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Motherwork, artwork: The mother/artist in fiction by Parton, Phelps, Chopin, Woolf, Drabble, and Walker

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MOTHERWORK, ARTWORK: THE MOTHER/ARTIST IN FICTION BY

PARTON, PHELPS, CHOPIN, WOOLF, DRABBLE, AND WALKER

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

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in

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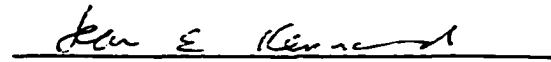
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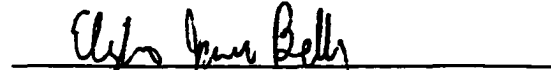
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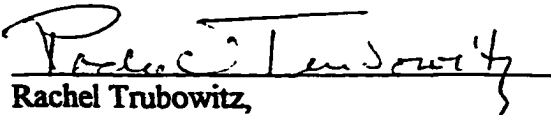
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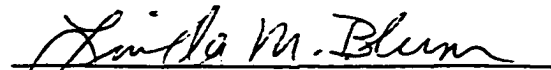
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ABSTRACT

MOTHERWORK, ARTWORK: THE MOTHER/ARTIST IN FICTION BY
PARTON, PHELPS, CHOPIN, WOOLF, DRABBLE, AND WALKER

by

Nancy Hoyt Lecourt

University of New Hampshire, May, 1999

This study asks the question, What happens to a practicing (fictional) mother who also tries to be a practicing artist? How do literary texts represent such people? How do they represent the relationship between material and artistic work? The primary works studied are Sarah Parton's *Ruth Hall*, (1855), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Story of Avis* (1877), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965). The conclusion focuses on Alice Walker's short story, "Everyday Use."

Mother-artists finds themselves on the "wrong" side of the nature/culture binary, where ideologies about "true womanhood" and good mothering, as well as the role of the "artist," play out in a variety of ways. The study finds striking similarities between the first and last novels studied: both Parton's *Ruth* and Drabble's *Rosamund* work successfully at their writing because they need to support their children. Rather than being a hindrance, the children are a motivation for these mothers to produce their writing. By working for the children, they can remain "good mothers." However, neither mother claims to be an "artist." The middle three novels focus on painters,

who must deal with ideologies surrounding the artist: Sacred Fount and Ivory Tower, competing needs in a zero-sum game. This art/life binary defeats Phelps's Avis, who can only hope life will be better for her daughter. Chopin's Edna is even more thoroughly defeated: she drowns when she finds can be neither "mother-woman" nor "artist." Finally, Woolf overcomes the art/life dilemma by dividing it between her two characters, Lily Briscoe (artist) and Mrs. Ramsay (mother and "almost artist"). Significantly, this gap is healed, not by the middle-class White woman who "gets her act together" but by the Black woman who has been below the radar screen of ideologies about "true womanhood" or the "artist." Edna's Pontellier's unnamed Black nursemaid, who actually does Edna's mothering for her, seems to be resurrected in the mid-twentieth century as Alice Walker, whose quilting and gardening mothers can unite art and life in an aesthetic which values both community and immanence.

INTRODUCTION

THE “GAUGIN POSE”

“That women should have babies rather than books is the considered opinion of Western civilization. That women should have books rather than babies is a variation on that theme. Is it possible, or desirable, for a woman to have both?”

—Alicia Ostriker

What happens when a practicing mother also tries to be a practicing artist? How do literary texts represent such people? And how do they represent the relationship between maternal and artistic work? These are the questions I have tried to ask and to answer in this study. I have chosen novels written in English whose protagonists were actively engaged in mothering children, and also doing some kind of creative work generally thought of as “art”—writing or painting, as it happens, though music or another medium would have been acceptable for my purposes. Having set up these parameters, I quickly discovered a telling fact: there are very few such novels—I have found five: Fanny Fern/Sarah Parton’s *Ruth Hall* (1855), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ *The Story of Avis* (1877), Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and Margaret Drabble’s *The Millstone* (1965). Even so, I had to “fudge” a bit, since Chopin’s Edna Pontellier is not very actively engaged in childcare (though she probably thinks she is), and Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe divide mothering and art between them.

What this telling fact makes obvious from the beginning is that it has seemed almost impossible for a woman to be both a mother and an artist in our culture. The obstacles in the path of the mother/artist have been both practical and ideological. As Tillie Olsen puts it in her book about artistic silence, the books and poems never written,

“where the gifted among women (*and men*) have remained mute, or have never attained full capacity, it is because of circumstances, inner or outer, which oppose the needs of creation” (17; italics original). The novels in this study deal with both.

Practically, how does one find the peace and quiet needed for creative reflection and production when children are interrupting, needing, calling? Is one truly mothering if one is locked behind a door, earplugs in place? Further, how does one find energy to create, considering the enormous requirements of childcare? Indeed, the definition of mothering which I have adopted does seem in many ways antithetical to the material demands of art. Here is that definition, from Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking*:

Children ‘demand’ that their lives be preserved and their growth fostered. In addition, the primary social groups with which a mother is identified... demand that she raise her children in a manner acceptable to them. These three demands—for *preservation, growth, and social acceptability*—constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training. (17)

This definition is noteworthy because it is based in practice, not in biology. I am not simply interested in looking at female characters who have given birth and then later become artists; instead, I wish to study the relationship between maternal and artistic work. Based on this definition, then, I might have chosen novels about male “mothers” or adoptive mothers; however, in practice I found no such texts. This is hardly surprising, since the ideological barriers which bedevil the mother/artist are based to a large extent in cultural beliefs which identify women with their bodies, insisting on their “natural” role as birth-givers and caregivers—roles often seen as identical. Ideologically, women find themselves on the “wrong” side of a cultural binary which identifies them with “life” rather than “art,” “nature” rather than “culture.” They are destined to be procreative rather than creative.

Simone de Beauvoir examined the cultural roots of this idea in her 1949 classic, *The Second Sex*. Speculating about the origins of patriarchy, Beauvoir looks back into the nomadic past of the human race and sees women's lives marked by menstruating, gestating, giving birth, lactating—activities which “reduced their capacity for work and made them at times wholly dependent upon the men for protection and food” (57). Because of this, a woman became identified with domestic activities, such as preparing food, caring for children and the elderly, cleaning the living area, which “imprisoned her in repetition and immanence; they were repeated from day to day in an identical form, which was perpetuated almost without change from century to century; they produced nothing new” (58).

