty-five horse power limousine—" complains this philandering husband with disbelief (196). As could be expected, Elinor returns to this luxurious life with many apologies. Frank Ware's ability to support herself with her work, on the other hand, makes her rejection of Gaskell and his values possible.

Even contemporary critics can have trouble seeing the last moment between Frank and Gaskell as final. Brenda Murphy (1987) reads their last interaction as "unresolved, and the action open-ended . . . Malcolm simply walks out of the room, leaving the audience to speculate about the future actions of the characters and, more important, to reconsider the positions argued in the debate" (*American Realism* 108). Although Murphy does acknowledge that "no such union is possible" (*American Realism* 108), it is still hard to acknowledge that the action of the play is resolved when Frank accepts that Gaskell believes in a double standard.<sup>53</sup> For the most part, Crothers's great impact on the theater is not fully explored, perhaps because her feminism—which merely reflects women's situations instead of aiming to inspire social change—seems reactionary by today's standards. Even so, Frank consistently fits into the role of resisting mother throughout the text. In both her personal and her professional life, it is Frank's aim to rectify social inequality. Very few portrayals allow for such a consistent figuration of mothering.

Although Crothers's work is conventional in its exposition and dialogue, it is progressive in its content. While Claire's actions dissolve into insanity under the pressure of her work and her family and, as I will discuss, Evangeline of *The Home-*

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<sup>53</sup> It is important to note that much of the contemporary criticism on Crothers focuses on the playwright herself as much as the plays. See, for example, Brenda Murphy (1999) "Feminism and the Marketplace: The Career of Rachel Crothers" and Doris Abramson's (1990) "Rachel Crothers: Broadway Feminist."

*Maker* is only brave enough to keep her job under the cover of her husband's illness, Frank keeps her sanity, her child, and her desire to engage in productive work. At the play's end, instead of submitting to a future of tender care under Gaskell's sexist but parental hand, she rejects him given that his belief system undermines the future of many young women. Like Mrs. Warren, she is able to move beyond the old patterns because she rejects the nuclear family structure and finds herself independent enough, both emotionally and economically, to support herself.

While *A Man's World* uses the medium of a melodramatic play to highlight challenges for working mothers, *The Home-Maker* makes similar observations in novel form. The difference in genre allows Dorothy Canfield Fisher's readers to have a clear picture of the characters' thoughts and ideas, thereby drawing a more nuanced and complete picture of the way gender roles constrain both mothers and fathers trying to find satisfaction in the work and lifestyle that best suits them.

As was the case for Rachel Crothers, Dorothy Canfield Fisher's life seems to be of more interest to critics than her writing. Ida Washington's 1982 biography highlights how Fisher's interest in the Montessori instructional method influenced her depiction of the way children can flourish emotionally and intellectually in the home (79). Washington also suggests that Fisher and her husband had to make adjustments in their relationship to accommodate her writing career, which may have influenced the plot of *A Home-Maker* (63). Canfield's progressive views on marriage were unambiguously articulated in the article "Marital Relations" written for the *Los Angeles Examiner* in 1924 and reprinted in the 1996 edition of *The Home-Maker*. She urges families to refrain from giving newly married couples advice and instead "let them alone" (v). Recognizing

the split between the public and private spheres, which still frames the argument about what makes a good mother in the twentieth-first century, she writes,

We could allow, without adverse comment, a married woman to be a business woman, if that is the sort of person she is, and if she and her husband can bring their children up to be as happy and well-developed as the average of other children. (Bearing firmly in our minds that mothers in the home are by no means invariably and wholly successful in that job.) On the other hand, without sneering at her as an economic parasite, we could allow her to stay at home in what Zona Gale well calls the unpaid profession of housekeeping, if that is what she does best. (v)

Fisher manages to hold progressive views on marriage without alienating her readers, many of whom were stay-at-home mothers who read her selections in women's magazines and Book-of-the Month club selections. Her simple advice to let marriages unfold individually, in the best way for each couple, underpins her formula for successful maternity: a good mother is one who is satisfied. If she despises the housework and the daily life of the house, the whole family will suffer as well. If she wants to be home but is forced to work, once again, it is the family who will suffer.

While this point might seem obvious, in the early twentieth century, and today as well, public rhetoric plays on fears that a woman's role in the home has serious consequences for the future health of children. As I have shown earlier, a mother's active presence in a child's life was frequently cited as necessary for the full flourishing of the family. Furthermore, Fisher's suggestion that some men might rather stay home rather than work is just as radical. It may not be surprising that a woman would want to experience work in the public sphere, but the reverse scenario would have been unthinkable. Although Fisher couches her progressive views in a story that was easy for her audiences to accept, her argument privileges a middle-class world view where a career is a luxury a woman can choose to indulge—or not, as her whim may be. It does

not account for those families where both parents, assuming that two are in the home, are forced to work.

*The Home-Maker* depicts the forces that prevent men and women from achieving the greatest satisfaction from working or parenting, as social customs weigh heavily on the characters and pin them into positions that are not wholly satisfying. Evangeline and Lester Knapp do their best to live up to the gender roles inscribed by society. Evangeline stays at home and maintains a beautifully decorated, tidy house; Lester goes to work and brings home a paycheck each week. However, since they are only performing these roles, and find no gratification in their tasks, they ultimately are failures. Evangeline's need for perfection and order creates an atmosphere of fear and discomfort despite her success at turning out mouthwatering meals and exquisitely decorated rooms. Their youngest son Stephen is unruly and disobedient; Henry endures severe and persistent intestinal distress; the oldest daughter Helen suffers from timidity and self doubt. Evangeline's psychic distress from running the house results in eczema, which she endures stoically as one more curse in her unhappy life. Lester's disgust at the world of commerce and the competition of the workplace makes him ineffective and earns him the derision of his colleagues. Like his wife, who is haunted by the ticking of the clock with "its insistent whisper: '*So much to do! So much to do! So much to do!*'" (45), he too feels a slave to time; "he loathed his life-long slavery to the clock, that pervasive intimate negative opposed to every spontaneous impulse" (68). During a particularly stressful night, when Lester has not received the promotion that would have alleviated their financial woes and Stephen spills beef juice on the newly scrubbed kitchen floor, Evangeline's eczema flares up, symbolically representing the disease that runs throughout

the household: “It was crusted over in places, with thick, yellowish-white pus oozing from the pustules. It was spreading. It was worse. It would never be any better. It was like everything else” (46).

The couple’s inability to happily navigate their expected gender roles is only relieved when Lester falls off a neighbor’s roof and can no longer walk. Suddenly, their roles are reversed, with Lester staying at home to keep house and Evangeline working to support the family—a progressive role reversal, even when dictated by their circumstances. Lester’s tender nature and quiet attentiveness is a salve to all his children’s distress, which suddenly disappears. Evangeline, who obtains a job in her husband’s former company, is buoyed up by the world of work. Her love for her children, who preoccupy her thoughts whether she is at work or at home, remains constant. But having a career and earning money provides Evangeline with a palpable satisfaction. She considers their good fortune and her new job with a thrill one night:

Apparently the excitement of it was too much for her, for she woke up suddenly, to hear the clock strike three, and found she could not get to sleep again because at once, in a joyful confusion, her mind was filled with a rush of happy thoughts, “I am to have Miss Flynn’s place. Three thousand a year. And a bonus! In a year or so I ought to be making four thousand.”

*Four thousand dollars!* They had never had more than eighteen hundred. Her thoughts vibrated happily between plans of what they could do here at the house and plans of what she would do in the reorganization of the department at the store. (278-279)

While mothering as a homemaker was stifling for both Evangeline and her children, she gains more personal satisfaction from what she can give them as a wage earner. The satisfaction in her work cannot be separated from her love for her family:

Why! With a tremor all over her, she wondered if some time she might not be not only head of her own department, but superintendent for all that floor. By a flash of prescience she suddenly knew as she lay there alone in the quiet that the road to advancement lay open before her, that she could step along surely and steadily to

success and take her dearly loved children with her, working for them with all her might, profoundly thankful to be able to give them what she had always so tragically and impotently wished them to have. (280)

The prospect of advancing her career, a notion that made Lester physically ill when he worked, titillates Evangeline's senses. She considers both how she can spend her money and how she can make her job more effective. Evangeline's job thus transcends its purpose as a means for their nearly destitute family to earn a little money and becomes a career. She brings their situation from financial ruin to the comforts of the middle class, with the potential of rising even higher on the economic scale. This work outstrips anything her husband was able to do in his miserable, fourteen-year career that ended in a layoff. Her career and mothering comeingle, her commitment to her work wrapped up with the service she can provide her family. Thus, working becomes a way to nurture her children so that neither career nor mothering can be separated from the other, as was the case for Frank Ware.

The housekeeping standard that Evangeline kept seems to have been a self-sacrificing reminder to hold over the heads of those who would pity her. Another version of Fisher's working motherhood also puts children, not housework, at the center of the parenting method. Upper class Nell Willing, wife of department store owner Jerome, participates in none of the hard labor of her household. Their housekeeper Kate manages the family's affairs, leaving her a supervisory role over the business of the home and the children. Daily housekeeping help allows her to pursue a career writing advertising copy for her husband's business. The couple's combined economic power allows them to purchase a house that comfortably accommodates their children's play and a separate office for her work. Fisher presents this family arrangement as an alternate arrangement

to the one Evangeline and Lester establish. Both Jerome and Nell seem content with their family management: Jerome marvels inwardly at how comfortable he finds his home life. Nell also wonders at their good fortune and exclaims sincerely, after hearing of his difficult work day, “‘It is hard on *you* having all those uncomfortable personal relations! . . . It always seems unfair that I can stay here at home with the children and draw a salary for writing advertisements that I love to do without sharing any of the dirty work’” (100).

Nell’s place in the home is firmly established as husband and wife discuss the need for a good manager in the store. Nell suggests she could execute the job well, but her husband immediately quells this idea—despite her skills—since, “we need you for the advertising, and besides that job would take you away from home all the time. And of course somebody has to be here for the children.” To which she immediately and obediently concurs, “No, I’d never consent to leave the children . . . I didn’t really mean it. I was just thinking what fun it would be if there were two of me’” (111-112). This reply does not seem sincere, but rather a quick retraction to affirm that being a mother is indeed her highest priority. While Nell has economic power and can commiserate with her husband as a near equal, her place at home is established as a necessary force for the success of their family.<sup>54</sup> Fisher’s reworking of the nuclear family makes gender roles

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<sup>54</sup> A career is not a necessary requisite for good mothering and happy children in *The Home-Maker*; rather, putting family before all else is the unspoken parenting philosophy of the text. Middle-class and absent-minded, Mattie Farnham does not have a career of her own, yet she is portrayed as successful since she prioritizes her children over the many demands of the house. Her housekeeping is bolstered by delicatessen dinners and spontaneous rides into the country. At home, she gladly puts aside her dress patterns as each of her four children arrive home to talk about their day. Similarly, Lester Knapp ends up being a far more effective “mother” because he is able to lay aside any housework to attend to the children. This perspective may have been shaped by Fisher’s involvement with the Montessori method of education.



interchangeable while leaving the pattern the same: one parent, of either gender, must stay home with the children while the other parent must go out and work.

Along with the relief from financial woes that Evangeline's salary brings, it also alters her mothering style as their resources are reallocated. Their plans for new material possessions reveal another resource that Evangeline suddenly has to spare: time. The pressures she suffered under the reign of the clock left her no space for herself or her family; in fact, prior to Lester's accident she only left home to attend church and the Ladies' Guild meeting or to shop for food. Family time was little more than an opportunity for scolding and silent disapproval. The satisfaction brought by Evangeline's work at the department store allows her to be more available to them at night as they enjoy dinnertime conversation, play whist, or spend leisurely Saturdays together.

This ability to give herself fully is further boosted by two aspects of her job. Working minimizes the stress created by disorder in the house, so that she can focus her emotional energy on her children and husband instead of the objects she used to clean. Second, her economic buying power allows them to buy services that were unavailable to them in the past. The cleaning woman Mrs. Hennessy who volunteered for the Knapps after the accident eventually takes on all their laundry—although, now that Evangeline works they “pay her, of course” (183). And as Evangeline progresses in her career, they give Mrs. Hennessy more responsibility, hiring her “to give the house the weekly, thorough, cellar-to-garret cleaning” (206). Thus, Evangeline's new, relaxed mothering style is all a result of the economic and emotional benefits that working brings to her personally. Relieved of the daily, never-ending drudgery of housework, Evangeline is transformed into a new woman: both her eczema and her anxiety mysteriously vanish.

In addition to services, Evangeline translates her new buying power into material goods for her family. Evangeline buys better quality clothing that she does not have to piece together herself. As Stephen shows off a model town he has built, he explains that “Mother is going to bring me some little houses from the ten-cent store. Mother brought me the little wagon and horses. She brings me something ‘most every night’” (204).

When their budget just made ends meet in the past, luxuries like dime-store toys would have been impossible. Once she receives a promotion and a raise, this money is once again translated into goods for her family. The Knapps happily plan what they can do with these resources: a college fund; a bicycle; a Ford to take them out of the house and on picnics on the weekend; renovations to their home. The boosted income provides a space for the family to dream about their future and for Evangeline and Lester to bond as a couple.

As Evangeline and Lester disrupt traditional gender roles, they pretend that they would go back to their former positions if only circumstance gave them the chance. In this case, not only is the woman forced to perform the role of good mother, but Lester’s masculinity would also be threatened by rejecting the role of breadwinner. If Lester found his inability to succeed in the public sphere emasculating, confinement to his wheelchair adds another layer of oppression that is relieved only by the joy of tending to his children and watching them thrive under his care. But when a home fire threatens Stephen and Lester discovers he can indeed walk, the joy is immediately crushed as he realizes that society, and his own ego, will continue to render him impotent if he continues to stay at home with the children:

The instant he tried to consider it, he knew it was as impossible as to roll away a mountain from his path with his bare hands. He knew that from the beginning of

time everything had been arranged to make that impossible. Every unit in the whole of society would join in making it impossible, from the Ladies' Guild to the children in the public schools. It would be easier for him to commit murder or rob a bank than to give his intelligence where it was most needed, in his own home with his children. (309)

He imagines his children would be shamed by a healthy father who chooses to be home and, even worse, his own personal shame if his former boss visited to "find him making a bed while Eva sold goods" (313). In the early twentieth century, childcare and housekeeping were emasculating occupations for any man.

As Lester continues to contemplate his situation, he understands how a mother's work in the home is marginalized. "Under its greasy camouflage of chivalry, society is really based on contempt for women's work in the home. The only women who were paid, either in human respect or in money, were women who gave up their traditional job of creating harmony out of human relationships and did something really useful, bought or sold or created material objects" (312). Despite his enlightened viewpoints regarding gender roles, it still disturbs him that men will view his house-husbandry with "a stupefaction only equaled by their red-blooded scorn" (312). The forces that confine women have implications for men as well. Lester may be progressive, but he still experiences the conflict that Evangeline faces as she enters the world of work. The townspeople and her colleagues do indeed admire Evangeline's success in the workplace; however, the admiration includes pity that she cannot be at home caring for her family. The respect that she receives is thus undercut by sympathy that she should really be doing something more womanly.

After observing her husband move his legs in his sleep, Evangeline, too, feels distress at the idea of their roles reverting; she is prey to the same belief that without

good cause, she must stay home and he must work. The horror of being mocked by a voluntary role reversal forces her to acknowledge the discrepancy between the performance of maternal feeling she displays and her true feelings. It is the performance she must uphold, even at the expense of the whole family's happiness. "What would people say if she did not go back at once to the children? She who had always been so devoted to them, she whom people pitied now because she was forced to be separated from them. Every one had heard her say how hard it was for a mother to be separated from her . . ." (287). The possibility manifests as a physical ailment and she leaves work early to be alone, pray, and consider her future:

After having known something else, she could not go back to the narrow, sordid round of struggle with intolerable ever-renewed drudgery, to the daily, hourly contact with the children's forgetfulness, carelessness, foolishness . . . to Stephen's horrible tempers . . . with no outlet . . . no future . . . poverty for them all, always. Poverty! It came down suffocatingly over her head like a smothering blanket thrown and twisted hard by an assailant who had sprung upon her out of the dark . . . There was no way out. She knew that now. But she could not endure it. She never could endure it again. She would hate Lester. She would kill herself and the children. (288-89)

Her own success makes Lester's failures in the marketplace tolerable, but once the prospect of staying at home looms in her future, Evangeline's feelings of scorn for his workplace failures return. Staying home fills her with disgust, resentment, and violence. Though the couple never discusses their parallel feelings, Lester extends the charade they have performed for the town by agreeing to remain wheelchair bound indefinitely. He sacrifices his own ego, made impotent by his disability, to the health, happiness, and reputation of his family.

The moments of interiority allowed by the novel shape the reader's understanding of the complex network of the town, but more important, the recording of Evangeline's

thoughts and hopes reveals the discrepancy between her authentic feelings about motherhood and the false ones she parades publically for the benefit of the town. As Fisher takes the reader through Evangeline's mind, the complex and contradictory feelings that maternity elicits can be set together side by side. Motherhood is a lonely act, according to the repeated musings of Evangeline. A Ladies' Guild meeting, for instance, sets in action a train of thoughts revealing that she considers home making to be a type of "solitary confinement" with "children who could not in the nature of things share a single interest of hers" (56). Despite her powerful love, staying at home with them is so isolating that she has no space to connect with her children. At another moment of depression, she considers how motherhood is so different from its depiction in books:

They never told you that there were moments of arid clear sight when you saw helplessly that your children would never measure up to your standard, never would be really close to you, because they were not your kind of human beings, because they were not *your* children, but merely other human beings for whom you were responsible. How solitary it made you feel! (48)

But a few moments later, this passion is countered by an overwhelming love for them and each of their particular needs. This transcription of her inner life, a modernist approach in this otherwise conventional woman's novel, records her fluctuating feelings and the outer steadfast image she projects.<sup>55</sup> The cashier who sells Evangeline her breakfast, for example, listens carefully as she repeats to him how "dreadfully hard [it is] for a mother to be separated from her children" (153). In reality, by entering Evangeline's thoughts the reader learns that her love is no longer tempered by resentment, or the regret she speaks of, as she considers "lovingly how sweet they had looked this morning as she

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<sup>55</sup> She also seems to believe in the image that she portrays, except for the one moment where she realizes she would sacrifice her husband's health to continue their role reversal.

kissed them good-by” (154). Once she works, she can think of them, and her husband, with unconditional affection. This state of mind is reflected in her actions, as she finds time to spend with her family that she did not have prior to working.

Convention prevents Evangeline and Lester from honestly accepting their new model for the nuclear family. Just when it seems Lester will make a full recovery, his doctor meets with him privately. The reader is not privy to this conversation, but is left with the vision of Lester in an impotent and emasculated state, his head thrown back in despair. Rather than let Lester stay home as an able-bodied man, Evangeline accepts this charade to maintain her self-respect and reputation, while the children are ecstatic that their domestic arrangements will remain unchanged.

Overall, Fisher paints a progressive portrayal, but it is limited by the choices available to her. Since their youngest child Stephen would soon be in Kindergarten, both parents could work as do the Willings. However, the Willings’s success is predicated on one of these parents—namely, the mother—being in the home full-time. Neither the townspeople nor Dorothy Canfield Fisher could imagine a father staying home with children without some pretense. Independently, Evangeline and Lester realize, with much self-loathing, that they would have to bow to convention and resume their former, miserable state rather than appear to choose their gender-role reversal. Their joint cowardice emasculates Lester from beginning to end: his failure in the marketplace earns his wife’s disdain; his success as a homemaker relies on the suppression of his ego which paralysis has “savagely, grimly, harshly beaten down” (301). Evangeline, too, is a slave to these gendered roles since choosing to work will diminish the townspeople’s respect and her edge in the workplace. If the Fisher allowed Lester to recover and Evangeline to

continue to be a working mother, the arrangement would have been too unrealistic for readers to accept. Instead, the text's feminist position comes from representing how mother—and fathers—can be entrapped by convention.

Evangeline makes an unusual arc through the complicit and resisting scopes of maternity. She begins, from the children's point of view, as the domineering, phallic mother, complicit in upholding standard roles and making her will felt by everyone in the town. A career allows her to take on a new role and she seems to challenge tradition as a resisting character when she works. However, part of this resistance is performed since she is guided by her reputation as much as she is by devotion to her family.