Man, on the other hand, was free to invent tools and symbols; to make the spear and the wheel and eventually the hieroglyph and the alphabet—“to burst out of the present” into the future, to risk and create. In so doing, “he transcended his animal nature” (58). Beauvoir sees men taking these values—newness and transcendence—and identifying them with maleness, and taking their opposites—repetition and immanence—and identifying them with femaleness, then “locking[ing] up women therein” (59). All this because of maternity, through which “woman remained closely bound to her body like an animal.... It is male activity that in creating values has made of existence itself a value; this activity has prevailed over the confused forces of life; it has subdued Nature and Woman” (60).

Sherry Ortner's famous essay “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” looks more closely at this binary, affirming its roots in childbearing.

It is simply a fact that proportionately more of woman's body space, for a greater percentage of her life-time, and at a certain—sometimes great—cost to her personal health, strength, and general stability, is taken up with the natural processes surrounding the reproduction of the species. (74–5)

This connection to “species-life” and the domestic tasks that have accompanied it has meant that “women are seen... as being closer to nature than men” (73). And since “it is always culture’s project to subsume and transcend nature” (73), woman is “naturally” devalued and subordinated to man, who is seen as closer to culture. Significantly, Ortner stresses that woman is not *identified* with nature; rather, as a conscious human being who thinks and speaks and participates in culture, she finds herself located on the boundary between nature and culture. While much of her time and energy is spent in activities based in biology, many of her other significant activities are clearly a part of culture; notably, child-rearing. “It is she who transforms the newborn infant from a mere organism into a cultured human, teaching it manners and the proper ways to behave in order to be a bonafide member of the culture” (79–80). As Ruddick notes, “the allegedly ‘natural’ activities of women—for example, pregnancy, birth, and certainly child care—are infused with cultural meaning” (263, n. 9).

Further, to cite another example offered by Ortner, woman’s traditional work in the kitchen turning the “raw” into the “cooked” is the most basic of cultural activities, both literally and figuratively: “transforming the raw into the cooked may represent, in many systems of thought, the transition from nature to culture” (Ortner 80). While this association of “female” activities with culture is limited by the culture (as Ortner notes, when boys are to be turned into men, or when “mere cooking” becomes *haute cuisine*, the male touch is apparently required), it is this liminal place, where women’s “natural” activities shade into the “cultural” that is the focus of my study. The moment that childrearing and cooking are recognized as cultural rather than merely “natural” activities, then all of women’s other traditional activities come rushing in to be claimed as cultural: sewing, gardening, decorating, storytelling. What is the difference between these activities and painting, sculpting, writing, composing?

The most obvious difference, the place where traditionally a line has been drawn on this continuum, is that the latter activities are aimed at the wider culture, what Ortner

calls “interfamilial relations, which represent high-level, integrative, universalistic sorts of concerns” (79), whereas the former take place within the domestic space and are performed for the family, which “represents lower-level, socially fragmenting, particularistic sorts of concerns” (18). Thus “woman’s work” in her “place...in the home” is less valuable culturally, because it serves the family unit, which is often in opposition to, and “always subsumed by...society—which is logically at a higher level than the procreative units of which it is composed” (79).

Therefore, notes Ortner, because men do not give birth, are not “naturally” associated with the family, their activities are seen as belonging in society, the larger sphere, at higher levels of cultural value.

Thus men are identified not only with culture, in the sense of all human creativity, as opposed to nature; they are identified in particular with Culture in the old-fashioned sense of the finer and higher aspects of human thought—art, religion, law, etc. (79)

“Art,” then, is that which takes place in society; by definition, the domestic is not “Culture” and therefore not “art,” in this traditional Western sense. Going along with this, the domestic cultural activities I have named—cooking, sewing, gardening, decorating, storytelling—are closer to “Nature” in Beauvoir’s terms because they are ephemeral and repetitive rather than permanent, meant to be worn, eaten, consumed, used; not to be displayed or preserved: immanent rather than transcendent. Indeed, the very usefulness of women’s work tells against it when it comes to “art,” for much Western thought about art insists by definition on its uselessness: “art for art’s sake.”

Ideological barriers impeding the mother/artist, then, begin here: by defining “art” in a way which precludes much of a mother’s traditional creative work. Furthermore, definitions of the “artist” have also been extremely problematic for women in general and mothers in particular. Maurice Beebe’s 1964 *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce* argues that “the artist” finds

himself¹ divided between two distinct ways of thinking about the creative life, as implied in his title. The “Sacred Fount” tradition emphasizes the need for the artist to experience “life,” to live “more fully and intensely than others” (13). In contrast, the “Ivory Tower” tradition is based on a belief that the artist must be aloof, separate, even exiled. Beebe quotes Joyce: “The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (13). But a practicing mother by definition cannot withdraw to an Ivory Tower to pare her fingernails indifferently; she must be immersed in “life.” Yet traditionally the “life” which the artist “needs” does not include giving birth, pushing a stroller, or singing lullabies; instead to drink at the Sacred Fount has meant travel, sex, and dissipation, à la Lord Byron. Furthermore, this traditional dilemma is essentially a zero sum game: the more one gives to “life” the less one has for “art,” and vice versa. “One implication of the Sacred Fount myth is that life and art are interchangeable. Life can be converted directly to art, but to do so is to destroy life” (Beebe 16). If one accepts this definition of the artist, then time with a child destroys art, and time with art destroys the child.

Finally, definitions of “mothering” as a full-time activity requiring a selfless, empty subjectivity have also worked to impede the mother/artist. This ideology is described by Sharon Hays in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996). She notes that over the past two centuries—the period of time during which these novels were written—the United States has seen an “increasing intensification of childrearing” (22) based on changing ideas about the nature of children and how they should be cared for. “Intensive mothering,” according to Hays, is comprised of three elements: first, an insistence on the child’s need for a single primary caretaker, with the mother as the best person for this task; second, an assumption that good mothering involves “lavishing

¹Beebe includes a few women, but he emphasizes four male “masters” and finds that many artists must “go to Woman” before they can be creative (18)—clearly we are dealing here with a masculine tradition.

copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child” (8); third, a belief that the values involved in raising children are completely “outside the scope of market valuation” (8). Until the early twentieth-century, these expectations about what it meant to “mother” applied exclusively to white, native-born, middle-class women—the kind of women who are the protagonists in these novels.

These expectations about what the “good mother” owes her child converge with classic psychoanalytic theory to further silence the mother. In her article, “Writing and Motherhood,” Susan Suleiman notes that even Freud’s female colleagues saw the mother as virtually erased by her child. For example, she quotes Alice Balint: “The ideal mother has no interests of her own.... For all of us it remains self-evident that the interests of mother and child are identical...” (qtd. in Suleiman 355). Suleiman notes that while Melanie Klein writes that “the one permanent tragedy of motherhood is that children grow up,” another tragedy has been ignored: “the conflict between the mother’s desire for self-realization—a self-realization that has nothing to do with her being a mother—and the child’s need for her selflessness seems never to have entered the psychoanalysts’ mind” (356).

In traditional psychoanalytic terms, the artist is in the position of the child. “Just as motherhood is ultimately the child’s drama, so is artistic creation” (Suleiman 357). It is hardly surprising, then, that most “second-wave” feminist theory and criticism looks at the mother from the point of view of the daughter, and often regards the mother and mothering with a kind of horror, the black hole which swallows up female subjectivity and selfhood. Feminist classics from the 1970’s such as Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*, which argues that childbearing is the root of all women’s oppression; Dinnerstein’s *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* with its descriptions of the adversarial relationship between mother and child; and even Rich’s *Of Woman Born* and its famous definition of “matrophobia” as “fear of becoming one’s mother”—all these represent early attempts to escape the either/or which confronts the protagonists in the books I have studied:

procreativity or creativity, but not both. *“Mothers don’t write;”* says Suleiman. *“They are written”* (356).

The 1980’s saw a strong interest by feminist scholars in female *Künstlerromane*, exploring the nexus of creativity and procreativity. While they all see the artist as daughter, nevertheless a certain softening toward the mother appears. Grace Stuart’s *A New Mythos* (1981) concludes that the female artist wants both to be her mother and to escape her. She sees the artist-heroine gasping for air, suffocating, miscarrying, or becoming a monster, since it is impossible to be both “woman” and “artist.”

Whereas the typical mythic hero destroys the minotaur, marries the heroine, and assumes the throne, the heroine must accept the demon, reject the hero, and live in misery if she is to retain her identity as an artist. Such an artistic rebirth involves the creation of a freak, a monster, a dybbuk, or a Medusa. (178)

Stuart concludes that “none of these novels depicts a self-made, fully integrated human being, artist and woman” (180).

Susan Gubar’s 1982 essay, “‘The Blank Page’ and Issues of Female Creativity,” also begins with a male creation myth, that of Pygmalion, in which “woman...is an art object: she is the ivory carving or mud replica, an icon or doll, but she is not the sculptor” (293). She goes on to describe “a long tradition identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation.... Clearly this tradition excludes woman from the creation of culture, even as it reifies her as an artifact within culture” (295). However, Gubar goes on to note a shift in creation metaphors at the turn of the century, which began to work in woman’s favor. “The substitution of the female divinity for the male god, the womb for the penis, as the model of creativity was so pronounced by the turn of the century that it posed a real problem for such male modernists as T. S. Eliot, Lawrence, and Joyce” (308).

In what is essentially a continuation of this study, Gubar's 1983 essay "The Birth of the Artist as Heroine: (Re)production, the *Künstlerroman* Tradition, and the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield," notes that in *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf explicitly links female artistic freedom to freedom from pregnancy. Gubar argues that as maternal and infant mortality rates dropped, "feminists could begin to valorize maternity" and thus "artistic production and biological reproduction" both became less fearful.

From the Victorian anxiety of female authorship, which infects the woman artist with the fear that she is a monstrous contradiction in terms, we move toward a celebration of female artistry that blurs the distinction between life and art so as to privilege neither one. (26–7)

This shift in perspective was based in part on a shift in the attitude of the daughter-artist toward her mother which Gubar calls "revisionary domesticity," the celebration of her (dead) mother's creative spirit (46).

Linda Huf's book *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* (1983) begins by trying to explain why there are so few female *Künstlerromane*, compared to the number with male protagonists. She argues that "women have rarely written artist novels" because of cultural taboos against female ambition and self-display (1). She notes the conflict women have traditionally faced between what is expected of a woman and what is expected of an artist: "she is torn...between her role as a woman, demanding selfless devotion to others, and her aspirations as an artist, requiring exclusive commitment to work" (5). Noting a "dramatic increase in artist novels by women" since 1963 (*The Feminine Mystique*), she argues that "more and more artist heroines are refusing to be selfless, sacrificing, self-effacing. They are declining to give priority to the needs of others—refusing to serve others in the name of compassion or love" (152).

Clearly Huf sees the contemporary woman writer rejecting the mothering role which has conflicted with the demands of "art." In contrast to Gubar (who is looking at

British novels while Huf is studying American writers²), she argues that “although twentieth-century artist heroines do have natural mothers, they...are so fanatically feminine that their daughters feel unmothered in effect...” (155). Huf goes on to describe “the stranglehold that the orthodox mother has on her creative daughter” (155) and applauds the daughter’s killing of “the Angel in the House”—the self-effacing mother. However, Huf also insists that “creative heroines with dependent children never leave their families in search of Art’s Holy Grail” (156), though they are beginning to “become less available to others” (157). Further, these artists do not have to feel that they are “monsters”: “what it comes down to is that women are slaying not only the Angel in the House but also the Monster in the Atelier” (157).

In 1985, Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s chapter on artist-novels in *Writing Beyond the Ending* is entitled “To ‘Bear My Mother’s Name’: *Künstlerromane* by Women Writers.” DuPlessis describes a shift between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century very similar to that outlined by Gubar, with the “mourning and domesticity” required of the nineteenth-century female artist giving way to twentieth-century celebrations of female creativity. In this view, the daughter-artist recognizes her mother both as her muse and as a “thwarted artist,” albeit in “unconventional media.”