Fisher's biographer Ida Washington (1982) discusses how writing *The Home-Maker* was an exhausting experience for the novelist; for the first time, she wrote in isolation, without ongoing feedback from her husband. Perhaps this isolation accounts for the emotionally draining composition process, as described to her publisher Alfred Harcourt (120). Once the book was published, it continued to cause her stress—even as it went on the best-seller list in 1924—because of the conflict between the author's conception of the novel and its public reception. Recalling initial response to *A Doll's House*, critics labeled the text as feminist, a description that riled Fisher as much as it had Ibsen. It bothered her so much she wanted to change the book jacket to add information regarding “the way the book's been misunderstood and the way it should be taken, as a whoop not for ‘women's rights’ but for ‘children's rights’” (Madigan and Fadiman 118). Though she did not mind that sales were less than expected, “it does make me sore to have it so idiotically misunderstood when the meaning is if anything too plainly inscribed all over it” (118).

*The Home-Maker* suggests that children will thrive if their parents find work that is satisfying for them personally, not if they are forced to perform gender roles unsuited to their temperaments. At its core, the novel shows the danger for the whole nuclear family when a template designates gender roles. However, the allotted roles of the nuclear family were so strongly inscribed in early twentieth-century life that the only apparent lesson to be gleaned for some critics was the odd portrait of a working mother and stay-at-home father. Fisher was self-conscious about this aspect of the text and wrote to her publisher when an English journal seemed to delay publication of the novel in serial form. “John surmises that any Englishman would be so overcome with horror at the very conception that a man might do better in the home than a woman out of it, that he could find no words in which to speak of such a blasphemous work” (qtd. in Washington 120). Fisher did not have to go as far as England to find those who misunderstood the text, however; critics were confused about the underlying message right in the United States. Ernest Boyd of *The New York Times*, for example, complained about the arrangement between Evangeline and Lester, misinterpreting the novel’s premise even more than those who believed it was a feminist text—at least they were partly right; Boyd explains that “the thesis is developed that man’s place is the home and that woman will realize her true self by punching a clock in a department store” (BR 1). The role reversal of Lester and Evangeline astounds the critic so much that he simplifies the plot into a basic restructuring of the nuclear family—a situation so absurd that he mocks its plausibility. “The special circumstances of Lester Knapp’s domestication, while Evangeline exercises her genius for business in the town store; the talent of the man for housekeeping and the woman for salesmanship—these enable the author to



combine sentiment and the go-getting philosophy within an artificially plausible framework, but her readers will insist that they know she can do better work than this” (BR 1). The reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* of London was also unsettled and admonished that “it is time that Miss Canfield came out of the kitchen and returned to the thoughtful style of her earlier books. It would be better for her now to take to fairy tales and let the lives of salesmen go unrecorded” (Rev. of *The Home-Maker* 341). This critic derisively rejects the feasibility of a woman understanding the workplace. Other critics were more sympathetic and seemed to glean her meaning; *New York Evening Post* writer H.L. Pangborn explained “the book will be misunderstood; indeed it has already been curiously misinterpreted as an outbreak of ‘feminism’ and ‘emancipation,’ whereas the real emphasis of the book falls upon neither husband nor wife, but upon children” (qtd. in Madigan and Fadiman 118).

Although Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s popularity has waned today, she was well known and widely read at the beginning of the twentieth century. Called one of the ten most influential people in the United States by Eleanor Roosevelt (Wright 15), Fisher’s writing was popular with middle-class audiences familiar with her work through women’s magazines and novels. Fisher’s reputation may explain why her progressive ideas were so readily embraced by her middle-class readers. It was Fisher’s aim to use her writing as a means of educating and expanding opportunities for her audiences. She worked very hard at ensuring that her ideas were conveyed in a way that most faithfully represented the experiences of her readers, going so far as to correspond with her fans, some of whom would go on to review her books. Jennifer Parchesky (2002) gained a greater understanding of this middlebrow culture by examining over 200 letters that

Fisher received. These middle-class readers found that her writing helped them to understand their world; they felt she spoke to their experience more than what they found in high-modernist texts. The existing letters show that

Canfield's fans were almost exclusively white and native-born. Her women fans—who account for about 70 percent of the letters—came from a broad spectrum of the new middle class, with husbands ranging from wealthy business executives to the most impoverished of sales clerks and office workers. Most of them had worked, did work, or planned to work in predominantly female white-collar occupations such as teaching, clerical work, and social work, but they typically put their careers on hold after marriage or at least while raising young children. (235)

Most of her fans shared a commitment to education and learning and valued what could be gained from reading. For both low-valued professionals like librarians or the educated, non-professional workforce, Fisher's writing validated their cultural worth (237). While the majority of the women in this audience were not planning to be working mothers, they were open to Fisher's underlying thesis that different temperaments were suited for different work, despite the dictates of white, middle-class society. Fisher reflects on how this idea impacted her readers in a letter to Scudder Klyce, a fan with whom she corresponded.<sup>56</sup>

I once wrote a book (*The Home-Maker*) intended to show the tragic (and quite unnecessary) sorrow and suffering caused by the blind pressure of public opinion which insists that all men are realists and all women idealists, and if they are not, at least they must make a life-long pretense that they are. The book horrified a good many people, but I had (among shocked letters) a good many which were written by people very grateful for a statement of and some sympathy with their predicament. (Madigan and Fadiman 131)

Although critical opinion was often divided about the value of the novel, her careful

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<sup>56</sup> Her relationship with this individual typifies the interest she took in the needs of her readers. In her first response to Klyce she writes, "To receive suddenly from a stranger such minute, discerning and accurate understanding of what I'm trying to say in my writing, takes my breath away. And to receive such commendation as you gave me, makes me extraordinarily happy, and not a little incredulous!" (Madigan and Fadiman 59).

attention to the needs of her readers and ability to make her them see their own lives in a new light ensured that she was popular throughout her life.

Fisher received varying responses to *The Home-Maker* from the critics and fans who wrote to her. Literary critic and author Dorthea Lawrence Mann wrote, as Fisher related, to tell her “that of course the book isn’t the equal of my other novels, and that I musn’t forget the primitive element in people which is rightly alarmed at the idea of men becoming effeminate . . . ha!” (Madigan and Fadiman 114). Mann’s opinion highlights how unconventional Lester and Evangeline’s positions would be to common readers, though Fisher was not dismayed by this thought. She goes on to tell her publisher that “an acquaintance writes me from Chicago that her neighbors are shocked by the utterly unexpected ending. These slight indications of interests are rather promising. if [sic] only people will find it interesting enough to disagree about violently, they may do some real thinking” (Madigan and Fadiman 114). Most moving, however, is a letter written to her by a fan who found deep emotional resonance in the characters’ plight. Canfield writes,

I haven’t heard anything about *The Home-Maker*, except some heated matters pro and con which have already made their way here. One of them just raised the hair on my head . . . a woman in Massachusetts wrote me wildly that she would give her life if I had only written the book earlier, for her husband committed suicide last winter . . . an artist with no business ability, trying to make a living for her and her six children. . . she said “I understand now after reading *The Home-Maker* so many things I never dreamed of before etc. etc.” (Madigan and Fadiman 114)

This circumstantial evidence shows that the text achieved its aim in provoking new ideas for her readers while suggesting that the situations presented were more than just a literary whim for many of her fans.

Nevertheless, Fisher receives little critical attention today, even with the new editions of *The Home-Maker* printed in 1983 and 1996. It is likely that the critical eschewal of *The Home-Maker*, and indeed, of most of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's work, has something to do with its status as middlebrow fiction. In "Progressive Middlebrow: Dorothy Canfield, Women's Magazines, and Popular Feminism in the Twenties," (2003) Jaime Harker looks at how popular works by Fisher held a place between what was considered the low- and high-culture rift during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fisher typified the middlebrow culture that offended the modernists, with her writing serialized in women's magazines and her work as a founding member of the Book-of-the-Month club. Tainting the artistic purity her work as well as the large stipends writers like Fisher could demand because of their wide appeal. Harker distinguishes Fisher from the ordinary middlebrow by labeling her a "progressive middlebrow," which "kept a highbrow concern with serious issues while satisfying both the lowbrow's demand for accessibility and entertainment and its fundamentally ethical judgment of the artistic. It attempted to establish a middle ground in which literature heals, creates community and saves the nation" (119). Much like Frank in *A Man's World*, Fisher viewed her writing as a means of social justice and, as is revealed in correspondence with reviewers of her work, she made sure that the portraits she created were as true to life as possible. It is likely that even the socially-minded middle ground would have been objectionable to modernist writers, though Fisher could have more impact on social values by maintaining a broad audience base.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> In her article, Harker cites Woolf as representative of the modernist distaste of the middlebrow. In "Middlebrow" (1942), a letter intended for, but never sent to, *The New Statesman*, Woolf articulates the intimate connection between lowbrows, preoccupied with life, and highbrows, preoccupied with art. Danger comes with the middlebrow, who is "in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself,

This critical contempt only served to rally readers more strongly around Fisher's writing since they held a similar disdain for the rarefied world of the high modernist. Parchesky reveals that Fisher received a great volume of appreciative letters from readers who found sustenance from her work and compared it to the aims of what they termed "highbrow" culture. One reader, fed up with "experts," congratulated her writing with terms that Woolf may have used to criticize it, claiming that "it won't be over the heads of either the average and hence unsophisticated reader or of the really intelligent person—and I judge you were writing for both the average person, including children, as well as for the really intelligent" (qtd. in Parchesky 238). This popular appeal and the stigma of middlebrow women's fiction caused Fisher's writing to lose popularity today.

The characters in *The Home-Maker* do what Claire Archer of *The Verge* was attempting with her own life and art: they break through and make new patterns for the nuclear family, though convention keeps them from living this lifestyle openly and with pride. The difference between the texts is that Fisher's conventional form made the ideas more palatable for her readers. It is clear that the same prejudice held by the modernists at the time still holds true today. Criticism of Fisher focuses on her biography, her relationship with Willa Cather, and her writing in Europe during World War I. Even in the collection in which Harker's article appeared, *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writer's of the 1920's*, little is written about *The Home-Maker*; critical

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but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige" (115). Any number of modernists could have been cited as well. In "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), for instance, T. S. Eliot declared that poets should be "*difficult*" and should "become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force . . . language into his meaning" (248). James Joyce, in *Ulysses* (1922) aimed to write "a book from eighteen different points of view and in as many styles, all apparently unknown or undiscovered by my fellow tradesmen" (Ellman 284). Even as Joyce and Eliot made their art obscure, they still drew portraits of those they would consider lowbrows, finding no need for the middlebrow in their art. Though these writers attempted to define a particular literary aesthetic, they too sought fame and readership to some extent, as did Fisher.

discussion of the text is limited to a single footnote regarding the way department stores provide women autonomy within their marriage (Goldsmith 286 fn. 8). Although *The Home-Maker* may have impacted middle class women of the 1920's, its dip into obscurity shows that the larger issues it brings up about gender roles, particularly about mothers who work, is not framed in such a way as to be valued today.

Kathryn Reisdorfer (2000) is one of one the few critics who engages *The Home-Maker* in an article examining representations of fatherhood that challenge patriarchal norms early in the twentieth century. Reisdorfer points out that in the workplace, Evangeline exhibits qualities valued by men while in the home, Lester exhibits those valued by women. She notes that Lester's role reversal is possible "only if it is physically impossible for him to assume a true man's role. What this means is that he may retain the position of homemaker only when he, like any good woman, refuses to use all of himself and rejects his mobility" (188). She concludes that the expanded choices available to women in the beginning of the twentieth century allowed them to assume roles traditionally reserved for men since these qualities were esteemed; on the other hand, men could not as easily assume female roles since the associated qualities would emasculate them.

This is an apt view of the situation involved in *The Home-Maker* that could be extended to the female characters as well. Lester does indeed provoke consternation and astonishment in his assumption of the household tasks; townspeople are disconcerted as they see him attend to what is perceived as womanly duties. Nevertheless, Evangeline realizes that she is accountable to expectations based on her gender as well, making her husband's possible recovery a cause for physical and mental anguish. Not only will he be

harshly judged for not being a man, she also will be judged for not being womanly enough and for slighting her “natural” inclination to care for her children. Thus, the respect she earns for her masculine qualities will be quickly erased. Further, it is possible to overstate the masculine qualities that she assumes in the workplace. While she is, as Reisdorfer explains, “almost scientifically observant, strong, straight, and task-oriented” (188), she acts this way within the safe margins of a male-run department store in the female-dominated Cloak-and-Suits department. These are the same qualities that earn her the respect of the townspeople as she fulfills her duties as a homemaker.

### **Conclusion**

Whether remote or proximate, these new portrayals provided representations of mothers working for satisfaction and need, representing a bridge between traditional notions of women’s work and professions more frequently associated with men. So even if prostitution is the world’s oldest profession, Kitty Warren rises to the level of entrepreneur as she runs several thriving houses on the continent. Claire Archer is an artist, but her field is the male dominated world of science. Frank is a successful writer and activist, fulfilling her job without apology. Evangeline, too, begins her career in the traditionally female-dominated area of retail sales, yet she breaks boundaries as she takes an academic and active approach to her job, increasing sales output by reading manuals and textbooks.

A contrast between the two groups I examine regards the balance of critical attention given to each. Remote mothers Kitty Warren and Claire Archer are widely evaluated while proximate mothers Frank Ware and Evangeline Knapp are largely overlooked. *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* always received detailed critical scrutiny, both by

contemporaries and subsequent generations. In recent years, *The Verge* has emerged as a forgotten and groundbreaking play as feminist critics appropriate it as a text that prefigures écriture féminine and breaks boundaries with its expressionistic form. *A Man's World* and *The Home-Maker*, however, remain largely untapped because of their target audiences; *A Man's World* could be dismissed as a light melodrama, while *The Home-Maker* was entertainment for middle-class family women. Their popular appeal in style and form masks the subversive content that questions the foundations of the Western family. Safely categorized as flimsy diversions, these latter works could be passed over by critics while they spoke quietly to their audiences about the possibility of change.

Even today, analyses of proximate mothers are cast aside as mere women's fiction, so that critical attention is most paid to these female authors' biographies and their widespread popularity instead of to the significance of their work. Both Crothers and Fisher have been probed in biographies and in critical essays that develop a relation between their writing and their experiences. This is not to say that other texts discussed in this dissertation have not received biographical attention; many books have been written about Eugene O'Neill's life, for instance, and biographies about Susan Glaspell are popular as well. Nevertheless, other criticism is readily available about these authors, providing multiple lenses through which to view their work. It seems that even more important than the gender of the author is the intended audience literature addresses.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> I would not go so far as to say gender has no impact on reception. In the example under consideration, for example, although O'Neill and Glaspell were members of the Pioneer Players at the same time, it took decades before Glaspell's work was considered as seriously as O'Neill's. This case serves to underscore my point that Glaspell may have been put aside in the past because of the specificity of her plays to women's issues. Its status as an innovative piece may have rescued it from perpetual critical obscurity.



Fiction *for* and *about* women is clearly presumed to have little literary merit—it is just often the case that these works are written by women.

Chapter One's focus on abortion portrays a topic so taboo that critics had to skirt the issue as they addressed the texts. Though censorship largely curtailed critical language, there was an underlying sentiment throughout that abortion was either a tragedy for or an outrage against these women. There was no other way to consider a woman's attitude toward abortion. In Chapter Two, the critical response is blind to the maternal representations presented or otherwise finds them impossible to believe. Remote mothers, with their distant approach to child rearing, were not even evaluated as mothers by their critics. The issues of prostitution and incest make Kitty's maternity invisible. Similarly, Claire is so removed from her daughter's life that critics largely ignore their relationship. These readings privilege one type of maternity: those that feature mothers living within the safe bounds of the home, raising their children on a daily basis. Since proximate mothers play more into this expectation, critics were better able to recognize their maternity, though these depictions sparked disbelief. How could Frank decide to reject her lover, Gaskell, for example, and the safe promise of family for herself and her child? Similarly, for *The Home-Maker*, how could housewife and mother Evangeline Knapp find greater success in the workplace than her husband? Both seemed impossible.

The mothers in *A Doll's House* and *The Awakening*, featured in Chapter Three, have all the culturally accepted trappings of a fulfilled woman's lifestyle, yet dispose of their families for the reward of independence and freedom. Before making the difficult decision to leave their homes, these characters perform the roles of contented, devoted

wives, similar to the way mothers in this chapter had to perform maternity to navigate their difficult situations. But while performativity helps working mothers negotiate their situations, it works against mothers in Chapter Three, ultimately resulting in their rebellion as they are alienated from their families.

## Chapter Three

### **“I have a tremendous desire to say: ‘To hell with everything’”: What Happened to Audiences When the Fictional Mother Abandons Home**

#### **Introduction**

*Never before the subject of so much controversy, Ibsen was the topic of debate in newspapers, periodicals, and books throughout Scandinavia and Germany. Ministers delivered sermons on the new play; people argued privately and publicly about it . . . Some questioned the plausibility of Nora’s sudden rejection of that almost inherited and well-drilled morality and her rebirth as a rebel. This was, in fact, the most meaningful question, but it was overshadowed by the problem that concerned the play’s contemporaries most: was it morally right for Nora to abandon her husband and children for the sake of her own intellectual freedom? She was being judged as an actual person, not as a character in a play. In one way this was Ibsen’s greatest triumph. People did not ask whether Nora had to do what she did; they asked if she ought to have done it.*

Halvdan Koht, *Life of Ibsen*, 320-321 (1954)

*Kate Chopin’s proposal, in her mock-apology for *The Awakening* in 1899, that Edna Pontellier was a character with a mind of her own (“I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things”) seems not accidental but rather a direct response to the tone of early reviews of the novel. The reviewers themselves seemed unable to regard Edna as a fictional creation; instead they saw her as a woman [sic] who deserved to be lectured to for behaving badly.*

Nancy A. Walker, “A Critical History of *The Awakening*,” 170-171 (2000)

Appearing in the late nineteenth-century, *A Doll’s House* (1879) and *The Awakening* (1899) stirred critics, audience members, and actors to express great emotion over the heroines’ decision to completely abandon their families. This reaction was especially intense since it seemed that the characters were not just part of the fictional imagination. According to the excerpts above, protagonists Nora Helmer and Edna Pontellier had the air of real women in genuine situations. Thus, critics scorned their impertinence, expressing incredulity that they could leave their homes. Women’s expanding activism may account for the impression that the heroines were actual people,

but it may also emphasize the growing suspicion that there were many other women who secretly craved freedom themselves.

These characters, as evidenced by the reaction they inspired, are the most transgressive under discussion in this dissertation. They neither uphold standard family roles, as was the case in most representations of abortion, nor rework the family, as was the case for working mothers; instead, these texts portray women who discard the family altogether. With increasing demands made by women in a rapidly changing world, such portrayals were initially disquieting to audiences, though *A Doll's House* was produced continually over the following decades while *The Awakening* was readily ignored after its release.

In *A Doll's House*, Nora Helmer has kept a secret from her husband Torvald: she has forged a bank note in order to pay for his medical treatment.<sup>59</sup> When Torvald discovers her secret, he is horrified and disgusted that she has ruined his reputation until he learns that no one will discover her transgression. But it is too late; when Nora realizes that her husband is more concerned with propriety than his love for her, she knows she must leave her home and family to learn about herself and the world. In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier's flirtation with Robert Lebrun during a summer holiday activates a series of buried longings and desires which motivate her to leave her husband and family to fulfill her passions and pursue her interests. By the end of the novel, realizing that life will consist of repeated alienations from people she loves and that her children's grasp will never allow her true freedom, she drowns herself.

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<sup>59</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from *A Doll's House* come from Davis and Johnston's 1995 translation.

The debate that *A Doll's House* provoked among late nineteenth-century audiences has continued among critical circles that, to this day, argue over the same points. The controversy focuses on the moment when this well made play takes an unexpected twist so that Nora Helmer leaves her husband and three children to find independence. Preposterous, thought some, and certainly for years, critics would complain that the change came on too quickly to be believable. Ibsen's contemporary, Georg Brandes, decided that "The ending is impossible . . . There must be a lover. No woman goes off to the country in search of self-improvement" (qtd. in Ferguson 244fn).<sup>60</sup> Others were mobilized and excited by this unexpected turn of events and audiences were titillated, discussing the implications of a woman leaving her family.

Twenty years after *A Doll's House's* first performance, the publication of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* also elicited great interest, on a smaller scale, in the United States. Readers were familiar with Chopin's stories, but some were unprepared to deal with a woman putting her desires and sexual autonomy before her family's needs. According to the cultural standard of the post-civil war U.S., such behavior was akin to mental illness. Using the reaction to *A Doll's House* as a counterpoint, I will trace the response that *The Awakening* garnered from reviewers and readers to explain why Edna Pontellier's portrayal was often difficult for her middle-class, American audience to understand. Unlike *A Doll's House*, a play that could be tampered with and re-interpreted endlessly, the plot of *The Awakening* was preserved in the static medium of the novel. Since producers could twist the ending to suit common taste—a move that had the

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<sup>60</sup> Curiously, this remark parallels Frank's friends' comments in *A Man's World*. Believing the heroine could not be successful without a man, one friend observes, "She is a very brilliant woman, but she cannot do what is impossible. She cannot write like a man unless a man help her" (Crothers 7-8). Similarly, it is difficult to imagine that Nora could take the bold action of abandoning her home without a man's aid.

unintended consequence of piquing audience interest in the original version—*A Doll's House* was more often engaged by audiences of the period than *The Awakening*, which was interpreted once and easily cast aside. The flexibility of drama to change meant that *A Doll's House* became part of the cultural canon within fifteen years of its publication, while *The Awakening* waited fifty years for a revival in the 1950's.

By examining both critical and public reception of the ending of the play and novel, it becomes clear that both Ibsen and Chopin tapped directly into public anxiety regarding women's changing status in and out of the home. Rather than discarding *A Doll's House*, the logical step if the work were as sloppy as some critics would have audiences believe, directors and writers were compelled to return to the last moment of the drama to make it fit more securely into a comfortable, patriarchal worldview. It is as if they needed to rectify the discomfort of seeing traces of women's dissatisfaction brought to life on the stage.

The new endings always bring Nora back to the fold of her home or forecast the doom her family will face without her guidance, representing a desire to maintain the nuclear family structure. As such, they fulfill the pattern—outlined by Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1985) in *Writing Beyond the Ending*—that rewarded “good” women with marriage and “bad” ones with death. If Nora realized her wrongs, she could come home; otherwise, she would experience misery and destruction. Though the ending of *The Awakening* concerns what a woman might do if she decides to abandon her family, it, too, punishes the heroine with suicide by the novel's end; perhaps this is another reason beside genre why its ending was not revisited.

The protagonists Nora and Edna take the same trajectory through Ann Kaplan's categories of resisting and complicit mothers. Each one begins the text in the guise of a complicit character; from the male point of view, these wives have accepted their role in society and pose no threat to their happiness and the family order. This proposition is taken as a given: the spouses can only imagine that their wives are pleased to be wives and mothers in economically stable families. In fact, this is a performance that these women cannot uphold, and both move to resisting positions over the course of the narrative.

As was the case for *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, there has been a rift between deeming *A Doll's House* a work of art or a feminist tract, resulting in numerous attempts to alter the ending of Ibsen's play. While the ending of *The Awakening* was left intact, a critical mythology grew up around the novel in the twentieth century that imagined a far worse fate for it and its author than was actually the case. So while *A Doll's House* and *The Awakening* are the earliest written texts discussed in this dissertation, their reception explains why the overarching issues regarding femininity and maternity did not find easy solutions in the decades that followed, making these two works an appropriate place to end this study.

### **Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879): Sources**

If *A Doll's House* felt real to critics, it may be because it was based in a "real life Nora," Laura Peterson, an aspiring writer who wrote a sequel to Ibsen's *Brand* (1865), entitled *Brand's Daughters* (1870). When she sent the manuscript to Ibsen for review, a friendship blossomed, developing from letter writing to personal visits one summer in Dresden. Taken with her youth and charm, Ibsen affectionately called her "the lark" and

encouraged her writing. Laura eventually married the explosive Victor Kieler but found that her husband's salary as a teacher was insufficient when he fell ill. To finance a trip to Switzerland, recommended by his doctor, Laura borrowed money without telling her family. In 1876, the family visited Switzerland, Italy, and finally the Ibsens in Munich, where Laura told Suzannah Ibsen about the loan she had secured in secret and hoped to repay with income from her own writing. Upon reading Laura's manuscript almost two years later, Ibsen did not agree to assist her cause, claiming the play was sloppily written and urging that whatever secrets she must be concealing should be shared with her husband. With nowhere to turn, she first tried to delay repayment of the loan and then attempted, unsuccessfully, to forge a note. When her husband learned of the debacle, his demand that they divorce culminated in her nervous breakdown and entry into an asylum (Koht 314-315).

When Ibsen learned what had happened to his young friend, he began the several year process of writing *A Doll's House*. During this time, Ibsen was loath to be affiliated with any one group of people, but he fought vigorously, sometimes antagonistically, for women's causes.<sup>61</sup> Once published, reviewers wondered what happened to Nora after she

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Meyer (1971) describes how Ibsen tried to encourage the Scandinavian Society to hire a female librarian and to let women vote in the Society. Though he had an essentialist idea of women's characteristics based on their inherent differences from men—he spoke passionately about women's instinctive genius that, like youth and artists, “unconsciously hits” on truth—the Society did not adapt his proposals and Ibsen would no longer associate with those who voted against him (449). Meyer also relates Gunar Heiberg's account of Ibsen's behavior at the Society's banquet that spring, where he ranted so stridently against the society and women who did not agree with his new ideas that a Countess fainted. He calmly finished his diatribe, grabbed his coat, and left (450). This romantic view of women led to his desire to see their rights expanded; though he professed to dislike John Stewart Mill, just like the British philosopher, he believed that women's advancement in society would benefit all.



left home. F. L. Lucas (1962) reports that Ibsen told a Swedish journalist that “‘Certainly she returns,’” but then told the writer John Paulsen “‘How do I know? It is possible that she returns to husband and children, but also possible that she becomes an artiste in a traveling circus’” (qtd. in Lucas 148fn). It seems that what happened to Nora after the end of his play was beside the point to Ibsen; the issue was whether and how a situation like Laura Kieler’s could be resolved in a different way. Nevertheless, just what happened to Nora was the preoccupying concern for audiences.

What many of the initial critical reactions to the play would have in common is that they responded to Nora’s character and actions as if she were a real woman. The feeling she was real seems to begin with Ibsen himself. Jane Templeton (1997) makes this point and traces how Ibsen referred affectionately to the character as if she were a human being, at one point telling his wife that she put a hand on his shoulder and later telling others that Nora was simply a nickname for “Eleanora” (124). While Templeton uses this point to argue against critics who view Nora as silly or self-centered, it also speaks to the cultural ruptures in standard family roles that made it possible to imagine a woman abandoning her home without the lure of another man. Indeed, this may have been the outcome that Ibsen wished for Laura Kieler who broke down and found no strength in the situation as Nora does in the play.<sup>62</sup>

### **Divided Literary Perspectives**

Ibsen’s contemporaries fell into binary positions when considering his humanism or his feminism, especially when considering *A Doll’s House*. Before writing any plays

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<sup>62</sup> It is impossible, however, to understand Ibsen’s allegiances. For example, when Georg Brandes publicly claimed that Laura Kieler had selfish aims when she procured the money, Ibsen refused to refute the charge, writing that “‘I have never suggested that she is’” the model for Nora even if her forged letter “‘bears a certain similarity’” to the play (qtd. in M. Meyer 635).

of his own, George Bernard Shaw, a great champion of Ibsen, portrayed him as a social reformer in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891/1913). He defends the necessity of Nora's departure throughout this text and frames the ending of the play as a real problem women grapple with in varying ways. For instance, he points out that, "When Nora is strong enough to live out of the doll's house, she will go out of it of her own accord if the door stands open . . . Woman has thus two enemies to deal with: the old-fashioned one who wants to keep the door locked, and the new-fashioned one who wants to thrust her into the street before she is ready to go" (111-12). Critics disliked Shaw's interpretation, believing that framing Ibsen as socially minded undermined his artistry.<sup>63</sup>

Though Ibsen had a great supporter in Shaw, he also had foes that were equally as passionate. The most vitriolic of Ibsen's literary peers was his rival August Strindberg. Ibsen enraged Strindberg, whose own misogyny helped create female characters with beastly qualities; Strindberg was disgusted especially by *A Doll's House* and Nora's character. Harold Clurman writes about a self-interview Strindberg wrote where he pondered Torvald's honest and upright qualities and Nora's mendacious and flirtatious ones (110). Strindberg was at odds with the established Ibsen and, after *A Doll's House's* publication, raged against "the famous Norwegian bluestocking, the promoter of the equality mania" (qtd. in Finney 92). Strindberg eventually lashed out in his collection of short stories, *Getting Married* (1885), with an extended reading of *A Doll's House* in the

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<sup>63</sup> Critics would resist Shaw's reading of Ibsen. For instance, James Huneker (1907) teasingly critiques Shaw in a book chapter titled "The Quintessence of Shaw"; Huneker, sees more of Shaw in this essay than he does Ibsen. He writes, "his Ibsen is transformed into a magnified image of Shaw dropping ideas from on high with Olympian indifference . . . We are never shown Ibsen the artist, but always the social reformer with an awful frown" (243). Raymond Williams joins in on the effect of such criticism on Ibsen's work a few decades later in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952), claiming that *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* "has to do with Ibsen only in the sense that it seriously misrepresents him" (238). The question of Ibsen's status as a reformer versus his talent as an artist seemed to have no middle ground, each perspective claiming his art was sullied by the opposing viewpoint.

Preface. After providing a sympathetic reading of Torvald, who is married to the deceitful “hussy” Nora (34), he critiques Nora’s logic in leaving her family. “To be logical she ought to have stayed with her children if she really thought her husband was such a dolt that he would not be able to grasp the ‘miracle’. For how could she leave the education of her children to such a poor specimen?” (37). The one redeeming consequence of the play, according to Strindberg’s Preface, is that it revealed that divorce is a viable option and that marriage does not always achieve happiness (38). He even named one of his stories “A Doll’s House.” After a sea-captain’s wife befriends a woman who fills her with feminist and philosophical ideas, she sends her husband a copy of *A Doll’s House*. To stop the effect of these new ideas, which wreak havoc on their marriage, he pretends to have an affair with the friend to get rid of her influence. Throughout the story, Strindberg weaves in his critique of the play (167-184). While Ibsen hung a picture of Strindberg from his study wall, Strindberg felt threatened by Ibsen and exulted that *Getting Married*, *The Father*, and *Creditors* influenced Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*; he writes, ““Now do you see that my seeds have fallen even in Ibsen’s brain-capsule—and grown? Now he carries my semen and is my uterus! This is the Will to Power, and my pleasure in setting others’ brains in molecular motion”” (qtd. in Lucas 465). Strindberg perhaps did not have enough self-awareness to grasp that in turn, Ibsen’s work may have influenced his play, *Miss Julie* (1888).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Other authors felt less conflicted than did Strindberg. Herbert Edwards (1952) reports that a close friendship with Elizabeth Robins influenced Henry James’s passion for the playwright so that he would sometimes see several performances in a week; in fact, Robins would read to James directly from the manuscripts written in Ibsen’s hand. James would eventually take the universalizing approach to Ibsen when *A Doll’s House* became controversial in London and claimed, as would Valency and Koht years later, that Ibsen was not socially progressive but rather a true artist (209). James Joyce, who would refer to him frequently in *Ulysses* and *Stephen Hero*, was influenced by Ibsen from a young age and wrote his first published essay about the playwright, “Ibsen’s New Drama,” in 1900, at a time when Ibsen was still a

In these representative examples, writers were irresistibly drawn to figuring out how Ibsen's feminism functions in his creativity, often in an effort to understand the significance of the end of *A Doll's House*. That Ibsen came from Norway, a small nation that had not yet gained independence from Sweden,<sup>65</sup> emphasizes how much the message that closes *A Doll's House* was ready to be considered and discussed throughout Western nations.

### **Divided Critical Perspectives**

The debate about Ibsen's political stand continued throughout the twentieth century. Though audiences are no longer surprised that Nora does not return after she slams the door on Torvald, contemporary critical commentary also focuses on this very last scene as a way to understand the play. One perspective views Ibsen as a universal artist while the other claims he is a feminist champion; these points rarely meet in a middle ground. A popular starting point for these discussions begins with a translation of Ibsen's talk at an 1898 Norwegian League for Women's Rights banquet given in his honor. He makes the point that:

I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more the poet and less the social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of mankind in general. (Sprinchorn, *Ibsen: Speeches and Letters* 337)

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controversial figure in Ireland. Joyce marvels that "Ibsen's knowledge of humanity is nowhere more obvious than in his portrayal of women. He amazes one by his painful introspection; he seems to know them better than they know themselves. Indeed, if one may say so of an eminently virile man, there is a curious admixture of the woman in his nature" (45-46). Joyce makes femininity a category of humanity.

<sup>65</sup> See Knut Gjerset's *Hisotry of the Norwegian People* for more on Norway's independence, first from Denmark in 1814 and then Sweden in 1905.

His early biographer Halvdan Koht takes a universalizing view of the speech in *Life of Ibsen* (1954), where he refers first to the quote above and then postulates that the play has developed over time, from audiences generally responding to feminist and political issues until “both actors and spectators learned to see more of the humanity and less of the ideas of the play . . . Little by little the topical controversy died away; what remained was the work of art, with its demand for truth in every human relation. The artist could achieve no greater triumph” (322). In this thinking, political and artistic projects are mutually exclusive and cannot coexist; Ibsen’s play is minimized with feminist readings. As part of his discussion of the quote in *The Flower and the Castle* (1963), Maurice Valency declares definitively that “Ibsen was no feminist” (149) and comments that the play’s success was “doubtless for the wrong reasons; but Ibsen bore its success with dignity, and stoically endured the consequences” (150).<sup>66</sup> Richard Gilman (1999) thinks Ibsen’s comments show that *A Doll’s House* is really about “human appetites for power and exploitation and the corollary victimization of those who are not so driven” (64). Gilman believes that Ibsen did not have the artistic capabilities to deal with the issues brought up in the last act so that the play suffers from “thinness” and “seems . . . attenuated” (65).

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<sup>66</sup> To argue their points more forcefully, critics will put words into Ibsen’s mouth as well. Robert Brustein references the quote in his discussion of how Ibsen’s legacy has been lost on our materialistic, shallow modern world. He goes so far as to imagine what Ibsen might have said in response to those who have “expropriated” his plays for feminist causes: “Even more, he might have said, ‘My task has been the description of the *struggle* of humanity,’ for it was the sense of continuing struggle, of process, of movement, of change that obsessed him, rather than the accumulation and consolidation of special liberties for special-interest groups” (139). F. L. Lucas (1962) imagines what Ibsen would say as well: in a discussion of a similar talk at the 1884 Northern Association for the Cause of Women, Lucas imagines he would have said, “‘I am not a feminist,’ he might have said, ‘nor a masculinist. I am simply a humanist. But women happen to make up half of humanity. What I really care for is not feminism, but *human* freedom and *human* personality’” (131).

Other critics cite this same speech at the Norwegian Women's Rights League to point out the failures of these critiques of the play. Joan Templeton (1997) notes that the speech is referenced so often by those who want to distance Ibsen from feminism that even feminists feel compelled to discuss the speech, despite its being given twenty years after *A Doll's House* was performed. Templeton regards any attempt to disassociate Ibsen from his feminist ideas as reductive and rails against those who believe inserting feminism into his work nullifies his art and who try to "save the author of *A Doll House* from the contamination of feminism" (110). She points out that this reasoning "rests on the assumption that women's struggle for equality, along with, one must suppose, all other struggles for human rights in which biological or social identity figures prominently, is too limited to be the stuff of literature . . . Women's equality with men is a subject that lies outside the realm of art, which treats universal, non-polemical issues of human life, whose nature is complex and evolutionary" (119). Any attempt to view Nora's plight as the plight of mankind generally is flawed since in great works that feature women, men and women are not interchangeable in the title roles. She reasons,

to say that Nora Helmer stands for the individual in search of his or her self, besides being an unhelpful and rather platitudinous generalization, is wrong, if not absurd. For it means that Nora's conflict has essentially nothing to do with her identity as a nineteenth-century married woman, a married woman, or a woman. Yet both Nora and *A Doll House* are unimaginable otherwise. (119-120)

Templeton does not believe there is a universal point to be extrapolated from the very female position of being locked into the role of maternal, dutiful housewife.

A few interpretations fall into the middle ground between the two poles of universalizing and feminist. Gail Finney (1994) explains that this oft-cited quote says less about Ibsen's view of women and more about his desire to avoid attaching himself to

any organized group. While Finney believes his “concern with the state of the human soul cuts across class and gender lines” she also acknowledges that “this is not to say that he did not at times concentrate his attention on the condition of women as women” (90). In a new variation to the discussion, Toril Moi (2006) critiques both responses to Ibsen’s speech

It strikes me as an over-reading, to say the least, to try to turn Ibsen’s refusal to reduce his writing to social philosophy into evidence that Ibsen never thought of Nora as a woman or into grounds for denying that Nora’s troubles have to do with her situation as a woman in modernity. Such claims are fatally flawed, for they assume that a woman (but not a man) has to choose between considering herself a woman and considering herself a human being. This is a traditional sexist trap, and feminists should not make the mistake of entering into its faulty premise, for example, by arguing (but can this ever be an argument?) that Nora is a woman and therefore not universal. Such critics refuse to admit that a woman can represent the universal (the human) just as much or just as well as a man. They are prisoners of a picture of sex or gender in which the woman, the female, the feminine is always the particular, always the relative, never the general, never the norm. That Ibsen himself never once opposes Nora’s humanity to her femininity is evidence of his political radicalism as well as of his greatness as a writer. (274-275)

Moi believes feminists have taken their position too far when they disallow Ibsen’s claims about his relationship to feminism. She does not see Nora’s plight as an either/or situation advocating art or social progress, but rather gives a nuanced account of Ibsen’s attitude, finally reading the feminist critique as faulty logic: the fact that Nora, a woman, faces conflict does not nullify her humanity. For Moi, Ibsen’s genius comes from his ability to present a social problem faced by a woman as a human dilemma.

This extensive review of the response to Ibsen’s claim that “I have been more the poet and less the social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe” could include even more responses. What the popular debate emphasizes is that in the late twentieth century and beyond, the conflation of a woman’s femininity and her maternal

capabilities are still a preoccupation for critics. One group views Ibsen as a universal artist, nullifying the social structures that reproduce women's submission to men; the other group emphasizes Ibsen's feminist leanings, minimizing that in Nora and Torvald's marriage, a similar structure keeps men in very narrowly defined roles. These roles become clearer with a close reading of the text.

### **Nora and Torvald: Performance and Self-Respect**

Attempting to explain Nora's motivation in a letter to Erik af Edholm in 1880, Ibsen writes that she is "a big, overgrown child, who must go out into the world to discover herself and so may one day be, in due course, fit to raise her children—or maybe not. No one can know. But . . . with the perspective on marriage that has opened up to her in the course of the night it would be immoral of her to continue living with Helmer: This is impossible for her, and this why she leaves" (qtd. in Ferguson 244). To stay would be to compromise herself; while Nora's decision may be the most dramatic in the play, other characters go to great lengths to protect their integrity as well.

This thinking highlights why the universal artist and/or feminist readings miss the point that the play concurrently fulfills both these expectations. *A Doll's House* responds to problems inherent in modern relationships—what happens when circumstances make people see their lives in new ways? What happens when one's conception of a spouse is incorrect? What happens when self-esteem is predicated upon a false ideal? With these conflicts, the play is both universal—how people respond to the unexpected—and feminist—how convention works to confine women to a narrow social and economic scope. But, in the same respect, the play also shows us that men's roles are limited since Torvald (and Krogstad) are men whose self-worth is tied to their professions, their ability



to provide for their families, and their rank in the world, ideals set for them by the unspoken rubric of the nuclear family.

*A Doll's House* outlines what happens when our idealized social functions begin to define us absolutely. The incongruity of the situation moves Nora from Kaplan's designation of a complicit character to a resisting one. As a complicit figure, Nora makes sure she is charming to her husband and nurturing of her children. She is perceptive enough to understand how these standard family roles function for Mrs. Linde and she even brings it to her old friend's attention. "You're proud that you've worked so hard for your mother all these years . . . And when you think about what you've done for your brothers, you're proud of that as well" (10). Nora's analysis is correct since Mrs. Linde emphasizes the idea that caretaking and self-esteem are linked for women. Soon after reuniting with Krogstad, Mrs. Linde says, "I need someone to be a mother to, and your children need a mother. The two of us need each other" (49). Once he accepts her proposition, she is enraptured, exclaiming "People to work for, to live for—a home to make. That's something worth doing" (50). For Mrs. Linde, women's expected function and her true desires correspond. In this respect, Mrs. Linde is the ultimate complicit figure, one whose characterization remains static throughout the play. She craves her expected role, to support and bolster family in an attitude of self sacrifice, and is at a loss when she has no one to nurture.