By entering and expressing herself in some more dominant art form (poem, not garden, painting, not cuisine, novel, not parlor piano playing) the daughter can make prominent the work both have achieved. Mother and daughter are thus collaborators, coauthors, separated by a generation. (94)

DuPlessis acknowledges the status of the mother as unrecognized artist, though like Gubar she notes that the celebrated mother is dead: “the narrative death is a cold-blooded if necessary enabling act, which distinguishes the useful from the damaging in the maternal heritage” (99). The daughter learns from the mother to value “nurturance, community

²The British/American difference here may be less important than the fact that the mothers Gubar looks at are dead but fondly remembered; Huf’s mothers are alive and interfering in their daughter-artist’s lives.

building, inclusiveness, empathic care” (103) but rejects the “envelopment and paralysis” (99) inflicted by the mother when she is actually present.

Finally, in a chapter entitled “The Darkest Plots” in her 1989 *The Mother-Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch examines the modernist female *Künstlerroman*, emphasizing a pattern of “oscillation” which does not seek to solve the “either/or” of female creativity but rather transforms it into a “both/and”:

Female *Künstlerromane* of the 1920’s feature young and middle-aged women who renounce love and marriage in favor of creative work, who renounce connection in favor of self-affirmation. This rebellious choice is intimately bound up in their relationships with their mothers but often is in great conflict with the choices the mothers themselves have made. What emerges...is an intense, passionate, and ambivalent preoccupation with the mother, which oscillates between a longing for connection and need for disconnection” (96)

In these novels, the daughter-artist essentially splits the life/art binary between herself and her mother: for herself she chooses “art,” but by clinging to her mother and using her life in her art, she tries to have both. However, again as in Gubar’s and Hirsch’s analyses, while the daughter celebrates the mother, the mother must die in order for this to take place: “Only then [after the mother’s death] can memory and desire play their roles as instruments of connection, reconstruction, and reparation. In fact, one might say that...death here enables the mothers to be *present* rather than *absent*” (97).

These studies from the 1980’s of female *Künstlerromane* show a movement from the fear and loathing of the mother by feminist literary scholars in the 70’s toward an ambivalent but nostalgic elegizing of maternal creativity. They reveal some of the themes which will recur in my own study: conflicts between ideologies surrounding “True Womanhood” and the artist as isolated “hero”; woman’s role as *object d’art*, domesticity, selflessness, and ambition. More subtly, in feminist scholarship itself I found

that *metaphors* surrounding maternity often displaced actual mothers.³ Essay after essay affirms that the woman artist learns to “give birth to herself” (Huf 153), to be liberated by “a womb of her own” (Gubar “Birth” 126), while the mother herself remains safely dead and buried. The mother’s creativity is celebrated, but she herself is apparently asked to remain mute.⁴ “*The mother does not write; she is written.*”

My study, like all others, is a product of its times. Nineties scholarship has begun to look at the mother as subject in her own right. For example, the 1991 *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities* begins by noting that “the subjectivity of mothers often disappears from even the most sensitive feminist discussions of mothering,” noting the unintentional but apparently inevitable “displacement that foregrounds the subjectivity of daughters” (1). The essays in the book examine maternal experience from the mother’s point of view, listening to the voice of the (erased) mother. The elision of the mother’s voice is what I, too, have tried to address.

However, it is important to remember that this silence of the mother, “loud” as it is, actually covers an even deeper silence. If the daughter has erased the mother, then the middle-class, White woman has erased her minority and working-class sisters. Issues of race and class are central to this topic, though they might not appear so at first glance. All the mother/artists in my study are White and middle-class. I could not find any *Künstlerromane* about African-American or other minority mothers, or working-class mothers. Instead, these women are the servants of the protagonists. They play the role which Tillie Olsen calls “the essential angel, so lowly as to be invisible, although without

³Similarly, Alicia Ostriker was told, when she tried to argue in a graduate class at Rutgers, in the 70’s, that one could be both a mother and a writer: “It was one thing to write about pregnancy, where you could be symbolic and spiritual, but quite impossible to use the squalling brats as poetic material after you had them” (128–9).

⁴Nina Auerbach, writing in 1978, vehemently rejects even the *metaphorical* use of mothering to talk about writing. She argues that the entanglement of biological and cultural creativity is at the heart of the woman writer’s problem. She wants to delink the two, since the childless woman writer has been depicted as “barren,” as writing books as a poor substitute for having babies. She celebrates the “child-free” space in which Austen and Eliot wrote, and depicts motherhood as a “shackling” and a “pall.” (“Artists and Mothers: A False Alliance.” *Women and Literature* 9 (Spring 1978): 3–15.)

her no art, or any human endeavor, could be carried on for even one day” (34). This “angel,” about whom Virginia Woolf did not write, is the person who cleans the “room of one’s own,” who takes care of the children if the mother is to be an artist, who makes the food and washes the dishes and mops the floors and changes the diapers, the silent bringer of coffee and sandwiches.⁵ Mostly, women have been this angel for men. When mothers try to be artists, they need practical help, at least at some level. So far, this has often meant privileged women being “enabled” by their less privileged sisters.

Sometimes this is simply a matter of money—people with money hire people who need it—but other, subtler factors are also at play. First, until very recently it was difficult enough for middle-class White women to have pretensions to “art.” Certainly women who were barely thought of as women at all, who fell below the radar screen of “True Womanhood,” could not even dream of the high, heroic calling which was “Art.” This has applied most strongly to women of color. As Linda Huf notes of Black women,

[she] is even less eager than the white woman to strike the grandiose pose which since the Romantic period has been expected of the Artist....

Considering her double disenfranchisement as both woman and black, a black woman who poses in the grand manner can expect only scorn... As of now, the black woman artist is a missing character in fiction. (14–15)

On a more practical level, education was also reserved, and still is to a certain extent, for the upper and middle classes. The protagonists in my study are all⁶ products of expensive private schools like Catherine Beecher’s Hartford Seminary, art schools in

⁵A. S. Byatt has written a short story about Olsen’s “essential angel,” a “part-Guyanese, part-Irish” Mrs. Brown, who cleans house for an “artistic family.” Mrs. Brown cleans the Ivory Tower of the husband, a sterile painter of still lifes, during the day. In her spare time she creates wild and witty fabric sculptures. At the end of the story (“Art Work” from *The Matisse Stories*, 1993), she has a successful show at the gallery which had rejected her employer’s work. While Mrs. Brown is also a mother, she gets her inspiration from her work as a “cleaning lady”: “Working as a cleaning lady, OK, you learn a lot, it’s honest, you can see things *anywhere at all* to make things up from...” (86).

⁶Except Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe—we know nothing of their schooling. Woolf herself, of course, was highly conscious (and resentful) of her own “homemade” education; though clearly, given her father’s library and the other privileges she enjoyed, she was highly educated.

Paris and Florence, even Oxford itself. It is this education which makes their writing and painting even thinkable—minority and working-class women simply did not have the same options. Nevertheless, these “invisible” women are here in these books, though not as protagonists, and as a White, middle-class woman myself it is “natural” for me to overlook them: I have consciously tried not to do so, nor to make the mistake of thinking that Whites do not “have race.” As Ruth Frankenberg notes in *White Women, Race Matters*, naming ‘whiteness’ displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance. Among the effects on white people both of race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their structured invisibility. (6)

This same invisibility, which makes “whiteness” seem “normal” applies to “middle-classness” as well, I believe.

Thus White, middle-class women have at least had a shot at speaking up as artists. One such practicing mother-artist who has spoken up is Ursula Le Guin, whose 1988 essay “The Fisherwoman’s Daughter” wrestles with these issues. As a writing mother of two, she notes that while combining art and mothering certainly offers a set of practical problems, “that isn’t how the problem is posed.... If it were, practical solutions would be proposed, beginning with childcare. Instead the issue is stated, even now, as a moral one” (224). Noting that “talking about mothers who write...is almost a taboo topic” (225), Le Guin argues that “this ban on a woman artist’s full sexuality is harmful not only to the woman but to the art” (225). She takes on the “Hero-Artist” ideology, what she calls the “Gauguin Pose” (223), which insists that the artist “must sacrifice himself to his art. (I use the pronoun advisedly.) His responsibility is to his work alone” (222). She believes that this stance cuts the artist off from the “potency”⁷ of life itself, “in an egoism that is ultimately sterile” (226). Alice Walker agrees: “In my opinion, having a child is easily the

⁷Q: What, according to Hemingway, is the one thing an artist needs?
A: Balls.

equivalent of having balls. In truth, it is more than equivalent: ballsdom is surpassed” (Gardens 373).

Le Guin finds herself energized by Virginia Woolf, who wrote in “Professions for Women”: “I doubt that a writer can be a hero. I doubt that a hero can be a writer,” insisting that women writers should represent all of female experience (though they might have to wait fifty years to fully describe their passions). Le Guin also likes Cixous’ image of writing in mother’s milk, because “the woman writer has been more often considered in her sexuality as a lover than in her sexuality as pregnant-bearing-nursing-childcaring. Mother still tends to get disappeared” (228). And she especially appreciates Alicia Ostriker, who has written that most surprising phrase, “The advantage of motherhood for a woman artist...” “Have you ever heard anybody say that before?” asks Le Guin, “the *advantage* of motherhood for an artist?” (228).

Here is the entire passage from Ostriker:

The advantage of motherhood for a woman artist is that it puts her in immediate and inescapable contact with the sources of life, death, beauty, growth, corruption.... If the woman artist has been trained to believe that the activities of motherhood are trivial, tangential to main issues of life, irrelevant to the great themes of literature, she should untrain herself. The training is misogynist, it protects and perpetuates systems of thought and feeling which prefer violence and death to love and birth, and it is a lie.

(130–31)

Like Le Guin and Ostriker, the five mother-artists in these novels work in various ways to resist or dismantle the either/or of art and life as it is presented to them; simultaneously, their authors try to do the same. To illuminate this double-stranded struggle is my project.

CHAPTER ONE

“THE MOTHER CAN—THE MOTHER WILL”: FANNY FERN AND RUTH HALL (1855)

Fanny Fern⁸ was the first woman in the United States to have her own signed, weekly newspaper column, and was “among the highest paid writers in the country... the first celebrity journalist” (Smith xvi). In Fern’s autobiographical novel, *Ruth Hall* (1855), the main character also attains considerable notoriety as a writer and begins to receive quite a lot of what one can only call “fan mail.” Most of the letters are clearly meant to be comic, though they seem likely to be based on actual letters received by Fern herself. (Everything she wrote appears to be derived from her own experiences, though often exaggerated.) One of the most remarkable letters comes from a young man who takes great pains to establish the venerable respectability of his family, then cuts to the chase—his family is now poor, naturally through no fault of his, and Fern is being offered the privilege of helping him.

The story, in brief, is this: his grandmother was highly “poetical.” While she was pregnant with his own father, she saw a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. She was so enchanted by it that she immediately decided to memorize the entire play. In his words,

she finished committing this immortal poem to memory, the very night my father was born. Time rolled on; my father, as he grew up, exhibited great flightiness of character, and instability of purpose, the result, undoubtedly,

⁸The problem of what to call Sarah Payson Willis Eldredge Farrington Parton is complex; however, she christened herself Fanny Fern, and soon all her closest friends and family called her “Fanny.” I follow their lead and use her pseudonym, except when referring to her life before she began to write.

of his mother's committing 'The Midsummer Night's Dream' to memory under the circumstances which I have detailed. (155)

This prenatal event had dire consequences for his father's future family. He was totally unsuited to managing his estate, or to any other pursuit involving money: "hence our present pecuniary embarrassments."

The maternal *faux pas*, however, can be put to rights by the motherly "Floy" (Ruth's pseudonym), whom he employs to take his story, turn it into a best-seller, and give him the money for college (which he will repay with his first earnings). While Ruth ignores the letter, the amused reader is reminded again of the central connection in this novel between mothers, money, and the written word.