Nora's experiences cause her to question this proposition and her ability to live up to it wholly. Pride derives from her sacrifice for her husband—this is Nora's own form of caretaking. But when Krogstad threatens to tell Torvald her secret, she wells up with tears. "That would be shameful . . . That secret—my pride and joy—if he learned about

it in such a horrible way” (20). Nora realizes that cultural constraints dictate self-worth when she explains why she cannot share her secret with Torvald: “Torvald’s a man—he’d be so humiliated if he knew he owed me anything” (11). She knows that the sacrifice that brings her so much pride reduces his status as the family’s provider. The crucial problem is that her pride comes from performing a woman’s role while she really takes on a man’s expected function. She is drawn to worrying about money, for instance, even though she complains, “I’d get so tired, so tired,” of the copy work, “but it was also great fun, sitting and working and earning money like that. Almost like being a man” (12). She is expected to be a caretaker but not to provide the way her husband does; while she enjoys resisting the norm, she wants to maintain her persona as complicit with the ideals of the wife and mother.

While feminist readings correctly defend Nora as she faces Torvald’s great insensitivity in the final scene, she too is guilty of the same gendered expectations that he has for her. The “great miracle” that she has been hoping for throughout the play is nothing more than his taking her burden onto himself, per his allotted role as the family patriarch. Torvald, too, expects to be the caretaker of the family—this is how he measures his self-worth. Once this security is removed, and he learns that Nora has made a financial decision and compromised his reputation, he lashes out at her. Clearly, he does not care about her crime since he readily forgives her once he realizes her actions will not be exposed; he only is cross that her actions might detract from his cultural capital as a man.

Again, this perspective highlights that the polarization of Ibsen’s thinking in *A Doll’s House* into universalizing artist *or* feminist activist misses the point that the play

fulfills both readings simultaneously. Ibsen shows us that confining men and women to these roles leaves them dissatisfied. Torvald and Nora's relationship is severed when the veil of these illusions is lifted. As old truths collapse, Nora is left to mistrust her ability to mother in a world where standards have proven to be false. At this point, she must stop pretending that her ideals match society's, and she adopts an attitude of resistance, leaving her home and writing a new script for mothers. Even more significant is that the connection between femininity and maternity is revealed to have a flip side; masculinity is connected to how well a man can be a provider for his family.

The critics who claim that Nora's transformation comes too quickly miss the subtle clues she expresses early in the play; they also must accept the performance of gaiety that she exudes now for her husband and presumably for her father before him. The stress of maintaining both her charm and her secret cause her inner life to unravel on stage in images of nihilism and destruction as appearance and reality fail to reconcile. She complains that "everything seems so pointless, so idiotic," (24) as she plans her dress for the party and then exclaims as she searches through the costumes, "I wish I could rip them into a million pieces" (27). This expresses frustration about both her pre-party activities and her current situation, which she sums up for Rank, longing to tell Torvald, "død og pine," or "To hell with everything!" (15).<sup>67</sup> She is fed up and frustrated and longs for change. Early in the play, her hope rests on Torvald who inevitably disappoints her and provides neither the solution nor the heroism which made the sacrifice of her identity to matrimony tolerable. Disappointment in his inability to live up to her

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<sup>67</sup> This is Davis and Johnston's translation, perhaps the most colorful one I have found. Literally, the idiom means "Death and torture" or "Death and pain" but the phrase has been translated variously as "Oh! dash it all!" (Henrietta Francis Lord 57); "Damn!" (William Archer 51); "Well, I'm damned," (Jim Manis 20); While the oath is not a strong one, it does have religious overtones that may have made it scandalous for Rank and Mrs. Linde while representing the stress of keeping her secret.

expectations turns to self-loathing that matches her early thinking as she realizes “I’d been living with a stranger—that I’d borne three children with him—. Aah—I can’t stand the thought of it! I could tear myself to pieces” (64).

Torvald attempts to defend himself against her new reasoning: “But no one gives up his honor for the one he loves”; to which Nora responds, “That’s exactly what millions of women have done” (64). But here, Nora is mistaken—at least by the dictates of her society. As Mrs. Linde epitomizes, serving the needs of a family *is* the honor and source of pride for women, while being a breadwinner, perverted to such a great extent in Torvald’s character, is the honor and source of pride for men. For the first time, though, Nora can speak honestly to her husband about this injustice in language that echoes those who were fighting for women’s rights at the end of the nineteenth century. Nora will end up abandoning her home because she realizes that she is at odds with the nineteenth-century perspective that to be female is to be a mother. In order to come to this realization, she had to move from a woman who *pretended* to be a complicit mother, seemingly obeying her husband while pursuing her own course, to an actively resisting one who can leave her family without shame.

Whatever his hesitations about being labeled a feminist, Ibsen understood the essence of the women’s rights movement. Writing about the end, Ibsen comments

The woman in the play ends with no idea about what is right and what is wrong; her instinctive feeling on the one hand, and her belief in authority on the other bring her into complete confusion. A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society; it is exclusively a male society, with laws written by men and with prosecutors and judges who judge women’s behaviour from the male standpoint . . . Bitterness. A mother in contemporary society, like certain insects that crawl off and die once they have done their duty for the furtherance of the race. (qtd. in M. Meyer 446)

However critics use his talk for the Norwegian League for Women's Rights, his early thinking reveals how social structures influence female behavior; the play itself shows the impact of these structures on both women and men.

### **Making the Ending More Comfortable**

An examination of the international production history of the play's first performances reveals that the end of *A Doll's House* made people on both sides of the theater—the theatrical staff and audiences—uncomfortable. Nora seemed to be an unnatural woman, one who would not overcome what was natural and right for her own silly needs. Producers believed that they could eradicate this discomfort by changing the ending—because if Nora leaves her doll's house, she leaves all the niceties of home and hearth established by Torvald, thereby threatening the nuclear family structure. The threat is magnified in that she chooses to walk out into a world that will treat her harshly. She may stay with Mrs. Linde for the first night, or two, but her fate after that is unclear. Yet she continues on in the face of these uncertainties, privileging her own right to selfhood over subservience to her family.

To rectify the potential polluting effects of such a portrayal, the new endings were supposed to be less unsettling and more familiar to audiences and theater staff. A close reading of the revisions reveal an effort, across Western cultures, to maintain the nuclear family by returning the mother to the home. Few imagine a positive outcome for Nora until she humbles herself and begs to be taken back; this outcome was the only one that relieved the discomfort created by the original ending. Curiously, the real life story of Laura Kieler parallels these corrective finales; a month after she left the asylum, Victor Kieler finally let Laura come back home to care for the children (M. Meyer 445).

Templeton points out that Ibsen had to moderate the story of the Kieler family to make it more believable to audiences:

His protagonist he made a housewife, not a writer, and the hack work not novels but mere copying; her antagonist is transformed from a cruel brute to a possessive guardian: rather than put her into an asylum, he denounces her as an unfit wife and mother, and then, once his reputation is safe, he forgives her and wants to take her back on the spot. The Helmers, in other words, are normal. But in the end, it was Ibsen's stroke of genius to create in his little *husfru* a rebel who throws normality to the winds. Career woman Laura Kieler begged her husband to take her back, but housewife Nora Helmer is tired of begging; in *A Doll's House* it is the husband who pleads to be taken back and the wife who refuses. (137)

The revisions to *A Doll's House*, then, match what actually happened when Laura Kieler left her family; Ibsen's original portrayal is more progressive than his young protégée's experience.

Though Maurice Valency (1963) falls more on the Ibsen-as-humanist side of the interpretive spectrum, he does pinpoint one feminist aspect of the play that made it disquieting for contemporary audiences. Nora's story is not unfortunate, for she "throws off her servitude; she is emancipated and strengthened" while tragedy rests with Torvald since he "is an example of the decline of the patriarchal idea. He is incapable of fulfilling the obligations of a domestic suzerain . . . Torvald is therefore fated, as a husband, to go down with the patriarchy which he unworthily represents" (158). Valency discounts the effect that a mother abandoning her children may have had on audiences and decides that Torvald's "symbolic castration" is what was really shocking; the decline of patriarchy, and specifically Torvald's loss of status and place in the world, is the primary element that contributed to controversy. While it is true that the future uncertainty of a patriarchal society was at the heart of the public's discomfort, it is difficult to remove a mother's

decision to leave her children out of the discussion, for her role in the home is a distinguishing factor of the patriarchal equation.

Finney (1994) writes that “In closing the door on her husband and children, Nora opened the way to the turn-of-the-century women’s movement” (91). So while women had been working on gaining rights for many decades, Ibsen’s play became a location where the feminist mission could be both furthered and imagined. Reading the play this way disturbs critics who feel that using the work as a feminist stomping ground detracts from the play itself. Just as authors and critics’ readings and Ibsen’s own attempt to dissociate himself from groups or movements work to reframe the play, so does the transnational effort to alter the ending work to bring it into submission and reduce its threat.

### **Scandinavia 1879**

A biographical sketch that precedes an early English translation by Henrietta Frances Lord reveals that in Scandinavia, the play aroused as much controversy as is usually ascribed to religion and politics: “You are requested not to mention Ibsen’s *Doll’s House!*” was sometimes added to social invitations (4); F. L. Lucas (1962) adds that placards were posted over doors in oversized lettering stating “Here it is forbidden to discuss *A Doll’s House*” (149). The controversy did nothing to quell the play’s popularity and the printed editions seemed to fuel the debate, generating unprecedented sales for Ibsen. The first printing in Copenhagen in December 1879 sold out 8,000 copies within one month; the second edition of 4,000 copies and third edition of 2,500 also sold out quickly over the next few months (Hanssen 1).

Koht discusses the impact of the play in Scandinavia after its first production at Copenhagen's Royal Theatre in December 1879. In newspapers and books, public and private discussions, people debated whether Nora could legally be prosecuted for forgery. Ministers included the play in their sermons. Others wondered if someone like Nora really could defy convention and rebel against marriage and motherhood. The moral implications of Nora's decision were taken up most passionately and made Ibsen a representative of women's rights (321-22). Following the first run, the play went on to play successfully in Stockholm, Christiania, and Bergen (M. Meyer 458).

Very suddenly, Ibsen became associated with women's liberation since the play's conclusion corresponded with women's expanding place in the schools and in civil service and the writings of feminists like Camilla Collett, Mathilde Schjøtt, and Aasta Hansteen. Amalie Skram, the first Norwegian to address female sexuality, believed the play was a harbinger of women's actions as they awoke to the injustices they suffered. Feminist Gina Krog, editor of *Nylænde*, thought the play would be a "miracle" for women's rights. The pastor M. J. Færden predicted that a suitcase would be the new symbol of women's role in her marriage, not her wedding ring (Finney 91). These were the first feminists to use the text as a starting point for their causes, despite Ibsen's reservations and the admonition of his universalizing supporters.

Some critics were able to appreciate the technical innovations of a pared down, naturalistic script that was new to drama and gave the play a realistic feel. Erik Bøgh, in *Folkets Avis*, comments that in the very first performance at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen there was "Not a single declamatory phrase, no high dramatics, no drop of blood, not even a tear; never for a moment was the dagger of tragedy raised. . . . Every



needless line is cut, every exchange carries the action a step forward, there is not a superfluous effect in the whole play” (qtd. in M. Meyer 455-456). However, the discomfort the play soon would cause elsewhere becomes apparent in some of these first Scandinavian reviews. Frederik Petersen, for example, writes in *Aftenbladet* that ““We have seen something sorely unbeautiful and retain only the sense of pain which is the inevitable outcome when no conciliation shows us the final victory of ideals”” (qtd. in M. Meyer 455).

Privately, at least one critic gave another hint about how the play would be received: by rewriting the ending. Literary critic and politician Edvard Brandes writes in a letter that the play ““ends where it ought to begin . . . If the first scene had shown the relationship between the two as Nora realizes it to be in the last act, and the whole play had dealt with their separation instead of that coming as it does now, like a *Satan ex machina*, the audience wouldn’t have clapped but Ibsen’s plot . . . would have been clearer and better”” (qtd. in M. Meyer 456). Brandes wanted Ibsen to fill in the blank of Nora’s life after the curtain falls, a topic which critics continue to consider today. Despite the stir that the play caused in the public and private spheres, Scandinavian producers and audiences in Norway seemed generally content to leave the play as it was written. Perhaps the play was taken as an obvious reworking of the widely publicized troubles of Laura Kieler and therefore could be left alone. Ibsen would have to fight desperately against producers, who were insistent that the ending was too progressive for audiences, in other countries where he was not protected by copyright laws.

### Germany 1880

Unprotected by copyright laws in Germany, Ibsen had to submit to actresses and producers who wanted to change the ending of his play. Actress Hedwig Niemann-Raabe would not play the role of Nora, claiming that “*I would never leave my children*” (Koht 321). To quell the ubiquitous impulse to alter the ending, Ibsen stepped in quickly in Germany, afraid of what managers and producers would write, and submitted this revision to be used instead of the original final scene:

NORA           Where we could make a real marriage out of our lives together. Goodbye.  
*(Begins to go.)*  
 HELMER       Go then! *(Seizes her arm.)* But first you shall see your children for the last  
 time!  
 NORA           Let me go! I will not see them! I cannot!  
 HELMER       *(draws her over to the door, left)* You shall see them. *(Opens the door and  
 says softly.)* Look, there they are asleep, peaceful and carefree. Tomorrow,  
 when they wake up and call for their mother, they will be - motherless.  
 NORA           *(trembling).* Motherless...!  
 HELMER       As you once were.  
 NORA           Motherless! *(Struggles with herself, lets her travelling-bag fall, and says.)*  
 Oh, this is a sin against myself, but I cannot leave them. *(Half sinks down  
 by the door.)*  
 HELMER       *(joyfully, but softly).* Nora!

*(The curtain falls.)*

(qtd. in Törnqvist and Robinson 42)

Ibsen’s alteration of ten or so lines of text reroutes the direction of the entire play. He heightens the melodramatic pathos with the repetition of the word “motherless”; the word is the force that induces this Nora stay with her family, though the decision creates a new reading for Nora in the play as a whole. The character remains the obedient little squirrel of the first acts, chained to her home instead of a woman whose character has a changing trajectory over the course of the drama. Even though Nora remains obedient, at least part of Ibsen’s vision and original intention is embedded in the revision when the

revised Nora says: “This is a sin against myself.” This line subtly signals that while her children may need her, she really should be out in the world to become independent. The idea of her children being motherless keeps her home, but this Nora recognizes that staying is a sacrifice given her newfound clarity. Although producers imagined that the revision would fulfill the audience’s concept of a “happy ending,” it is, on closer inspection, a more dire fate for Nora than that of the original. She knows she must go, but patriarchal rule prevails. The conception that audiences desired “happy endings,” so original ideas were revised, was a typical method to make texts conform to expectation. In the play *A Man’s World*, Rachel Crothers allowed producers to stage the ending where Frank and Gaskell are united, synthesizing the nuclear family. Similarly, the editor of *A Voyage Out* requested that Anna Morgan’s life be saved after her abortion. On deeper inspection, these endings are not really happy—only conventional.

It is difficult to believe that the play would have garnered discussion and debate anywhere if it had ended in this manner since Ibsen only would have fulfilled the convention of the well-made play, one in which a character’s secret is revealed and a return to natural order is resumed. Here, the natural order could be fulfilled by Nora returning to the home. In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891/1913), George Bernard Shaw comments that

Up to a certain point in the last act, *A Doll’s House* [sic] is a play that might be turned into a very ordinary French drama by the excision of a few lines, and the substitution of a sentimental happy ending for the famous last scene: indeed the very first thing the theatrical wiseacres did with it was to effect exactly this transformation, with the result that the play thus pithed had no success and attracted no notice worth mentioning. But at just that point in the last act, the heroine very unexpectedly (by the wiseacres) stops her emotional acting and says: “We must sit down and discuss all this that has been happening between us.” And it was by this new technical feature: this addition of a new movement, as

musicians would say, to the dramatic form, that *A Doll's House* [sic] conquered Europe and founded a new school of dramatic art. (219)

By Shaw's estimation, Ibsen took drama in a new direction simply by having Nora leave the home. All the revisions to the play that began in Germany, including Ibsen's own, are attempts to change *A Doll's House* into a familiar form.

The idea of revising the ending displeased Ibsen greatly and he wrote a letter in February 1880 to the Danish newspaper *Nationaitidende* expressing his feelings: "In a letter to my translator, I myself stigmatized this change as a 'barbarous outrage' against my play. Those who make use of the altered scene do so entirely against my wishes. I trust that it will not be used at very many German theaters" (Sprinchorn, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches* 183). Ibsen also wrote to the director of the Vienna City Theater who had reservations about the ending of the play. Ibsen reassured the director. "You find that the play because of its ending does not fit properly in the category of *Schauspiel*. But, my dear sir, do you really attach much value to so-called categories? For my part, I believe that the dramatic categories are elastic, and that they must accommodate themselves to the literary facts—not vice versa" (Sprinchorn, *Ibsen Letters and Speeches* 184). After discussing the lack of copyright laws protecting artists in Scandinavia and Germany, he complains that "our plays are exposed in Germany to acts of violence at the hands of translators and producers, of directors and actors at the smaller theaters. When my works are threatened with such outrages, I prefer . . . to commit the act of violence myself instead of leaving them to be treated and 'adapted' by less careful and less skillful hands" (Sprinchorn, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches* 183-184). Ibsen's strong language reflects his understanding of how minor alterations change his meaning and intention, injuring him personally while ruining the play. In that same month, Ibsen wrote to

Heinrich Laube, who would direct *A Doll's House* at the Vienna City Theater, to compel him to use the original ending. He writes, "I prepared the alternative ending not because I thought it was required but simply at the request of a North German impresario and of an actress who is going on tour . . . After reading it you will, I trust, acknowledge that the effect of the play can only be weakened by employing it. I suggest that you disregard the altered ending and produce the play in its original form" (Sprinchorn, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches* 184). Ibsen is careful, once again, to make known that the change was not done willingly.

At the Stadttheater in Flensburg, *A Doll's House* made its German premiere on February 6, 1880, starring Hedwig Niemann-Raabe ("German first performances" [ibsen.net](http://ibsen.net)). Audiences were not receptive to the revised ending here or as it went on to play in Flensburg, Hamburg, Dresden, and Hanover. The revision drained the script of vitality and the reviews were lackluster. Controversy eventually focused on the various versions presented to audiences, particularly in Berlin. Here, audience reaction resulted in multiple staging of different versions, each one eliciting a different outcry. When the play concluded with Ibsen's "happy" ending, audiences complained that they were deprived of the original;<sup>68</sup> when the original was performed, they were disturbed by Nora's decision to leave her family. Audiences were certain that now a "fourth act" was being withheld. In response, yet another version was put up that included the alleged "missing" fourth act. In this rendition, Miss Linde and Krogstad have married and Nora, restless and unsettled, is their guest. Torvald pays a visit and Nora asks him, quietly, "Have you then quite forgiven me?" Helmer looks at her lovingly, takes a macaroon

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<sup>68</sup> Koht adds that the audience also laughed during the most emotional scenes (321).

from his bag, and playfully puts one in her mouth. “As the curtain falls, Nora cries, ‘The miracle of miracles!’” (Ferguson 245). Within a few years, however, these alterations were discarded permanently in favor of the original. Perhaps the ending seemed less taboo once it was in circulation for a few years.

The original ending was not unconditionally praised either after it finally premiered in Germany at the Königliches Residenz-Theater Munich on March 3, 1880 starring Marie Ramlo (“German first performances” ibsen.net). Koht reveals that the audience was divided: some applauded Nora’s decision to leave while others hissed at the immorality of her decision (321). Although Ibsen’s desire to see the original produced in Germany was fulfilled with Ramlo’s performance, he still had many complaints and misgivings, including whether the actors truly understood their lines and whether Ramlo’s hands were the right size for Nora (Ferguson 246-247). It is unlikely that the audience would have been attuned to these issues. Eventually, Ibsen’s prediction proved to be true and audiences in Germany, as elsewhere, came to accept the play as he had originally written it.

Before the play came to be accepted, *A Doll’s House* inspired some negative reviews from critics and passionate discussion among audience members. Paul Landau commented in *Die Greensward* in 1880 that the ending was immoral and illogical. Karl Frunze concludes a year later in 1881 in *Deutsche Rundschau* that Ibsen loved the repulsive. Ibsen’s friend Georg Brandes wrote Frederik Hegel about the stir *A Doll’s House* caused. “*A Doll’s House* has excited as much controversy as at home. People have taken sides passionately either for or against the play, and it has hardly ever happened before in Munich that any play has aroused such lively discussion” (qtd. in M.