In *Ruth Hall*, Fanny Fern conflates maternal and literary work, through the economic. Ruth Hall is represented as writing solely to support herself and her children, as a means of sheer survival. When her daughter asks her if she, too, will write when she grows up, Ruth replies, "God forbid... No happy woman ever writes" (175). Fern's revolutionary text displays the hole in the safety net of domesticity; it urges middle-class women to achieve economic independence—an unmistakable expression of lack of confidence in men. However, because of the ambiguous cultural position of women writers at mid-century, and given that *Ruth Hall* is so highly autobiographical, it is also necessary to look at other motives for writing which Ruth cannot admit but which Fanny Fern herself either practiced or espoused. While Ruth asserts that a woman only writes to survive—making writing another form of domestic labor—Fern also wrote because she wanted to change the culture by expressing her feelings and opinions. She urges women to practice both psychic and economic independence. In *Ruth Hall* Fanny Fern represents this need for middle-class women to achieve autonomy financially and psychologically. However, this "American Dream" is achieved, not by means of a solitary quest away from the domestic, but for the sake of home and children.

Ruth Hall never meant to be a writer, let alone a best-selling “authoress.” Like her classmates at boarding school, she longed only to marry the man she loved, keep his house, and bear his children. And she does so. The novel opens with Ruth’s marriage to handsome Harry, and before too long she is mistress of a charming cottage and mother of a lovely girl. Ruth lives the domestic dream and lives it well. Her marriage to Harry is perfect, her life full of pleasure and love. Yet where another novel⁹ might end, Ruth’s story is only beginning. Her child dies and she is inconsolable. She insists on leaving her home, so full of painful memories. She and Harry live in hotels, and two more children come, but life cannot be the same. Then Harry dies and the world comes crashing down. There is no money after the debts are settled, and neither her parents-in-law nor her own father (her mother is dead) are willing to offer more than a pittance. Suddenly the pampered Ruth, unprepared for anything but arranging flowers and hanging “snowy” curtains, finds that she must earn her “crust.” She and her daughters move into progressively cheaper and more miserable boarding houses, her daughter Katy must finally go to live with her meddling, mean-spirited grandparents, and Ruth and Nettie are reduced to surviving on bread and milk in smaller and smaller amounts in a dark upstairs room.

Ruth takes up writing as a desperate measure, a matter of survival for herself and her children. She tries everything else first. Sewing pays too little; she cannot get a job as a teacher without “connections.” (Here again, her family lets her down by not giving her a recommendation.) She even looks with a shudder at the house of prostitution down the block and comes to understand “how it could be, when every door of hope seemed shut...” (91). Finally, she remembers winning prizes for compositions in school, and thinks that perhaps she could write for the periodical press as some other women are doing. She sends a few essays to her brother, a successful editor who has helped other

⁹Susan Belasco Smith contrasts Ruth Hall with *Jane Eyre* (1847), and notes that the former begins where the latter leaves off: with an idealized marriage (xxxviii).

struggling women writers get started, but is only rebuffed by him, told to make her living in a less “obtrusive” way.

Ruth struggles to get published without her brother’s help and eventually becomes so popular that her brother begins to boast privately of his relation to her. Her success is enormous, no thanks to him, or to anyone else in her family. As Susan Belasco Smith puts it, “the novel concludes not with a romance, marriage, and the promise of a conventional domestic life but with Ruth Hall in possession of her fatherless children, a successful career as a journalist, a comfortable income, and a formidable bank account” (xxxvii). Stability has returned to her life, but she has by no means come full circle. Ruth Hall, like her creator Fanny Fern, has discovered the “fissures in the edifice of the domestic sphere” (Smith xlv). As Joyce Warren notes, “widowhood radicalized [Fanny Fern] and led ... to her revolutionary conclusion that women could not be truly independent until they were financially independent” (68).

Middle-class women like Ruth never expected to have to earn a living. Indeed, they thought of themselves as “outside the money economy.... their value as women...intrinsic” (Warren *FF* 301). They were assured from birth that they would be taken care of by the men in their lives: father, brother, husband. A woman’s role was to be dependent and supportive; to have anything to do with earning money was vulgar. Warren, in her article on widowhood, explains how Ruth Hall (and Fanny Fern) could find herself in such dire financial straits after the death of her husband. “[Middle-class] women in nineteenth-century America were led to believe that they were weak and dependent creatures whose best defense was to rely on man, whose strong right arm and knowledge of right would guide him in protecting weak womanhood” (“Text” 68). But a widow was an anomaly in the system: there was no place for her socially or financially. “After her husband died, the widow had no identity... she was a financial burden and an embarrassment...” (“Text” 73). As Fanny Fern later wrote of dependent female relatives,

No matter how isolated or destitute her condition, the majority would consider it more “feminine” would she unobtrusively gather up her thimble, and, retiring into some out-of-the-way place, gradually scoop out her coffin with it.... “Do something for yourself,” is their advice in general terms; but, above all, you are to do it quietly, unobtrusively, in other words, die as soon as you like on sixpence a day, but don’t trouble *us!* (318)

The very presence of a poor woman in a family implied male failure to care for her, to live up to their half of the domestic bargain, and she is asked not to advertise the fact by displaying her poverty openly.

This male failure is the scandal of *Ruth Hall*—and the scandal is only worsened by the fact that the novel was highly autobiographical. For a “gentlewoman” to sink into such poverty as Fern depicts, one or more men must be at fault. First, Ruth’s husband dies and leaves her with no money. While Ruth never blames Harry (and Fern never blamed her first husband), nevertheless she makes it clear that the first impetus toward financial independence was his death: “From Harry’s grave sprang ‘Floy’” (175). As Linda Huf reminds us, “it took a man’s mutilation if not his death to free many Victorian heroines, artist or not, to follow their desires” (32). Indeed, Helen Papashvily’s early classic on the sentimental novel has an entire chapter devoted to “The Mutilation of the Male.”