Meyer 460). As it would in other countries, the play fascinated German audiences, attracting more viewers to the theater, so that in 1880, performances of *A Doll's House* contributed to Ibsen's highest earnings ever, over a thousand pounds, even though many productions did not end up paying him royalties. Significantly, this was the first time that performing royalties exceeded his income from published plays. Ibsen would not make as much money again in a single year over the next decade, even though he had yet to write *Ghosts* (1881), *The Wild Duck* (1884), or *Hedda Gabler* (1890) (M. Meyer 471-472).

### **United States 1880**

Arthur C. Paulson and Kenneth Bjørk (1940) report that the first controversy regarding the play occurred a few years before an adaptation was even staged in the United States. The argument took place in the pages of *Norse*, a Norwegian-American newspaper published in Chicago that kept Norwegian immigrants abreast of the literary world of Scandinavia while promoting items from publisher I.T. Relling's bookstore. Paulson and Bjørk translate the letters between the scholar P.P. Iverslie and a newspaper editor O. S. Hervin, who wrote under the pen name Herm. Wang. The public quarrel, which involved intellectual snubbing and off-topic rants, encapsulated much of the debate that would surround *A Doll's House* over the next few decades. Iverslie found the play abhorrent and a violation of Christian values. He writes that ““It is depressing and sad to observe the empty, godless life that it portrays . . . When one considers the book's spiritual content it doesn't matter at all that this, like Ibsen's other works, is a masterpiece . . . Nora is in truth a doll and acts like one; and she talks like a doll, that is to say, like a being without a brain, or in any case a very insignificant one”” (qtd. in Paulson and Bjørk 3). Iverslie's criticism is similar to discussions a century later by critics like Evert

Sprinchorn (1980) and June Schlueter (1985) who denigrate the play based on the perceived ineptitude—and perhaps true-to-life characterization—of the heroine. After Herwin insults Iverslie by concluding that his remarks show he must be ““much over ninety”” (4), Iverslie shoots back by grounding his opinion in Christian and patriarchal truths.

Christianity teaches that no one is perfect, that consequently we must put up with one another, that therefore one party to the marriage contract must exercise forbearance with the other. By contrast, the moral of a *Doll's House* evidently is based on the view that people are self-sufficient, that therefore it is not necessary for one of a married couple to endure the other, but that he can go his way as soon as he or she discovers that the other does not meet his or her fancy . . . One thing, however, they should take into consideration, namely that the opinion under consideration eventually must lead to the dissolution of every bond of relationship. (qtd. in Paulson and Bjørk 5)

Typical of the rhetoric of household and family manuals of the period, an intact nuclear family is the glue that keeps together all other relationships, and by extension, society. It is significant that Nora seems a threat to Iverslie even though she is a fictional character whose actions do not impact any real family relationships. Once again, she is judged as a real role model to those who evaluate her and who cannot see the imbalance of power within Nora and Torvald's relationship. O. S. Herwin eventually abandons the debate in a letter that focuses more on Iverslie's opinion of him than about the text of the play. He comments little more about *A Doll's House* in this letter than ““I look upon the play as a description of the life of the ‘cultivated classes’ and not as a lesson in morality”” (8). Notably, this discussion took place a full two years before the play was first staged in the United States.

When the print version of *A Doll's House* first reached the United States in 1880, the Civil War had ended only fifteen years earlier in 1865 and the country was in flux,



rebuilding its population, economy, and values. As part of this growth, hundreds of theaters opened across the Midwest that welcomed touring theatrical groups. According to Robert A. Schanke (1988), these audiences shared a value system that included “a firm faith in God, a clear-cut distinction between good and evil, the importance of the home and family life, love as the great human motivator, and the work ethic. In addition they glorified innocence, patriotism and loyalty” (4). Audiences at the time enjoyed sentimental dramas like Alexander Dumas’s *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848) and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Schanke goes on to explain that immigration patterns affected the types of shows that became popular. Norwegians began to settle in the United States in great numbers from about 1840; forty years later, these numbers peaked so that by the turn of the century, over 300,000 Norwegians lived in America, especially in the Midwest. These families attempted to preserve their culture through newspapers and schools, where emerging Norwegian culture could be disseminated (5).

Its U.S. production history typifies what happened when producers attempted to protect the public from *A Doll’s House*. William Moore Lawrence renamed the play *The Child-Wife* and described it as “a protest against the European estimate of woman”; despite this description, the play featured little protest as Nora decides to stay with her husband, as she did in the German version, *Nora oder ein Puppenheim* (1880), on which this play is based. The play was enlivened by a solo sung by one of Nora’s children that induced encores from the audience and a comical Irish widow, none of which are components of the original. With such alterations, the first U.S. production was really a vaudevillian, watered-down version of Ibsen’s drama, featuring inexperienced actors

(qtd. in Haugen "Ibsen in America" 4). Even the characters' names were changed and Nora became Eva and Torvald became Robert, perhaps, as was the case in the German version, so that audiences would not attribute her actions to her nationality and upbringing (Haugen, "Forgotten Performance" 403). The motivation for making these drastic changes is unclear. It could be that producers wanted a Norwegian play for their Norwegian-American audience. But the decision to use the revised text signals an interest in toying with this new vision of femininity that the play suggests for its viewers; significantly, none of these changes would be possible if *A Doll's House* were another genre, like the novel.

This forgettable performance of *The Child-Wife* was the result of hours of hard work and numerous obstacles. First, Lawrence tried unsuccessfully to hire Minnie Maddern, a famous stage actress, to star in the production and then elicited scholar Rasmus B. Anderson to refine the script. When the two men could not convince New York's Union Square Theatre to stage the production, they finally found a home for it in Milwaukee. Although the actor who played Nora, Minerva Guernsey, had some theater training, this performance was met with disparaging criticism as reviewers commented that she was nervous and forgot her lines (Schanke, *Ibsen* 6). Even though the show ran for only three performances, Anderson and Lawrence received the rights to translate all of Ibsen's work into English in the United States; there is no evidence that Ibsen ever read this first version of the play. However, this was to be the last of the translations undertaken by the two men (Haugen, "Forgotten Performance" 415-16). Haugen explains that Lawrence failed in his efforts to popularize Ibsen because "he was not allowed to give them the real Ibsen, but only an emasculated adaptation agreeable to the

demands of current taste” (“Forgotten Performance” 420). This commentary is significant: by deleting Nora’s bold action, the play is “emasculated,” or falling more in line with a woman’s expected actions. Even though the play had been published in the United States, it did not sell as well as it did in Scandinavia and most audiences did not know enough to demand the original.

A review written for *Dagbladet* in Christiania by “B” provides extensive information about this performance for an audience who did know the original:

The translation was not especially good, and particularly certain changes in the play made by the translator did not improve it but rather harmed it. Thus the ending was changed according to German model so that Nora at the sight of her children suddenly decides to remain . . . As the actress who played Nora was unable to dance the tarantella, this highly exciting and characteristic scene was omitted and the play naturally suffered greatly on this account (qtd. in Haugen, “Forgotten Performance” 405)

Although Lawrence admits that he made some changes, his claim that “the great mass of it is Ibsen’s unchanged work” cannot be true since descriptions of the production are so different from the original (qtd. in Haugen, “Forgotten Performance” 404). One review, for example, writes that the Irish maid “is never at a loss for a genuine Irish action or expression. She causes plenty of mirth” (qtd. in Haugen, “Forgotten Performance” 407). Further, it is difficult to know exactly what audiences thought about this production because the reviews are so contradictory. A critic from the *Sunday Telegraph* writes that the theater was filled “with a large company of critical ladies and gentlemen, but it had nothing to do with their being grandly entertained. The play, it was apparent, more than met the expectations of the public.” This perspective contradicts the critic from the *Evening Wisconsin* who mused that the audience was “largely composed of personal friends of the author” (qtd. in Haugen “Forgotten Performance” 408). A personal

reminiscence from a student, who may have been one of the few people who actually read the original, related that ““The theater was not filled but there was a very fair house . . . It had been thought that the play was too somber in character and they had attempted to brighten it at several points with some totally irrelevant humor, which to us who knew the play was a blot”” (qtd. in Haugen “Forgotten Performance” 409). These reviews, which focus on little more than the audience and plot summary, lack the passion that would follow those productions that were actually presented as Ibsen intended. *The Child Wife* was destined to fall into obscurity.

Robert A. Schanke (1988) discusses how the second U.S. performance, another alteration from the original, was the collaboration between the husband and the secretary of accomplished Polish actress Helena Modjeska. After touring with *A Doll’s House* throughout Europe, Modjeska decided to stage her version, inspired by Ibsen’s German revision, during a run of other plays (*As You Like It* and *Camille*) in Louisville, Kentucky in December 1883. This *Doll’s House*, renamed *Thora*, included an extended discussion of religion and included “a reunion, a rushing together, and a falling curtain on a happy family tableau” (9). Once again, the deflated ending altered the essence of the play and, despite the draw of Maurice Barrymore and Mary Shaw, Modjeska had to eliminate *Thora* from her repertoire after one performance. As others before her who tried to present altered endings, she attributed the public’s disinterest to their being unready for Ibsen’s work; perhaps her revisions made the play too commonplace and unappealing for those who usually reveled in her productions. While the original *Doll’s House* inspired debate and dissension, the versions that altered Ibsen’s vision elicited an even worse response for a playwright: apathy.

It was not until producers began to stage the play as Ibsen wrote it that longer runs and discomfort rather than apathy became associated with the production in the United States. The American actor and manager Richard Mansfield used the translation by William Archer and cast his fiancé Beatrice Cameron as Nora for the first tour of the original play on October 30, 1889. Despite harsh critical reaction in Boston, the play went onto other major U.S. cities, including Baltimore, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Washington D.C. (Schanke, *Ibsen* 10). Throughout, the critics disliked Nora even if they liked the production. An unsigned review in *The Critic*, for instance, lashed out at the actors and criticized Nora, writing:

It is possible, of course, that a wife and mother, of eight years' experience, might be as silly, frivolous, flippant and ignorant as Nora Helmer; but is inconceivable that she should be capable of conjugal or maternal devotion, or that, being capable of either, she should desert husband, home and children, after the first serious quarrel in her matrimonial experience, especially after the cause of that quarrel had been effectually removed. ("Ibsen's 'Doll's House' at Palmer's" 329)

Significantly, the reviewer thinks that Krogstad's forfeiture of the note should end the quarrel between Nora and Torvald; further, her departure erases any devotion she may feel for her children. Selfhood and maternity are clearly incompatible. It is no surprise that this reviewer declares "Nora is an incomprehensible and incredible fool" (329). A review in *The New York Times* praises the "sheer good acting that kept the small audience in their seats and forced them occasionally to applause" ("Record of Amusements" 11). With some sarcasm, the critic decides that Nora, "will be selfish. She will go out into the world, leaving husband and children, to learn the lessons that were never taught her . . . This is not a pretty character" ("Record of Amusements" 11). Torvald does take some blame, however, for being "uxorious" and "limited." While Nora believes that her father and Torvald have "never given her the chance to know good from evil," the real blame,

“of course, lies with the methods of educating women in Europe and the position women hold in society” (“Record of Amusements” 11).<sup>69</sup> This criticism reveals a sense of nationalism and superiority; the real source of the problem rests with *their* society, implying that the U.S. is immune from such deficiencies. *Chicago Times* writer Amy Leslie describes it as “morbid, forced, repulsive, not so much from the situation supposed as the amazingly stupid, sometimes, and fantastic, sometimes, way it is met . . . Doubtless the world abounds in festers of many kinds, but the way to remedy them is not to smear their horrible oozings over everything else” (“Amusement Notes” 3/6/1890 n.pag.). The distaste expressed in these reviews goes back to Nora’s surprising actions, a representation that must have been difficult to understand.<sup>70</sup>

Ten years later, after gaining notoriety and fame, Ibsen still served to draw contentious discussion of how his plays, particularly *A Doll’s House*, could be read in the context of modern society. In 1890, *The Critic* published Edward J. Harding’s “Henrik Ibsen, Iconoclast,” an essay that rejects Ibsen’s negative view of humanity. Harding is disturbed by Ibsen’s characterizations, wherein “To live one’s own life, to follow the natural impulses, is the highest rule of conduct; and the gratification of these tendencies . . . involves the destruction of our happiness and that of our dearest ones” (131). Fortunately, however, these ideas “are not the whole truth; and after all it is a distorting mirror which Ibsen holds up to nature” (132). This essay inspired Annie Nathan Meyer, a founder of Barnard College and an anti-suffragist, to respond with a

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<sup>69</sup> It should be noted that a review of the London production of *A Doll’s House* elicited a much harsher review from *The New York Times* six months earlier in June 1889. Though E.A.D. acknowledges its “eloquence,” the critic calls it “as sad and depressing as any work of art could be. It denies everything that the good people of this world believe. Its pessimism is of the bitterest kind; its frankness is shocking” (“Drama Off the Stage” 13).

<sup>70</sup> The notes in Robert A. Schanke’s *Ibsen In America* led me to many of these U.S. reviews and responses.

feminist perspective in a letter to the editors in the next issue. She writes that Ibsen's plays highlight "his strong, sympathetic belief in the future of women." Extensively quoting from the last scene of *A Doll's House*, she argues that his plays "are full of the beautiful truth that Woman is a responsible being, as complete in herself, as capable of exercising self-government as Man" (147). The argument here splits along familiar gender lines, with the male criticizing what the play has to say about humanity in general and the female pleased with the implications of Ibsen's work for women.

Despite the openness to Norwegian literature in some parts of the United States, Ibsen's work was slow to find full acceptance. By 1890, almost ten years after the first U.S. production of *A Doll's House*, W. E. Simonds writes: "That [the Americans] should give any general assent to the truth of his assertions, or anticipate the realization of his suggestions, is out of the question altogether. Ibsen is too revolutionary, too much of an extremist, to permit of any large following here" (qtd. in Haugen "Ibsen in America" 3).<sup>71</sup> It would take years of performances before Ibsen's work was considered worthwhile.

### **Great Britain 1884**

When *A Doll's House* first arrived on the London stage, producers altered the script to avoid offending the audience; as could be expected, the production languished. The first presentation in Great Britain, as in the United States, came from a German translation, undertaken by Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman, at the request of a producer who wanted a "sympathetic" play. The result was *Breaking a Butterfly*, presented at the Prince's Theatre on March 3, 1884. This version relates the tale of the

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<sup>71</sup> This sentiment echoes that of Ibsen's contemporary Georg Brandes who said ruefully a decade earlier that "Germany will never understand Ibsen" (qtd. in Koht 321).

innocent Flora who has illegally borrowed money for her husband Humphrey. A new character who loves Flora, Martin Grittle, intercepts the letter revealing Flora's secret from the Krogstad character, Philip Dunkley. By this point, however, Flora realizes disaster can follow when she acts on her own instincts. Unlike Torvald, Humphrey declares his guilt and Flora exclaims that he is too good for her. The play ends with a tableau of the happy family, reconciled with Flora's new knowledge about how to be a proper wife: by gaining her husband's counsel. Edward Aveling, the common-law husband of Eleanor Marx, reviewed the play in *To-Day*, a Socialist publication, and concluded that "They have emasculated, they have, if I may coin a meaning for a familiar word, effeminated the drama" (473). Ibsen translator William Archer wrote just as scathing review for *Theatre* and comments on the play's mixed reviews: "'A pleasant little play' or 'an unpleasant little play', 'an interesting little play' or 'a tedious little play'—these and such as these are the terms in which *Breaking a Butterfly* has been described. The one point on which all critics have agreed is that, whether good, bad, or indifferent, the play is unimportant and trifling" ("Breaking a Butterfly" 65). This version is such a poor likeness that he calls the translators "authors" who "felt it needful to eliminate all that was satirical or unpleasant, and in making their work sympathetic they at once made it trivial" ("Breaking a Butterfly" 71-72). Once again, although drawn to the text by the strength of Ibsen's vision, producers thought they could capitalize on his work without including the parts that might be difficult for audiences. This version, despite the revisions that were supposed to make it more palatable for the public, was not staged again in a major London production after its month run at the Princess Theatre (Ackerman 34). What this unsuccessful revision reveals is that the cross-cultural assault



to dominate Nora and fit her into the patriarchal hierarchy did not appeal to London audiences. *Breaking a Butterfly* is guilty of this change not only in its end, but throughout the play.

It took ten years of translations into English and an 1885 private charity performance by ‘The Scribblers Dramatic Society’ before a full-scale performance was mounted in London (McFarlane 63-64). Perhaps these earlier, watered-down versions prevented the text from attracting the censor’s attention. William Archer received the Lord Chamberlain’s license for this production, though Ibsen’s reputation and the subsequent stir caused by the play may have resulted in the 1891 denial of *Ghosts*’s production license. *A Doll’s House* did have its premiere without restriction on June 7, 1889, at the Novelty Theatre, and it quickly generated intense interest from critics and audiences, so that the one-week run was extended to twenty-four performances over three weeks. The schedule could have been extended further if some of the cast did not have contractual obligations in Australia (C. Archer 168). The familiar format of *A Doll’s House* caused uncertainty as well as interest. In a letter to his brother, William Archer describes a point of confusion that critics would later comment upon as well. The acting manager, who William Archer described as a “Philistine,” raved about the ending to actress Janet Achurch and predicted its success. By the next rehearsal, his point of view had changed; he told William Archer that “I had no idea it was the last act. I thought it was the first act, and it was all going to be cleared up” (C. Archer 182-83).

Despite these misunderstandings, the play would thrill theater audiences. Elizabeth Robins, who would go on to star as many of Ibsen’s heroines, reports that “Everybody in London had begun to talk Ibsen . . . I went to a party and was rewarded by

finding people all agog about Ibsen, asking one another who was this ‘strange’ (in every sense) dramatist that nobody had ever heard of before” (Robins, *Both Sides* 195). In a letter to his brother Charles, producer William Archer writes that the ending “is to me *the* great thing of the piece . . . the B.[ritish] P.[ublic] now rises to the occasion unflinching . . . I cry over it every night” (C. Archer 182). Archer admits that although the ticket sales were not extraordinary, he was impressed by the attendance since the play was not advertised much and the theater was not centrally located. The early stir that *A Doll’s House* generated did not stop the production from being frequently revived throughout the 1890’s, eventually becoming a part of the repertory.

Gretchen Ackerman (1987) made use of the Houghton Library Theatre Collection at Harvard University for her dissertation on Ibsen on the British stage. She found one writer for the *Era* who observes,

The small audience that assembled at the Novelty Theatre on the evening of the 7<sup>th</sup> inst. was made up of the critics whom duty called, and of the Ibsen worshippers, who, afflicted with a craze, followed the developments of Ibsen’s play translated by Mr. William Archer, with almost solemn interest and attention, pretended to discover in it something very wonderful, and applauded most vigorously when Ibsen became most mysterious and most puzzled their understandings. (qtd. in Ackerman 49-50)

This assessment is as revealing about the critic’s understanding of the play as it is about the audience, which apparently was quite enthusiastic; “the craze” referred to by the critic is indicative of the stir the production aroused amongst individuals. Critics seem most displeased about the statement Ibsen makes about families and so make an effort to quell the interest of the public; in fact, their words had quite the opposite effect. Two years after the first production, William Archer compiled some of the harsher comments in “The Mausoleum of Ibsen” in the *Fortnightly Review*. *People* refers to it as “‘Unnatural,

immoral, and, in its concluding scene, essentially undramatic””; the *St. James Gazette* notes that it is “not suitable for dramatic representation—at any rate on the English stage””; and *The Standard* deems it ““morbid and unwholesome””(qtd. in Archer, “Mausoleum” 79). These are just a few of the many complaints about the play, which deem it beneath the quality expected in England.

Of all of Ibsen’s detractors in England, Clement Scott was perhaps the most vocal. In an extended attack on the play in *Theatre*, Scott makes a complaint that would be repeated thereafter that

There were no previous signs of her conversion, but she has exchanged playfulness for preaching. She, a loving, affectionate woman, forgets all about the eight years’ happy married life, forgets the nest of the little bird, forgets her duty, her very instinct as a mother, forgets the three innocent children who are asleep in the next room . . . and does a thing that one of the lower animals would not do. A cat or dog would tear any one who separated it from its offspring, but the socialistic Nora, the apostle of the new creed of humanity, leaves her children almost without a pang (114)

Scott is so sidetracked by her actions that he ignores all the frustration Nora expresses through the play and how closely she took her husband’s admonitions to heart about what makes a good mother. Echoing the debate in other countries, in Scott’s review, it was inconceivable that a woman could actually break her family structure to find meaning in the world. He goes on to critique what Nora’s actions say about society:

It is all self, self, self! This is the ideal woman of the new creed; not a woman who is the fountain of love and forgiveness and charity, not the pattern woman we have admired in our mothers and our sisters, not the model of unselfishness and charity, but a mass of aggregate conceit and self-sufficiency, who leaves her home and deserts her friendless children because she has *herself* to look after . . . Why should the men have it all their own way, and why should women be bored with the love of their children when they have themselves to study? (114)

Scott looks to the Victorian, self-sacrificing woman as a model to understand the proper order, where men get their own way and women get their children. Although he was able

to praise the quality of the translation and the acting for his review of the first performance, even as he coined the derogatory term “Ibsenite” to discuss Nora’s revolting desertion of her children, he gives a good sense of the impression the play gave those who disliked it. He writes in an earlier, unsigned review for the *Daily Telegraph* that “the interest was so intense last night that a pin might have been heard to drop” (103). While it may have been disturbing to watch the natural order transformed before him, apparently the other audience members were as entranced as he was.

Thomas Postlewait’s *Prophet of the New Drama: William Archer and the Ibsen Campaign* (1986) provides the most thorough summary of the critical reaction to the first performance. Looking at twenty newspapers’ reviews of the opening night, he found five with very positive reviews; four with descriptive reviews; and eleven negative reviews. While some of these negative reviews praised the acting, these reviewers were perturbed by the theme of the play. A few negative reviews were especially riled by the moral implications of the production. This overview highlights the thrill the play created, whether the reviews were positive or negative. Closer inspection reveals the passion with which Ibsen’s supporters and detractors approached his work. William Archer confirms this view in an article written in the *Fortnightly Review* about a month after the Novelty Theatre production. He writes, “If we may measure fame by mileage of newspaper comment, Henrik Ibsen has for the past month been the most famous man in the English literary world” (“Ibsen and English” 115). Some audience members felt they had stumbled upon something very real. *Gentleman’s Magazine* Justin Huntley McCarthy reflected that he felt like “one of the friends of that ill-starred Helmer household—that I was witnessing the real woes of real men and women. I saw the play again and with the

same result; no play had ever seemed to me quite so intensely real before” while Elizabeth Robins felt that it was ““less like a play than a personal meeting”” (qtd. in Ackerman 45-46).

Once again in London, public disputes arose in the newspapers, with critics arguing over the quality of the play. George Buchanan and George Bernard Shaw voiced vastly different views in the pages of *The Pall Mall Gazette* in June of 1889. Buchanan’s “Is Ibsen ‘A Zola With a Wooden Leg’?” critiques Ibsen’s naturalism, declaring that Nora “is transformed from a chattering young hussy of criminal proclivities into a sort of Ibsen in petticoats,” making the point that her character development is unrealistic (7). A pointed response appeared in the same paper two days later from Shaw, entitled “Is Mr. Buchanan a Critic with a Wooden Head?” Like the critics in the U.S., he begins by insulting Buchanan, claiming his “plays bore me; and his views do not interest me in the least: I had grown out of them before I was born” (2). Despite Buchanan’s criticisms, he says audiences are “silent, attentive, thoughtful, startled” and describes the play as “word for word the true story of half our households” (2). By the end, Nora and Torvald are transformed into “the types of Man and Woman at the point where they now stand, she revealing the new Will in her before which must yield all institutions hostile to it—his harem, his nursery, his lust and superstition, in their established forms of home duties, family ties, and chivalry” (2). Mr. Buchanan made no reply to this response.

While I have already discussed the tendency to revisit and revise the end of *A Doll’s House* in order to make it fit neatly into everyday expectations, there was a parallel tendency to write epilogues to the play, many of which show the dire consequences of Nora’s decision. Less than a year after the London performance of *A Doll’s House*, the

*English Illustrated Magazine* published “The Doll’s House—And After” by novelist Walter Besant. His tale takes us into the dysfunctional lives of the Helmer family, ruined, twenty years after Nora leaves. In the intervening time, Nora establishes herself as a wealthy and renowned novelist whose subject is the abolition of the family. “Well, she had had her way. She gave up her husband and home; she abandoned her children; she went forth to find—Herself. She found something, and she called it Herself” (320). Christine arrives to report to the newly returned Nora how her departure has impacted the family: Einar and Torvald are alcoholics; Robert has criminal intentions; Emmy is beset by loneliness, all because “no woman ever did a more cruel, a more wicked, or a more selfish thing than you, when you deserted your husband and your children” (321). Nora secretly returns to visit her daughter Emmy, who rejects her. Emmy eventually commits suicide because her brother has embezzled money from the now upstanding Krogstad, who will pardon him as long Emmy agrees not to marry his son. Nora passes by the scene of the suicide as she leaves town; though “apostle of the new and better creed, [she] was threatened with some of the weakness of the ordinary woman” and almost cries (325). She soon collects herself, however, and proceeds on her journey, deciding that she need not concern herself with the situation. This story suggests that the nuclear family will go awry when the mother is too selfish to take her rightful role. Since it was popular to wonder what happened to Nora, the sequel was translated into Norwegian in Christiania’s newspaper *Dagbladet* as well as into booklet form in German (Henderson 405).

Once again, George Bernard Shaw could not let this piece rest unchallenged and quickly wrote an epilogue to Besant’s epilogue, entitled “Still After the Doll’s House: A

Sequel to Walter Besant's *Sequel to Henrik Ibsen's Play*" which appeared in *Time*.

Unlike Besant's Nora, who is alternately regretful and detached, this Nora is confident in her decisions and path. The story features a meeting between Nora and Krogstad, where it is revealed that Krogstad has been secretly visiting Nora to obtain advice and counsel and to confess his wrong doings when his conscience bothers him (202). Throughout, Nora uses logic and pity to raise his awareness about hypocrisy and gender issues, suddenly having the poise, confidence, and wit of Vivie Warren from *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. In this forgotten piece, Shaw comes closest to pushing the maternal representation to a new level. Nora's time away from her family has shown her the flaws in the nuclear family structure. She observes that marriage "always either sacrifices one of the couple to the other or ruins both. Torvald was a success as long as I remained a failure. But it is not always the woman who is sacrificed. Twenty years ago, when I walked out of the doll's house, I only saw my own side of the question" (205). Her time alone has taught her about the nature of marriage. "Now I have had my eyes open for twenty years, during which I have peeped into a great many doll's houses; and I have found that the dolls are not all female" (206). Either partner can misuse the bonds of marriage for power and gain. When Krogstad notes she seems almost unaffected by her daughter Emmy's suicide, Nora argues back that,

I suppose you do not believe Christine's theory that a woman's affections are naturally graduated in strict proportion to blood relationship, and that ever since I left Torvald my heart has been an aching void, and my life barren of the love of children and of the pleasant interest in the promise of those who are too young to stir our envy or cross our ambition. Since I freed myself, I have had enough and to spare of affection from children of all ages, including you, Nils. (207)

In one respect, Nora seems to have thrived even without the companionship of her husband and children; nevertheless, family nurturing has been replaced with nurturing of

people who would need her counsel, like Krogstad. It seems Nora has only replaced one caretaking relationship with another, though this time, she has done it on her own terms. Krogstad leaves the room with a loud door slam behind him, yet Nora is the hero of the tale (197-208).<sup>72</sup>

Whereas the first United States production played mostly to those with roots in Norway, the production in London specifically attracted the artistic and literary communities. Sally Ledger (2001) reports that the first production was attended by Eleanor Marx, George Bernard Shaw, and Olive Schreiner, among other novelists and feminists; this was certainly a different audience from that of more mainstream shows. She quotes that writer Edith Lees Ellis remembered the effect of this production: “‘A few of us collected outside the theatre breathless with excitement . . . We were restive and almost savage in our arguments . . . Was it life or death for women? . . . Was it joy or sorrow for men? That a woman should demand her own emancipation and leave her husband and children in order to get it, savoured less of sacrifice than sorcery’” (qtd. in Ledger 80). And perhaps it was the interest of Marxists, socialists, and feminists that caught the attention of the general public whose demand for the play resulted in numerous revivals throughout the 1880’s. Ledger attributes the appeal of Ibsen in Western European and Scandinavian societies to his highlighting the importance of an

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<sup>72</sup> Gretchen Ackerman, whose work led me to many of the British reviews and responses, cites two more revisions of *A Doll’s House* that argue most persuasively for Ibsen’s influence beyond all the revivals of the play throughout the 1890’s. One is an 1891 *Punch* parody of *A Doll’s House*, entitled “Nora, or The Bird-Cage (Et Dikkisvoit)” where Nora decides she will leave her doll’s house with the following plan: “‘I must go away at once, and begin to educate myself . . . I shall begin, --yes, I shall begin with a course of the Norwegian theatres. If that doesn’t take the frivolity out of me, I don’t really know what will!” (qtd. in Ackerman 66). Yet another *Punch* cartoon by Everard Hopkins from 1891 takes on this satirical air. The caption reads IBSEN IN BRIXTON; the cartoon features a large and sour-looking woman telling her tiny and depleted husband that “‘Yes, William, I’ve thought a deal about it, and I find I’m nothing but your doll and dickey-bird, and so I’m going!’” (qtd. in Ackerman 66-67). These parodies on *The Doll’s House* story attest to the wide circulation Ibsen gained, discussed even among those people who would not see the play but would be aware of its story.



individual's freedom in the face of the restrictions of late nineteenth-century middle class society (81).<sup>73</sup>

### **Revisionist Thinking Continues, in New Contexts**

A century after the first 1879 production of *A Doll's House*, it would seem that the matter of the play's ending would become an outdated conversation. Yet, even in a very different historical context, the conclusion still seems to evoke the passionate tendency toward revision and debate, albeit, a debate that has now internalized the rhetoric of the twentieth century, a time where feminist ideas have been most publically debated, revised, and embedded in our language and culture. Nevertheless, *A Doll's House* still is relevant, though the terms of the discussion have the weight of a century of mainstream feminism.

One instance of the persistent relevance of the play appears in *PMLA*, where Joan Templeton's 1989 "The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen" prompted a scornful reply from Marvin Rosenberg. Rosenberg dismisses her feminist reading by distinguishing Nora's early action in the play from her final exit. He criticizes Nora's mothering and then falls into the common temptation of imagining what is next for the family. It is difficult to understand why her instincts have not moved her to "defend her children or to take them away with her. . . . If one imagines the children, awakened by

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<sup>73</sup> Ibsen's struggle with the original ending continued as the play was staged throughout Europe. In 1891 in Italy, for example, actress Eleonora Duse asked that the translation include a "happy ending," but she had to settle for the original. In a letter regarding the disagreement to a French translator, Moritz Prozor, Ibsen writes that "I cannot possibly directly authorize any change whatever in the ending of the drama. I might honestly say that it was for the sake of the last scene that the whole play was written" (Sprinchorn, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches* 300). Ibsen was correct in his instincts: the Italian performance increased his international renown, even with the original ending (Koht 415).

The original version was featured in the 1894 Paris production, though here, some critics were unconvinced by the end. For instance, while critic Francisque Sarcey deems it the most interesting foreign play that had ever been performed in France, Nora's abandonment of her family seems unbelievable. He decides that it was "an enjoyable comedy, apart from its dénouement" (qtd. in M. Meyer 716).

that slamming door, coming in to face their father across the room, one sees that the male-oppressive cycle must begin all over again if there is no heroic woman in the house to resist it. Deserted Little Ivar and Bob will be clones of Torvald, little Emmy doomed to repeat her mother's sad story" (895). This prediction is accompanied by distaste for Nora's new purpose, since "Ibsen sends her out into the world without a smidgen of social or artistic purpose or a vision of service for anyone except herself. We may have a touch of compassion for the society that has clever, cunning, lovable Nora thrust on it" (895).

Templeton tears into Rosenberg's reasoning by contextualizing his stance toward Nora and launching her own criticism:

The notion that Nora should be at once her husband's frivolous playmate and a competent mother of his children is Ibsen's dramatization of the contradiction inherent in the notion of the "woman's sphere," in which woman is not deemed fit for the real world but held responsible for rearing children to live in it. Ibsen refuses to separate Nora as mother from Nora as wife because he is identifying the whole source of her oppression, the belief in a "female nature," an immutable thing-in-itself whose proper sphere is domestic wifedom and whose essence is maternity. The "vision of service" that Rosenberg finds lacking in Nora is what she slams the door on. The famous last stage direction is the final flourish in the play's exposure of the foolishness of sequestering women from the world's work. (895)

The discussion of the play's ending, from its first performance to present-day, continually falls into the two camps represented by Rosenberg and Templeton's, one that measures Nora's actions against her expected functions as wife and mother. Despite progress and fights for equality, women's biological function structures consideration of her fictional actions. While the broad terms of the debate remain the same, this recent discussion reveals a shift in the consciousness of reviewers. No late nineteenth-century critic would have evaluated the "male-oppressive cycle" continuing with Nora's departure; this cycle

was the invisible, accepted structure that determined gender relations. Though Rosenberg argues against Ibsen, his critique signifies a feminist consciousness even as he wishes Nora could have just stayed home.

### **Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899)**

Although twenty years had passed since *A Doll's House*'s first performance, the publication of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in 1899 elicited a similar reaction from critics and readers, on a smaller scale, in the United States. Although readers were familiar with Chopin's stories, they were unprepared to deal with a woman putting her desires and sexual autonomy before her family. According to the cultural standard of the time, such behavior was akin to mental illness. Just as I traced the reaction to *A Doll's House*, so will I trace the reaction that *The Awakening* garnered from reviewers and readers to explain why Edna Pontellier's portrayal was difficult for her middle-class, American audience to understand. Unlike the text of *A Doll's House*, however, which could be tampered with and interpreted and re-interpreted endlessly, the written text of *The Awakening* was a static medium as a novel. So while producers and actresses fiddled with the text of the play to render it amenable to the moral code of the day, *The Awakening* could only be interpreted and rejected—and so it was. After a flurry of response from critics and readers, the novel fell into obscurity until the 1950's, and even then its rebirth as a classic took several decades to be established.

*A Doll's House*, along with the many alternate, more traditional endings the play inspired, and *The Awakening* parallel each other in the critical attention that they received. Beyond the obvious link that both Nora and Edna rebel against their home lives, the critical scrutiny surrounding each novel was intense and focused very often on

the ending of each work. Many critics felt dissatisfied with the way these female characters resolved their conflicts. A second area of critical overlap is that critics tended to attack the characters as if they were real people who should have naturally adhered to the dominant patriarchal order. Reviews also reveal the critics' consciousness of the sex of the author. If reviews about *A Doll's House* sparred over whether Ibsen was an artist or social reformer, critics of *The Awakening* saw the text as the product of an overwrought female imagination.

While Nora and Edna's characters invite comparison, Chopin herself found fault in Ibsen's work. She did not believe his work would endure since

Human impulses do not change and can not [sic] so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another which they have occupied since our knowledge of their existence began. It is why Aeschylus is true, and Shakespeare is true to-day, and why Ibsen will not be true in some remote to-morrow, however forcible and representative he may be for the hour, because he takes for his themes social problems which by their very nature are mutable. (qtd. in Seyersted 86-87)

Chopin reads Ibsen primarily as a social reformer, not an artist. Her perspective makes the distinction between the fates of their characters clearer: no matter what changes are made to adjust gender roles and rights, she believed men and women would always act in expected ways—thus her heroine walks into the sea when faced with the unpleasant realities of desiring emotional and social freedom. In this light, renegade Nora, out to find herself and cast off a marriage based on false premises is a mere flight of fancy; she is appropriate for the age when women consider their social status, but unrepresentative of women's lasting place in a male-centered world. Edna, with her dissatisfactions and sensuous longings, cannot permanently exist in Chopin's reality because her focus is not on the men and children who must be nurtured.

Today's critics sometimes compare Ibsen's characters to Edna Pontellier.<sup>74</sup>

William Warnken (1974-1975) finds parallels between Edna's and Nora's evolution, linking them according to their genre as Realist texts<sup>75</sup> and concludes that Ibsen and Chopin "brought their artistic talents to bear on the burning question of the freedom of the individual spirit" (48). Throughout, Warnken privileges Ibsen and Chopin's artistry as opposed to their social aims, as outlined in critical debates throughout this chapter, claiming that "just as Nora and Edna were first and foremost themselves rather than wives and mothers, their creators are first and foremost artists rather than proponents of a given cause" (44).

A more notable discussion comes from Chopin's biographer Per Seyersted (1969) who makes a distinction between Nora and Edna: "As Mrs. Pontellier develops, she accepts nothing that hinders her from exerting her own free will and making her own rules . . . unlike Ibsen's Nora, she is sure she is right rather than society" (145). I would modify this assertion since it seems to frame Nora too narrowly and Edna too expansively. It is not clear that Nora has come to a complete understanding of whether she or society is wrong. While she does fear that her duplicity in securing the loan may have a harmful influence on her children, she has a difficult time coming to terms with the procedures and regulations of her patriarchal society. At the heart of her decision to leave her family is the understanding that under the supervision of her father and husband, representative rulers of state and home, she has never been able to form her own ideas. She feels compelled to discover her identity in relation to a society that has failed

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<sup>74</sup> For instance, "Hedda and Edna: Writing the Future" (1992) by Susan Bonifer.

<sup>75</sup> A point disputed in Toril Moi's 2006 book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, which argues for Ibsen's role as a modernist playwright.

her before she feels fit to mother effectively. While it is true that Edna increasingly “makes her own rules” against the dictates of her social position, a persistent unhappiness haunts her that is not relieved when she is either an obedient wife or a disobedient one. This frustration is articulated in the last moments of the novel when she realizes that one passionate love affair would inevitably lead to another, with none bringing permanence or satisfaction; at the same time, Edna realizes that she will always be bound to her children. The dual reality of eternal dissatisfaction and compulsory motherhood ultimately draws her into the sea. This reading makes it difficult to accept Seyersted’s neat conclusion that Edna thinks society is wrong while Nora thinks it is right.

Contemporary criticism of *The Awakening* parallels arguments regarding *A Doll’s House* that struggle over viewing Nora’s exit as a humanist or a feminist gesture.

Cynthia Wolff (1973) explains that

The importance of Chopin’s work does not lie in its anticipation of “the woman question” or of any other question; it derives from its ruthless fidelity to the disintegration of Edna’s character. Edna, in turn, interests us not because she is “a woman,” the implication being that her experience is principally important because it might stand for that of any other woman. Quite the contrary; she interests us because she is human—because she fails in ways which beckon seductively to all of us. Conrad might say that, woman *or* man, she is “one of us.” (450)

Curiously, with a few name changes, this analysis seems interchangeable with the more contemporary analysis of *A Doll’s House*. This parallel reading comes because each heroine’s sense of discontent, desire for self-knowledge, and abandonment of the family can be written onto society at large; however, the original contexts of these works really speak to women’s experience.

Nancy A. Walker (2000) describes the cultural context in which Chopin found herself as a woman writer at the end of the nineteenth century. At the time of *The*

*Awakening's* publication, Chopin was a widow who had moved from New Orleans back to her hometown St. Louis after clearing up all her husband's debts. Her serious writing, undertaken with great energy, gained her a wide audience locally and in national magazines like *Vogue*. The novel, poems and stories she published boosted the income she received from her husband's inheritance and property she owned. Critics enjoyed her fiction, conveniently overlooking its more controversial subjects, since it seemed to fall safely into "local color" narratives, capturing the dialects and scenes Chopin observed in the long walks she took as a married woman around New Orleans. The city was in a period of transition during the time she lived there in the 1870's, with the population growing from 168,675 to 216,090 in the period from 1860 through 1880 (Introduction 7-14). While these critics still appreciated her style, the themes of *The Awakening* were too controversial and explicitly progressive to ignore as they could with her earlier works. *The Awakening* deeply challenged their notions of what was proper for a woman to write and audiences to consume.

The idea of separate spheres for men and women seems to have been especially in force for white women of the late nineteenth century. While women of color often served as mistresses to wealthy men, white women were expected to be pure, passionless, and devoted to the private sphere, while men were expected to live in the public sphere (Martin 16). This system explains even further why Edna was often a disagreeable figure to critics: not only did she display raw sensuality, but she appeared in public with men, sunburned her light skin, and was unaffected by the idea that the Napoleonic Code could strip her of everything, including her children, should her husband decide to divorce her. But unlike Nora who leaves her home to experience the world, Edna is moved to abandon

her home to explore the bodily and emotional pleasures that have been unavailable to her in her cloistered life. From the eve of her departure, however, a sense of dissatisfaction creeps in to mar her newfound freedom.