This, however, is not what so dismayed Fern’s reviewers. Rather it was the vicious caricatures of her relatives—their meanness, hypocrisy, vanity, and pride—which led Grace Greenwood (a successful author and protégée of Fern’s brother, the well-known editor and poet N. P. Willis) to refer to the book as “*Ruthless Hall*,” and for many reviewers to be shocked at the “unladylike” vengefulness of the book. One reviewer in particular seems to have gotten the point very clearly. “As we wish no sister of ours, nor no female relative to show toward us, the ferocity she has displayed toward her nearest

relatives we take occasion to censure this book that might initiate such a possibility” (qtd. in Warren *FF* 125–6).

Ruth must support her children because no man will do so. Though a widow without children might have found herself similarly destitute, the presence of children exacerbated the situation considerably. A woman with children could not simply be given the unused back bedroom and asked to help with housework. Furthermore, they represented more mouths to feed and backs to clothe. And the children made it more difficult for a woman on her own to actually perform the little work that was available to her. Ruth begins by “begging for employment” trimming lace collars and caps. Unfortunately, as the proprietor explains, “the kind of work she wished, is done by forty hands, in a room directly over the store.... Of course that was out of the question... for she could not bring her two children there and she had no one to leave them with” (80). Ruth does succeed in finding some “ruffling and hemming” which she can do in her room, but she earns only fifty cents for two weeks’ work—not nearly enough to support herself and two children.¹⁰ Ruth also tries to find work teaching school, thinking that she can bring the girls with her. However, there are twenty-four applicants for one position, and she has no one to recommend her to the corrupt and incompetent school board, and does not get the position.

Writing is the only way Ruth can find to work and take care of Nettie at the same time, as well as earn money to redeem the exiled Katy. But writing, too, is more difficult with children. Ruth must drag poor Nettie along with her from office to office as she begs editors to print her work:

DID RUTH DESPAIR? No! but the weary little feet which for so many hours had kept pace with hers, needed a reprieve. Little Nettie must go

¹⁰“The most that Sara Eldredge could earn as a seamstress was seventy-five cents a week” (Warren *FF* 82).

home.... Would a brighter morrow ever come? Ruth thought of her children, and said again with a strong heart—it will. (121)

And Ruth must do most of her writing at night, while Nettie sleeps.

Scratch—scratch—scratch, went Ruth's pen; the dim lamp flickering in the night breeze, while the deep breathing of the little sleepers was the watchword. On! to her throbbing brow and weary fingers. One o'clock—two o'clock—three o'clock—the lamp burns low in the socket. (125–6)

When she tries to write during the day, she is often interrupted.

A dull, drizzling rain spattered perseveringly against Ruth's windows.... Little Nettie had exhausted her slender stock of toys, and creeping up to her mother's side, laid her head wearily in her lap. 'Wait just a moment, Nettie, till mamma finishes this page....' (134)

Clearly, these are not ideal conditions, either for writing or for mothering: "Nettie's snowy lids drooped over her violet eyes, and she was far away in the land of dreams, where there are no little hungry girls, or tired, scribbling mammas" (135). Fern is not recommending this life—only pointing out that self-support is sometimes forced upon middle-class women, and they should be prepared. As Huf notes, it is important for Ruth's femininity that she be a "reluctant" author (30).

By tying writing so firmly to the economic, Fern identifies the woman writer with all women who labor to support themselves and their children, breaking down some traditional notions about class, gender and work. Ruth takes on the only task open to her, because she needs that vulgar article, money. By having Ruth first try the other jobs open to women and even view prostitutes with understanding, the text suggests that the economic fate of all women is intertwined, and none is immune to the threat of "downward mobility" and the potential need to earn a living.

Furthermore, for Fern no honest work is shameful, if it is done well. Ruth does quite a bit of manual labor in the course of her "adventures," including scrubbing her own

laundry and washing the stairs of her boarding house. The inclusion of laundry as part of Ruth's work is telling, for it was considered the most dreaded household duty at this time, the "most hated task of all" because of the sheer physical labor involved, according to Susan Strasser. This was the first work which women "jettisoned" whenever they had "any discretionary money at all" (105). Clearly, Ruth has fallen as deep into drudgery as one can. This detail also underlines the villainy of Ruth's relatives, and if the fact itself isn't enough for Fern's readers, she makes their servants comment on the despicable way she is being treated: "If I lived in such a grand house as this...I wouldn't let my poor cousin stand every Monday in my kitchen, bending over the wash-tub" (82).

It is the servants and other workers in this book who show the most sympathy for Ruth, and appear as foils to the wealthy, leisured characters, who are mostly lazy, spoiled hypocrites. Johnny Galt the fireman chivalrously remembers Ruth in her poverty by bringing her a bouquet from the country (84), then later saves her life in a hotel fire (199). And Ruth's Irish nursemaid puts an admirable curse on Ruth's relatives before she leaves: "'May the sows of 'em niver get out of purgatory; that's Biddy's last word to 'em'" (65). Ruth is depicted as one worker among many, trying to support herself and her children.

Still, Ruth is able to earn a living by writing because of her middle-class background and education. Like Fern and most of the women writers of the day, Ruth is the descendant of educated men (and sometimes women) who are ministers, editors, and other professionals. She has had the best education available to women at the time (Fern attended Catherine Beecher's Hartford Female Seminary), and if she had been male would have been expected to go on to college and have a substantial career. Fern herself had quite a bit of experience as a child in reading and writing proof for her father's papers. So when "Floy" has virtually instant success at writing, this is not the fantasy it might seem: much of Fern's life had inadvertently prepared her for a career in journalism. The "moral" of *Ruth Hall* is not that destitute women should start writing for the papers, but that

middle-class women should be prepared to support themselves if necessary—and if they must perform manual labor along the way, this is no shame.