Joseph Allen Boone (1998) points out the economic contradiction in Edna's awakening that can be transferred to Nora as well since

only a well-to-do woman like Edna would have the unencumbered time to "drift" toward an inner awakening without the worry of material concerns. Edna's leisured awakening is not only made possible by her husband's enterprising capitalism—part of the same system, ironically, that oppresses her—but by the racial caste system prevailing in Louisiana. That is, the autoerotic "decolonization" of Edna's body that occurs as she sheds the encumbrances of marriage and recovers her "latent sensuality" depends, ironically, on the colonization of others. If Edna appears to accept without question the many, usually unnamed, black and mulatto servants who maintain the domestic duties (including caretaking of the children) that she deliberately neglects as part of her rebellion against *female* servitude, the text self-consciously underlines the mute, shadowy presence of all the subalterns whose contrasting servitude makes Edna's self-discovery possible. (85)

Whatever proportion of bravery or naivety is involved in abandoning Nora and Edna's spouses, their exits would be impossible without the support system provided by domestic labor. While Nora has the children's best interest in mind, believing a person who does not know herself is unfit to mother, she can rest assured that "They're in better hands than mine, that much I know" (65) since her nanny Anne-Marie will take over their care. She may be opening herself up to the ravages of a world she has never authentically engaged before, but this opportunity for independence would be difficult if she were a single mother. When Nora wonders about the effect of her moral influence on the children, she can send them into another room with the nanny; similarly, Edna's domestic help provide her space to come to her awakening, whether she spends the day with Robert at Grand Isle or stands on her porch and thinks about life while home in New



Orleans. In the periphery of her moments alone lurk the children, accompanied by their caretaker. While Nora moves out alone, Edna brings her maid with her to do her cleaning and cooking and maintain the house while she works and wanders.<sup>76</sup> This support makes it possible for her to work freely, without interruption. Without any help, Nora will not have this luxury.

Although it is the domestic staff in the background that has made these characters' liberation possible, they both seem aware of the symbolic importance of taking nothing from their homes that did not belong to them before marriage. Nora resolves to make her way in the world, though the avenues for gainful employment open to her would be limited. She recognizes Torvald will be free from financial obligation to her since once "a wife deserts her husband's house, as I'm doing now, I've heard the law frees him from any responsibility to her" (65). Shocked by this side of her he has never seen before, he pleads, "But I'll have to send you—" but she cuts him off before he can articulate the unspoken capital she will need to survive; she will take "Nothing nothing" since he is a stranger (65). Similarly, Edna leaves her husband's home and moves next door with nothing acquired from her husband: "Whatever was her own in the house, everything which she had acquired aside from her husband's bounty, she caused to be transported to the other house, supplying simple and meager deficiencies from her own

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<sup>76</sup> Chopin characterizes Edna as someone who longs for individual freedom but is unconcerned with women's liberation as a whole. As a heroine imagined about the time of Reconstruction in the South, Edna seems unaware of the wide staff who serves her needs, whether it is setting up a new home once she becomes independent or caring for her children when she wants to pursue her love interest. Michele Birnbaum (1994) reads Edna's blindness to her domestic staff as a function of her status as a colonizer who "enacts the paradox of the imperial self who appears to rule while being herself ruled" (303); as such, she erases the oppressed from her waking memory and her racial position becomes tied up with the motif of sleep that runs throughout the novel.

resources” (141). Indeed, Edna gets great pleasure making a living for herself by the sale of her paintings—it is liberating to fulfill her own obligations rather than her husband’s.

In both cases, their spouses find their wives’ new—and unmotherly—behavior troubling. When Nora realizes that her personal, moral code is out of synch with that of the world, Torvald thinks, “You’re ill, Nora—you have a fever. I almost think you’re out of your mind” (63). Léonce Pontellier’s perception is similar as Edna ignores her duties as wife and mother by fulfilling her own fancies; he wonders, “if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally,” though she leaves the impression of health and wellness. “How handsome Mrs. Pontellier looked!” Madame Lebrun muses after seeing her back in New Orleans, and her son agrees that she seems like a different woman (83-84). Doctor Mandalet, the family physician, also sees her as “the picture of health” (87) and upon closer inspection realizes that she had changed “from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life . . . There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun” (92). These images of emerging beauty parallel Nora’s tarantella scene, when she dances for Rank, Mrs. Linde, and Torvald. Even though Torvald keeps directing her actions, her hair falls around her shoulders and she dances wildly, entrancing the others and making Torvald feel uncomfortable with this new side he cannot control.

As Nora and Edna redefine femininity, they seek satisfaction outside marriage, a point which in itself is not new. Adultery has long been a subject of literature—Emma Bovary (1857) and Anna Karenina (1878) both easily leave their husbands. Edna’s case is different, however, in that she seeks freedom for its own sake; satisfaction with a new

love is only part of her desire. Lawrence Thorton (1980) notes that this point distinguishes Edna from Emma Bovary since “Edna’s awakening corresponds with the attentions she receives from Robert who reifies the ‘realms of romance’ anesthetized by Léonce, but her ultimate desire is for freedom to do as she likes, not, like Emma’s, to find the man of her dreams” (58). Throughout the narrative, Edna’s focus is on extricating herself from Léonce and asserting independence through art and freedom from social responsibility. Unfortunately, self-doubt undermines her feelings of satisfaction, eventually leading to her suicide. Nora, too, will leave her home to assert autonomy, but she leaves alone as well, with no man waiting to care for her.

*A Doll’s House* and *The Awakening* show the elasticity of Kaplan’s figuring of mothers along the continuum between complicit and resisting. Edna, like Nora, moves from performing the role of the obedient, complicit wife and mother to taking on a fully resisting role. Chopin moves the reader along this arc by giving us insight into the flow of Edna’s thoughts. At the novel’s opening, Edna obeys her husband and is defined by him. Despite his love for his wife, Léonce Pontellier judges that somehow “his wife failed in her duty toward their children” because he could see she “was not a mother-woman” (16). Edna, a Kentucky-born Presbyterian, cannot live up to her husband’s Catholic, Creole standards of maternity. She does not dote over her children’s every move as her husband expects. The children might be happy and independent, but his wife fails by insufficiently giving up her whole self to them. Still, she is obedient to her husband and, by all appearances, cares for the children as would be expected of a woman of her social class.

With a method that would become standard in modernist texts, Chopin lets the reader trace the pattern of Edna's thoughts—for her awakening is not just physical and emotional; it is intellectual as well.<sup>77</sup> It is the unfolding of these thoughts that allows her to move beyond her role as dutiful wife and mother and attempt to come into her own. Through her relationship with Robert, a young man who carries on flirtations with wives as they summer at Grand Isle, Edna feels something greater and “was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (25). Indeed, becoming conscious of the workings of her mind is an intricate part of her awakening. Madame Ratignolle questions her one evening about her thoughts, to which she replies, “Let me see. I was really not conscious of thinking of anything, but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts” (29). And though Madame tells her she need not go on, Edna traces her mind's wanderings, how the water looks beautiful, how the hot wind brought her back to a Kentucky day of her childhood, walking through tall grass where she “felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it” (30). Rumblings of this idea occurred to her early in her life, for later we are told that “She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself” (79). Once the struggle is articulated, she can define herself outside the structure of her nuclear family.

The resistance begins as Edna and her husband battle wills one evening at Grand Isle as he demands that she come inside instead of remaining outside on the hammock.

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<sup>77</sup> This must have been a new method for readers, for a critic for the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* felt a “distinct shock” by her “crude mental operations” (“New Publications” 15).

Once more introspective, “She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant . . . She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had” (53). These reflections allow her to overcome the manner by which she conformed to life, for “At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (26). By throwing off the guise of the complicit wife and mother, the “outward existence that conforms,” she lets her resisting side emerge as she rebels against her expected roles. These resisting elements, from which she gathered strength by tracing the flow of her thoughts, allow her to progress from disobeying her husband’s will to moving away from his life to create her own meaning.

The process of awakening, very much like Nora’s, is accompanied by a desire to destroy. After a fight with her husband about keeping up appearances, she is seized with violence and, “taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it . . . In a sweeping passion she seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to hear” (87). As it did for Nora, the conflict between appearance and reality creates the desire to smash everything to pieces, to hear, feel, and see destruction around her. But unlike Ibsen, Chopin lets the reader imagine what happens after the desire to destroy results in exit from the doll’s house—though the huge imaginative leap it takes to move is not matched in physical distance: she assumes residence right next door to Léonce’s home. Going any further than this would have made the story too ridiculous and unbelievable for her

readers. Even so, independence is intoxicating as she feels she is finally forming an authentic self.

There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to 'feed upon opinion' when her own soul had invited her. (156)

“To look with her own eyes” is exactly the reason that Nora had to leave the doll’s house. Separated by two decades, in the different cultures of Norway and the United States, Ibsen and Chopin create characters whose survival depends on severing ties with their obligations as wives and mothers. With increasing developments in feminism on her side, Chopin is able to imagine what happens to the fictional mother when she leaves home, though this portrayal soon ends, as might be expected from a nineteenth-century plot, with suicide.

Edna’s moments of rapture are periodically interrupted by moments of ennui and depression. For even though she has tried to make a new life for herself, she cannot escape the culturally embedded belief, voiced by her husband early in the novel, that a woman should give herself up to her children entirely. When Edna finally visits them after establishing herself in the pigeon house, “She lived with them a whole week long, giving them all of herself and gathering and filling herself with their young existence” (157), the feeling of which dissipates by the time she has returned home. It is this belief, that to be a mother means to “sacrifice herself for her children” (79), that is her ultimate undoing. She has internalized her husband’s and society’s worldview that motherhood means a sacrifice of the self.

If making money from working allowed Nora the pleasure of feeling like a man, the same may be true of Edna. Certainly, life in the pigeon house allows her to live outside her gender, covering her own expenses and coming and going as she pleases. Writing about another story of Chopin's, Anne Goodwyn Jones (1981) says that "sex, love, and independence are mutually exclusive for a woman. She must either become 'masculine' and lose her sensual life, or become 'feminine' and lose her independence; in fact, to have independence a woman *must* become 'male'" (144). This ethic is true for Edna's female models in *The Awakening*: she can either follow the independent, sexless Mademoiselle Reisz or the mother-woman Madame Ragnitolle; no middle ground exists between these two poles. She learns much from Mademoiselle Reisz's example, so that she can mock Robert when he expresses discomfort at their meeting, chastising him that "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If you were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy, she is yours,' I should laugh at you both" (178). However, even as a resisting character, she cannot shake the belief that a mother's existence should be consumed by her children, like Madame Ragnitolle. The expectation, impossible to fulfill, that proper motherhood is an all-consuming state, is the source of the depression that besets her periodically and eventually moves her to commit suicide.

### **Early Reviews of *The Awakening***

Analysis of *The Awakening* often discusses the harsh criticism Chopin faced upon the novel's release. Nancy Walker describes the first reviewers as "chastising" ("Critical" 171). Suzanne Disheroon Green and David J. Caudle (1999) say its publication caused a "scandal" (33). Per Seyersted (1969) writes about how some were

“genuinely horrified by what they considered an indecent novel, while others who had envied Kate Chopin her success – ‘there was a lot of jealousy,’ it has been said – welcomed the pretext to fall upon her” (175). Critics have expounded on how the reviews absolutely crushed Chopin. Seyersted’s analysis is still quoted today; for example, the *Northeastern Dictionary of Women’s Biography* (1999) references Seyersted thirty years later, explaining that “Chopin was insulted and ostracized; she was so disheartened that she never wrote again” (Uglow et al. 124).

Emily Toth (1990) devotes an appendix of her biography on Chopin to dispelling the various myths that grew around the rejection of the novel. For instance, her investigation reveals that the rumor that *The Awakening* was banned from local libraries began with biographer Daniel Rankin, who learned of the legend from family members after the author’s death. Toth speculates that the book banning story may have helped to generate interest in the content of the book. Though Rankin did try to undermine the myth that Chopin never wrote again, since she published stories and even tried to publish a collection the year she died, these myths persisted. Yet another Chopin tale relates that her friends abandoned her and that she was banned from the St. Louis Fine Arts club—an association that never seems to have existed (422-425). The mythologies that grew around the novel’s production reveal the tenor of public perception. Book banning may have seemed an appropriate fate for a writer unconcerned with convention; the myth makes the sting of its reception harsher. The story about her never writing again fulfills the popular rendering of women as frail and weak since negative reviews would have the power to extinguish her talent. All these legends, repeated for decades by critics, serve as apt punishment for an author who sympathetically portrayed a wife and mother flouting



her duties. At the same time, they also function to increase Chopin's mystique as a visionary artist working outside the dictates of her era.

The genre of each text may have influenced its reception. Chopin's novel was put aside as the work of a local colorist, not worth revisiting after a first read. Indeed, as a novel to be read in private, *The Awakening* does not lend itself to the revision that *A Doll's House*, engaged throughout Europe and the U.S., experienced. Despite the frustration revisions presented him, Ibsen benefited from the collaboration and reinterpretation with each local audience. Negative reviews surrounding *A Doll's House* thus encouraged revision and kept the work alive and on the stage around the world. Its fate may have been different if it too had been a novel.

While stories of outrage were perpetrated for years after her death, Chopin herself had moral support from her friends. Though negative reviews may have been disheartening for Chopin, they were balanced out, somewhat, by the lavish praise she received in private. Toth outlines the letters she received from friends and acquaintances who read the book. Poet R.E. Lee Gibson wrote ecstatically of *The Awakening* and said “[t]here is no end to my admiration of your undoubted genius” (qtd. in Toth 337). Without much foresight, Lewis B. Ely wrote in his letter of praise, “I think there is little in it to offend anybody” (qtd. in Toth 338). Madison Cawein, a Kentucky poet, wrote to a friend regarding Chopin's great talent and ability to make the reader “feel everything she speaks of” (qtd. in Toth 356). Toth speculates that, in order to support her, Chopin's friends went so far as to pen letters from British fans who praised the novel and suggested it should be translated (358-360). It may have been difficult to deal with the harsher

criticism of *The Awakening*, but at least she had the backing, not the enmity, of those who surrounded her.

Toth's investigations about book banning and fallouts with publishers and friends parallel how critics have interpreted early reviews of *The Awakening*. Just as the myths discussed earlier increased her visionary status, so does the story of *The Awakening*'s reception appear livelier when framed as "nationally condemned" (Seyersted 176). The truth about its reception is far less romantic when viewed in its entirety. Even if Toth systematically corrects Seyersted's book banning claims, Seyersted makes another important point that some critics would not review the book at all. Chopin's friend William Schuyler would not review the work nor would St. Louis critic Alexander DeMenil;<sup>78</sup> the *Atlantic* passed it over as well. Even when publications wrote articles about Chopin, they occasionally omitted any mention of the text: *The Critic* profiled Chopin in August 1899 and failed to cite *The Awakening*, published a few months before in April (Seyersted 175-176). A year after her death in 1904, a book on *Southern Writers* omits devoting a section to Chopin and the 1918 *Cambridge History of American Literature* does not include the work in its discussion of the writer (Seyersted 186-187).

Myths regarding her vilification and the reality that she was overlooked by her contemporaries overstate the negative response to the novel. Though Edna's characterization was a new one for heroines, it might be more accurate to say that Chopin's work was forcefully ignored rather than universally condemned. Even when novels are "universally condemned" they are often widely read; *The Awakening*, however, only made about \$102.00 in royalties in 1899, \$40.00 in 1900, and \$3.00 in

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<sup>78</sup> DeMenil published *The Hesperian*, a magazine which he claimed was "devoted entirely to the higher literature" (qtd. in Garitta 124 fn-91).

1901 (Seyersted 226 note 45). With the help of bibliographies and reference works on Chopin I was able to find references to no more than thirty initial responses to the novel, not all of which have been located.<sup>79</sup> These reviews include three pre-publication announcements that served to promote the book; seven were published in St. Louis. This number shows that “public outrage” might be too strong a description for the book, since not all these reviews condemned her and none seem to have roused the verbal jousting seen in the Ibsen controversies. The number is especially low when compared to the sales records for her short story collection *Bayou Folk* (1894), which received over 200 reviews (Green and Caudle 10). While it is true that the negative reviews criticize Edna’s actions because of her position as a wife and mother, the collective description of the reviews as wholly vitriolic adds to the aura that has grown around Chopin as an ostracized artist, ahead of her time.

In fact, combined with the high-profile outlets that ignored the work and its quick dip into obscurity, it would be more accurate to say that the novel touched a nerve with a local audience and was recognized marginally on a national level. A closer examination of the reviews reveals subtleties in critique. Some responses were negative and written rather colorfully, but not all were completely negative. The reviews often separate the morality of *The Awakening* from its artistry, a method reminiscent of the British reviews of *A Doll’s House*. What differentiates *The Awakening* and *A Doll’s House* is that the circulation of the former declined after the first flurry of reviews. Once a few critics evaluated *The Awakening*, there was no need to return to the story since it could not be revised.

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<sup>79</sup> I was aided in this compilation by database searches and Seyersted (1969), Potter (1970), Springer (1976), Toth (1990), Petry (1996), Green and Caudle (1999), and Corse and Westervelt (2002).

Among all the reviews across the nation, certain tendencies in criticism arose, whether the response was positive or negative. For instance, many compared the likeness of the work to real life. Lucy Monroe's pre-publication release comments that "it seems to reveal life as well as to represent it. In reading it you have the impression of being in the very heart of things, you feel the throb of the machinery, you see and understand the slight transitions of thought, the momentary impulses, the quick sensations of the hardness of life, which govern so much of our action" (387).<sup>80</sup> The *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, while critical of the book, claims "there is no denying the fact that it deals with existent conditions" ("Notes from Bookland" 3). Although the *Boston Beacon* seems troubled by the book, the critic insightfully observes that

It reveals the dreadful consequences of marriage without real love, tracing the struggle of a woman's inborn sense of duty and right to be herself, against the conditions into which she was ignorantly inveigled and which then made it immoral before the world for her to act out herself and seek her affinity . . . There is an evident effort to illustrate without prudery—very much without prudery—that the normal woman is capable without sin of experiencing a full awakening of the entire human nature. ("Books and Authors" 4)

Clearly, that a woman's "entire human nature" could be activated was such a new idea that the newspaper cites this point as something revelatory; the unstated assumption is that men already feel this way. This idea wouldn't be naturally applied to women, with their preoccupation with maternity. Even the critic of the *Chicago Times Herald* who famously complained that Chopin had "enter[ed] the overworked field of sex-fiction," still had to admit that "the book is strong" and describes "certain phases of feminine character" ("Books of the Day" 9). Willa Cather reviewed the book for the *Pittsburgh Leader* and could not understand why Chopin "devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well-

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<sup>80</sup> Toth explains that Monroe was a literary advisor for Stone & Company, *The Awakening's* publisher, and very likely was the one who recommended that they publish it (491).

governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme.” Calling Edna “A Creole *Bovary*,” Cather compares Edna to Flaubert’s heroine to describe them as “studies in the same feminine type” who require “more romance out of life than God put into it” (6). Adhering to limited notions of women’s desires and drives, Cather believes that Edna should have been satisfied with husband, children, and occasional flirtation. These similar viewpoints regarding the likeness of the book to life come from positive, negative, and mixed reviews. Though these reviewers come from different markets and hold different opinions about *The Awakening*, they all believe she captures the female character.

The realistic portrayal incites critics to respond emotionally to Edna’s character, once again, throughout positive and negative reviews. The *St. Louis Republic* deems her “the woman who did not want anything but her own way” (“Mrs. Chopin’s 11). While this critique has the provocative title “Mrs. Chopin’s New Book is The Story of A Lady Most Foolish,” the bulk of the review consists of excerpts from the novel, apparently letting the description speak for itself. Another St. Louis publication, the *Daily Globe-Democrat*, decides that “She is all heart and entirely without balance” (“Notes from Bookland” 3). *Public Opinion* found Edna so objectionable that “we are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death in the waters of the gulf” (Rev. of *The Awakening* 794). A positive review comes briefly from *The New York Times* which found Edna’s awakening “poignant” since it was not accompanied by greater happiness” (“100 Books” 408). The negative reviews find it particular difficult to understand how a woman can be moved to passion outside her family sphere, though all have an emotional and strong response to Edna’s character.

Another common theme is to focus on the text's insalubrious nature. Frances Porcher's colorful review states that the novel is absorbing, but it "makes one wonder, for the moment, with a little sick feeling, if all women are like the one" (1).<sup>81</sup> That such "gilded dirt" of new writers is now accepted is "nauseating" according to *The Providence Sunday Journal* ("Books of the Week" 15). *The Outlook* found that the "disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellant" ("Novels and Tales" 314).<sup>82</sup> A different analogy, in *The Los Angeles Times*, likened the work to Aubrey Beardsley's, "with their disfiguring leer of sensuality, but yet carrying a distinguishing strength and grace and individuality"; however, "it is unhealthily introspective and morbid in feeling, as the story of that sort of woman must inevitably be" ("*The Awakening*" 12). William Morton Payne of *The Dial* finds it "not altogether wholesome in its tendency" (75). Finally, in a statement that seems to sum up all the themes traced throughout these reviews, the *Indianapolis Journal* concludes, "It is not a healthy story, yet it is clever and one feels while reading it that he is moving among real people and events" ("*The Awakening*" 6). The problem with its unwholesome nature in the eyes of reviewers is that it can negatively impact the public. An unnamed critic in *The Providence Sunday Journal* is concerned the book "will come into the hands of youth, leading them to dwell on things that only matured persons can understand, and promoting unholy imaginations and unclean desires" ("Books of the Week" 15). The *Boston Beacon* thinks that match-makers might be helped by *The*

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<sup>81</sup> In his dissertation on the critical reviews of Kate Chopin, Anthony Garitta explains that Porcher's own literary ambitions may have motivated her to write a scathing review. The Porcher review is quoted often by critics due to its vibrant phrasing, for example: "One would fain beg the gods, in pure cowardice, for sleep unending rather than to know what an ugly, cruel, loathsome monster Passion can be when like a tiger, it slowly stretches its graceful length and yawns and finally awakens" (1).

<sup>82</sup> It should be noted that many of the other reviews in this issue of *Outlook* were negative as well: for example, W.J. Locke's *Idols* does not have "serious value"; Harold Frederic's *The Market-Place* is deemed "disappointing"; admittedly, the language used to describe *The Awakening* is harsher in tone (314).

*Awakening*, but it “is emphatically not a book for very young people” (“Books and Authors” 4). Just as mothers were deemed responsible for the healthy growth of the nation, so was this fictional mother under suspicion for her negative impact on youth. If fiction served to educate the nation, Edna’s influence should be restricted.

These commonalities appear among vastly different publications. Though some critics judged Chopin’s book harshly and others were more positive, the evaluations treat Edna as if she is a real person, motivating passionate responses and the belief that her character could influence readers’ actions. Local papers, like the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, with the largest circulation in St. Louis at the end of the century, and the *St. Louis Republic*, with its waning but still popular influence,<sup>83</sup> seemed to have similar ideas about Edna as the liberal *Nation* or papers from larger urban centers, like *The New York Times*, whose circulation had just increased by 50,000 in 1899 (Davis 238). Whether they thought the portrayal was a good one or not, they all seemed to be intrigued with the idea that Edna had the drive to make a new pattern in her life outside what was expected of her as a mother.

In response to her reviewers, Chopin published an open commentary in the *Books News* column “Aims and Autographs of Authors,” a section of the paper that gave authors a brief space to comment on their work and then reproduce their signature. Chopin explains her intention in creating Edna’s character.

Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late. (612)

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<sup>83</sup> See Garitta (1978), pages 119 and 121 fn 87 for more information.

Some critics have called this statement a retraction. Culley (1976) labels it as such in her collection of reviews (159). Although Culley puts the term retraction in quotation marks, other researchers, like Corse and Westervelt, ended up copying this terminology in their own analysis, though the actual newspaper article never uses this word and the so-called retraction is merely listed with other novelists who describe their aims. Wendy Martin (1988) suggests that Chopin is playing innocent here, ironically responding to the negative views of her heroine (9). These shifting reactions are instructive in themselves. Early critics could only project feelings of shame onto Chopin's public reaction; what else could the author feel in response to creating an immoral character with no remorse?

In addition to genre considerations, the gender of the author may have had some impact in the texts' long-term reception. It is likely that the very reason that Chopin was classified as a regionalist, a category denoting mere descriptions of locality without the depth of literary merit, is that she is a woman. As in the case for *A Man's World* and *The Home-Maker*, the text seems targeted toward female audiences with its focus on Edna Pontellier's domestic problems. Though *A Doll's House*, too, deals with domestic issues, the gender of its author gives it the air of serious drama. Had *A Doll's House* been written by a woman, it may have been easier to cast aside its heroine. Even when Ibsen was deemed an iconoclast, he was still considered a serious dramatist. On the other hand, Chopin's writing was quickly lumped into women's regionalist fiction, a localized genre of portraits that would be appealing to women. Her writing is thus marginalized as a lower art form. By the late-twentieth century, interpretation changed so that feminists could view Edna's characterization as liberating the heroine, assigning this point of view to the author.



Most important, though, is that like Nora, the early critics' point of contention was on Edna's character. In the other "Aims and Autographs" of the edition in which Chopin defended her book, no other author's focus was on a particular character but on their general aims; for instance, R.V. Rislev explains that *Men's Tragedies* is about "the effect of intense tragic emotion" and Arthur Conan Doyle explains generally that the characters in his *Duet with An Occasional Chorus* "show how the most ordinary and commonplace lives may be made beautiful and happy when they are glorified by love" (Chopin et al. 612). Chopin is the only one who accounts for the motivations of her protagonist and perhaps the only one whose heroine was so scrutinized.

The varying reactions to the novel which I have outlined are documented by Sarah M. Corse and Sandra Davis Westervelt (2002), two sociologists who quantify the types of comments in Chopin's reviews. Looking at the full-text of reviews written between March and August 1899, Corse and Westervelt statistically analyze the tenor of their critique. The majority of the reviews, 43%, looked at Edna's awakening in a negative light. While reviews such as these are often cited in examinations of critical reception of the novel, 26% of the reviewers saw the work in a more positive light. What is most striking about the authors' findings is that whether or not Edna's awakening is taken in a positive or negative light, more than 90% of the reviews discussed the moral aspects of the novel. The primary blame for any immorality is laid on Chopin, who is criticized for not adequately critiquing her protagonist. These reviews approach the text with the preset assumption of fiction's guiding role in women's lives. While all but one of these critiques on morality was negative, the reviewers put aside their criticism when it

came time to discuss the text's literary merit. Eighty-seven percent of the reviewers reacted to her style, most of which complimented her skill.

Corse and Westervelt posit that variations in interpretation occur because “Interpretive strategies are intellectual resources, varying across environments, that create new readings of texts and therefore new audiences—and even new canons. Interpretive strategies construct a narrative for readers by selectively engaging certain aspects of multivocal texts—but not others—to create dominant readings of those texts by framing the narrative in specific, largely determining ways” (141). The examination of the 1899 reviews, according to these authors, reveals that the dominant readings of *The Awakening* were drawn from the perspective that reading is a source of moral instruction and that women are nurturers. As such, some critics “could make little of value out of *The Awakening*, constructing a narrative that was objectionable at best and virtually unintelligible at worst” (141). Nevertheless, we are left with 26% of these reviewers who could see the value of *The Awakening* and its resonances with contemporary issues – making summary statements about her failures, like those of Anthony Garitta (1978), who says that the novel turned “local admiration” into “social ostracism” and “national acclaim” into “nationwide outrage,” a bit overstated (147). Without denying the vitriol of some of the first reviews, especially those in her hometown, claiming universal damnation allows critics to frame Chopin as an artist ahead of her time more forcefully. For instance, Larzer Ziff (1966) accurately notes in his *The American 1890's* that *The Awakening* “did not attack the institution of the family, but it rejected the family as the automatic equivalent of feminine self-fulfillment” (304); he then silences Chopin by deeming her a visionary, concluding that, “She was alive when the twentieth century

began, but she had been struck mute by a society fearful in the face of an uncertain dawn” (305).

### Conclusion

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar devote an entire chapter to *The Awakening* in the second volume of *No Man's Land* (1989), where they read Edna's character as a late-nineteenth century Aphrodite, inspired by the “myths she had inherited from patriarchal civilization” (95).<sup>84</sup> Within this discussion, they make an unusual point: “*And how, after all, do we know that she ever dies?* What critics have called her ‘suicide’ is simply our interpretation of her motion, our ‘realistic’ idea about the direction in which she is swimming” (110, emphasis theirs). This is the only instance I have come across that broaches this idea, even though Chopin takes the reader no further than the shoreline. While some interpret the swim as a suicide into rebirth, it is never read as a swim that ends in literal rebirth, with Edna emerging wet and rejuvenated, ready to shut the door on the past, as Nora did.

This thinking must be too fantastical, for even Gilbert and Gubar are quick to make a retraction with three explanations excusing themselves and assurances that they are not subverting more traditional readings.<sup>85</sup> The preferred reading that Edna will never return fits more comfortably with expected outcomes for nineteenth-century heroines—if Edna could not return to her family, then surely, she must die. I propose

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<sup>84</sup> They argue that Chopin writes “a female fiction which both draws upon and revises fin-de-siècle hedonism to propose a feminist myth of Aphrodite/Venus as an alternative to the patriarchal western myth of Jesus” (96). Their mythic reading leads them to reject an interpretation of Edna's suicide that is rooted in realism and instead to see it as a metaphor that is more of a resurrection than an ending point.

<sup>85</sup> The three reasons: 1- to show “the tension between realistic and mythic aesthetic strategies”; 2- to emphasize the role of Aphrodite during this period; 3- to highlight her relationship with writers who preceded her (110-11).

that any alternative choices that Edna could have engaged were beyond the reach of the author, who had no prior models to draw from. Yet even if Ibsen and Chopin cannot move the characters much further than their exit from their families, the authors are progressive in their efforts to create a realistic portrayal of women who question their assigned roles.

Critical reviews of *A Doll's House* and *The Awakening* reacted to the fictional protagonists as if they were real mothers, probably because these texts revealed shifts in Western, middle-class consciousness about gender relations and the family. The first audiences of *A Doll's House* attempted to change the ending in order to nullify Nora's influence. For *The Awakening*, the text dipped into obscurity before critical conversation could address Edna's actions. However, a mythology of condemnation rose up that imagined an appropriate fate for the author and the protagonist. This resistance is layered in disbelief that a real wife and mother could behave this way.

It is commonly noted that Nora and Edna rely on the domestic staff that makes their decision to abandon possible; however, it is also true that the support they receive does not erase their maternity. As Nora is called out into life and Edna is called away from it, the sound of their children prods them to chart their courses. Nora realizes that she cannot properly mother without making a commitment to her own identity; Edna refuses to give control of her life to her children, a sacrifice she feels her family demands.

With no resources, Nora's future is bleak. She knows that once she leaves home, she loses all legal rights to her children and so will be truly alone, without a vocation or extended family to support her. Chopin's portrait, too, shows a limited trajectory. The reader is taken beyond the initial exit from the house, but in this case, the move is only to

an adjacent home. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1985) notes, “the binary choice [between romance and a profession] still has force, but not finality; the main character cannot experiment further and punishes herself for her mixture of ambition to transcend feminine norms and complicity with them by an act (swimming) that both celebrates and destroys that awakening” (88-89). Any third alternative seems too difficult to pursue. As in the other representations under discussion, neither male nor female writers can imagine the next step for these women since femininity and maternity had been linked for so long.

Ibsen and Chopin were both daring to feature a heroine who leaves husband and children without the motivation of a lover to drive their actions. Their behavior opens up the possibility that there could be satisfaction for women outside the nuclear family. While abandonment of the family is the most subversive of all the decisions outlined in this dissertation, it is even more significant since Nora and Edna’s portrayals are the earliest under discussion. The social currents that motivated these portrayals would have been influential to the writers in Chapters One and Two as well, but convention prevented authors from adapting Ibsen and Chopin’s themes until later in the century.<sup>86</sup> For Nora and Edna, motherhood transcends its ordinary designation as caring for children and becomes an act that represents male-dominance, restricted roles, and unfulfilled desires, all threatening to consume them.

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<sup>86</sup> Even when these themes reappear in the late twentieth century, as in *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), presented one hundred years after the first performance of *A Doll’s House*, or *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), the focus of the story is on how those left behind deal with rearing the child, not on what happens to the mother during her absence. The mother becomes an invisible element that shapes these plots.

## Conclusion

This project examines representations of maternity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and evaluates how audiences and critics received these new images. Though the excitement generated by *A Doll's House* in 1879 seemed to indicate mothers could be imagined in new ways, progressive portrayals were not easily taken up by authors in the decades that followed. It was difficult to separate a woman's biological function from any other desires she might have—nineteenth-century thought fused maternity and femininity into a single entity, making new patterns difficult to accept. Even contemporary critics can adhere to narrow conceptions of gender when evaluating these characters today.

Chapter One examines texts that represent the experience of abortion, representations which grew rapidly in the early twentieth century. Even with strict decency laws in place in the United States and Great Britain, writers repeatedly returned to this theme to structure their plots. While I could have chosen a number of texts produced during the first third of the century, I chose a selection written before and after women were granted universal suffrage to determine whether women were figured differently as their rights expanded during the century. These representations emphasize the extent to which abortion highlights standard family roles when women find it difficult to imagine mothering outside of marriage. To varying degrees, female characters would enjoy continuing their pregnancies if only they had the assurance of the nuclear family to support and nourish them. Additionally, abortion is an experience prompted by the action of male partners who prioritize personal needs over relationships and future families. Men are often characterized as more concerned with events outside of the

family unit. This characterization is consistent, from the 1907 play, *Votes for Women!*, where Vida's pregnancy is sacrificed for Stonor's inheritance, through the 1939 novel, *The Girl*, where men demand that women end pregnancies to avoid the economic burden of rearing children. At the heart of these depictions is a discomfort in portraying women who would want to end a pregnancy. Thus, the Girl's birth scene is celebrated as the fulfillment of her natural desires. Even so, this decision is radical since she makes the choice to mother outside the nuclear family. Critics who first responded to these works generally avoided directly addressing the issue of abortion, lacking a critical vocabulary to deal with the texts because of convention and censorship.

While women lack agency in decisions regarding abortion in Chapter One, a greater degree of freedom structures the portrayals of working mothers in Chapter Two. New representations were again forged with these images of mothers who reinvent the family. Texts about remote mothers, those women who work and dole out childcare to others, are progressive. The themes of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and the expressionism of *The Verge* challenged audiences to such a degree that Kitty Warren and Claire Archer were not even recognized as mothers. Proximate mothers, who directly raise their children, are represented in *A Man's World* and *The Home-Maker*, where traditional genres mask the content that envisions new options for mothers who decide to work. Critics who fully apprehended these portrayals of maternity found them difficult to believe.

Chapter Three examines another new maternal representation, but this portrayal is found in the late nineteenth-century. *A Doll's House* and *The Awakening*, texts where female protagonists abandon their homes and leave their families, lay the groundwork for

more contemporary discussions of motherhood and identity that would develop throughout the following century. These texts provide a useful conclusion to this dissertation since they are a precursor to women's demands for greater selfhood and control. These texts inspired revision—producers attempted to rewrite the ending of *A Doll's House* and critics imagined that *The Awakening* had a far more devastating impact on its author than was truly the case.

Ann Kaplan (1992) discusses the varying theoretical models used to understand how the institution of motherhood functions in Western culture. She concludes with the observation that,

For women one of the most subordinated *and* fetishized positions has been that of “mother.” Once this position is opened up as only a part of any specific woman's subjectivity, not the all-consuming entirety of it; once any specific woman is seen to be constituted “mother” only when interacting with her child; once “mother” is no longer a fixed, essentialized quality, then women may be freed from the kind of discursive constraints and burdens studied in this book. (219)

The characterizations that I have chosen grapple with these issues and open a space for new perceptions of motherhood. For the late nineteenth-century characters who abandon their children, convention does not allow them to pursue their own course and mother at the same time, so they leave their families behind. It is impossible for them to imagine that independence and maternity can coexist; they believe they fail their children since mothering is not “the all-consuming entirety” of their identities. These characters surprised audiences because they ultimately choose self-fulfillment over motherhood, as if these are two mutually exclusive categories. Economic issues are more of a concern for the women who decide to have abortions. Without the support of a man, many of these characters think they cannot mother. This decision, invisible to the rest of the world, actually serves to reinforce social structures that have, in Kaplan's terms,



“subordinated *and* fetishized” the role of the mother. Only the working mothers move toward achieving Kaplan’s vision, since their maternity is only one factor among many that defines them. The freedom provided by working allows women to subvert assumptions about mothers’ goals.

Even among the most progressive of the texts examined, notions of appropriate gender roles remain firmly intact. If a text liberates a woman from the home and allows her to shine in the workplace, then her space is filled by a surrogate, as in the case of *The Home-Maker*. If she finds that maternity is distasteful to her, then she suffers some calamity, as in the case of Claire Archer in *The Verge* or Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. This reactionary content can appear in texts written by either men or women. Each portrayal is naturally limited and shaped by the contemporary moment so that forays into new territory are tempered by prior convention. Each choice represented here provoked debate in the public sphere. What was most difficult for critics was to recognize that a new vision of maternity could evolve from these texts, especially when authors did not imbue these characters with extensive freedom from their gender roles.

Plays were especially effective in expanding audience’s notions of maternity and femininity, especially in works like *A Doll’s House* or *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* that caused much discussion in the public sphere. As a more static medium, novels impacted their readers with fewer waves of controversy. The physical presence on the stage of the proud prostitute-mother Kitty Warren or the abandoning wife Nora Helmer provoked more passionate response than could be achieved through a character situated safely in the pages of a novel. When Nora abandons her family and flies off the stage or Frank

Ware rejects her lover and the nuclear family, critics were left feeling something more must come; women could not possibly resolve their problems without male protection.

Issues regarding motherhood take on new forms as time passes, though the underlying issues are the same. Ellen Lewin (1995) discusses lesbian mothers, a topic not even imagined in the time period I investigate; these women subvert traditional expectations by choosing to raise children outside heterosexual marriage, thereby claiming the same rights as heterosexual women. Her argument has particular resonances for the characters discussed in this dissertation.

While women are supposed to be mothers, we learn, and only motherhood can provide women with ways to meet the most significant expectations associated with their gender, motherhood is not supposed to be embarked upon as the result of an individual choice. Motherhood is supposed to happen because women stand in a particular sexual and economic relationship to men, not because a woman determines that being a mother will meet her personal goals or be desirable in some other, less readily articulated, way. In other words, motherhood (coded in recent political discourse as “family”) provides evidence that the gender system is working as it should. While it hardly constitutes rebellion for a heterosexual married woman to become a mother (indeed, her rebellion would consist in childlessness), for lesbians or other “inappropriate” mothers . . . to embark upon a maternal career means defying the expectations that motherhood and heterosexual marriage must be linked. (117)

The belief that there is such a thing as “inappropriate mothers” influences, to some degree, characters, like Anna in *Voyage in the Dark*, from continuing their pregnancies. This concept can also make working mothers “inappropriate.” When women work, they disrupt supposedly natural family patterns that allow men to be providers. This proposition is based on cultural assumptions that each family unit is made up of a mother, father, and child. *The Awakening* and *A Doll’s House* question this premise in the late nineteenth century; the mothers’ absence signals a new family structure, at least until their spouses can fill their roles with other women. *The Girl* also provides a new pattern

in the 1930's when the Girl decides to continue her pregnancy without the support of the baby's father to help her. Her reliance will be from a female collective, not the nuclear family.

Writing about *A Doll's House* in "Mother, Wife and Role Model," Kristin Ørjasæter (2005) discusses sacrifice and the dilemma women faced in carrying out their expected social functions for men at the end of the nineteenth century. "Sacrifices made out of submissive love were not enough to gain women respect . . . Putting other people's well being above their own turned out to be a trap for women" (35). Women's social function was at odds with the choices available to them; drama and fiction became a space where these contradictions could be imagined and worked out. While Ørjasæter writes about women's role at the end of the nineteenth century, the same discussions seem relevant a hundred years later. Kelly Oliver (1997), for instance, looks at ways that the maternal body is tied to nature and the paternal body is absent from culture. Oliver notes that although some contemporary households today are led solely by women, "the fantasy of the nuclear family is still a centerpiece of our cultural imaginary. For this reason, we cannot merely dismiss the importance of the cultural ideal of the nuclear family" (xvii). Representations of maternal choice during the modernist period defined and redefined women's roles, sometimes inscribing them within the family and sometimes thinking beyond these bonds. Today, the nuclear family continues to be a common preoccupation, with politicians ruing its demise and referencing it as a barometer of public health. The precursors to contemporary portrayals of women's troubles, hopes, and desires are found in these narratives that reflect and resist—whether they intended to or not—a changing notion of maternity.

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