Fern is clear about where she stands in the cultural discussion of household labor and its meaning. In the first half of the century, according to Elizabeth O’Leary’s *At Beck and Call: The Representation of Domestic Servants in Nineteenth-Century American Painting*, “freedom from the drudgery of menial chores became a badge of gentility” (77). Catherine Sedgewick wrote in 1837 that the ability to avoid household labor was “the *first requisite for a lady*” (qtd. in O’Leary 77). But by mid-century, a movement was underway to give household work back its dignity. Catherine Beecher, for example, “devoted considerable effort to glorifying housekeeping, attempting to convince her readers that their daily duties, although possibly tedious and distressing, constituted important work, assigned to them by Nature and God” (Strasser 185). Fern is adamant that hard, physical labor never hurt anyone, least of all herself:

I have washed and ironed, and baked and brewed, and swept and dusted, and washed children, and made bonnets, and cut and made dresses, and mended old coats, and cleaned house, and made carpets, and nailed them down, and cleaned windows, and washed dishes, and tended door-bell, and done every ‘menial’ thing you can think of, when it came to me to do, and I’m none the worse for it. (333)

However, while Fern was sympathetic to this effort to give dignity to housework, her motive was to give women more respect, and not to try to convince them that they were happy at home. In contrast, Susan Strasser emphasizes that Beecher’s campaign was part of a general need to shore up the “separate spheres” ideology, which was being undermined by the increasing numbers of factory-made goods and the decreasing status of unpaid labor. “It therefore fell to those who wrote about domestic affairs to ‘redeem woman’s profession from dishonor’” (185). However, though Fern certainly argued that

household labor was honorable, she had no illusions about the glories of “woman’s sphere”:

It is all very well to sneer...and raise the old cry of “a woman’s sphere being home”... You might as well say that a man’s sphere is his shop or his counting-room. How many of them, think you, would be contented, year in and year out, to eat, drink, and sleep as well as to transact business there, and *never desire or take*, at all costs, some let-up from its monotonous grind? (344)

Fern knew that any work, whether inside the home or out, could become tedious, and that all workers, including housewives and mothers, deserved some variety and respect.

Throughout her long journalistic career, Fern used her column to crusade for better working conditions for seamstresses and shopgirls, fairer labor practices, and more jobs for women—and to remind the prosperous not to think themselves so very separate from the lower classes. In 1852 she wrote the “Soliloquy of a Housemaid,” in which the tired maidservant wishes her employers would show just a little interest in her as a human being. “A soft word would ease the wheels of my treadmill amazingly,” she sighs (237). In her 1853 column “Sewing Machines” Fern urged the “gentlemen” who employed seamstresses to remember to treat their workers humanely: “God made no distinction of sex when he said—’The laborer is worthy of his hire’” (248). And she visited the women’s prison on Blackwell’s Island in 1858 and wrote three columns describing the miserable conditions and reminding her readers of the practice of “gentlemen” which brought many women there: prostitution.

Two of the minor subplots in the novel underline the link between the classes and express admiration for useful, energetic working women who are independent of men. These two plots, one tragic and one comic, revolve around two women, the rich and beautiful Mrs. Leon and the rough and ready Mrs. Skiddy. Ruth first meets Mrs. Leon in the hotel where she is staying with Harry and her two girls. She is attracted to her

because she, too, despises “common female employments” like “satin patchwork, the manufacture of German worsted animals, bead-netting, crochet-stitching, long discussion with milliners, dress-makers, and modistes, long forenoons spent in shopping, or leaving bits of paste-board...” (51). Ruth has little patience for the useless activities of middle-class women who have no real work to do, and senses that the beautiful Mrs. Leon is a kindred spirit. They soon become friends. Mrs. Leon reveals that she married for money, without love, and now is essentially a prisoner of her conventional, punctilious husband. “The chain is none the less galling, because its links are golden,” (52) she tells Ruth.

Ruth (and the reader) forgets about Mrs. Leon as her own problems accumulate after Harry’s death. But a few months later, when she and the girls are admiring the manicured grounds of an “Insane Hospital,” Ruth discovers that a Mrs. Leon lies dead inside. Mr. Leon has left his wife here “for her health” while he has gone to Europe. The superintendent, a friend of Mr. Leon, declares that she was “hopelessly crazy” and had to be force-fed. When Ruth asks to see the body, an undelivered note to her is discovered: “I am not crazy Ruth, no, no—but I shall be; the air of this place stifles me; I grow weaker—weaker. I cannot die here; for the love of heaven, dear Ruth, come and take me away” (112). Mrs. Leon was dependent on a man who did not love her. She represents wealthy, vulnerable women who are dying, both figuratively and literally, for lack of love. She is “the fragile wife, to whom love was breath—being!—forgotten by the world and him in whose service her bloom had withered, insane—only in that her love had outlived his patience” (109).

Fanny Fern knew well what it meant to marry for money rather than love. The tale of Mrs. Leon seems to be a substitute for the story of her own disastrous second marriage: the only significant part of her life omitted from *Ruth Hall* is her marriage to Samuel P. Farrington at the urging of her family, who did not wish to support her. At first she refused the widowed Farrington, not wishing to marry without love. But her father the deacon was furious. He had “no patience with the idea of declining to profit by such a

manifest interposition of Providence” (qtd.. in Warren *FF* 83). Having unsuccessfully tried to support herself by sewing and teaching, like Ruth Hall, she believed she could not survive without her father’s support. For the sake of her children, she married Farrington, telling him flatly that she did not love him.

The marriage turned out to be hellish: he was jealous, tyrannical, and impossible to please. Further, Sara apparently found him sexually repulsive. In her novel *Rose Clark* Fern describes a similar loveless marriage, and since her writing was invariably from life, her biographer Joyce Warren concludes that she is probably describing her feelings about Farrington. The main character and narrator says that she came to understand that her new husband was “a hypocrite, and a gross sensualist. That it was passion, not love, which he felt for me, and that marriage was only the stepping-stone to an else impossible gratification.... To him my disgust was only coyness, and served but as fuel to the flame” (qtd. in Warren *FF* 84–85). Later in the book *Rose Clark* compares herself to an “inmate of a harem... slavishly subject to the gross appetite of her master” (qtd.. in Warren *FF* 85).

Sara eventually had the temerity to take her two girls and leave Farrington, who finally divorced her for desertion, though not without slandering her with charges of adultery. Though this was an exceedingly painful episode in her life, it, too, became the source of some of her columns. She railed against the fact that “when a man is defamed, a fist, a pistol, or the law rights him: a woman thus situated, if silent, is guilty; if rased to a public vindication of her rights, is bold, revengeful and unwomanly” (271–2). And she even argued that the wife of a hopelessly degenerate husband should leave him. “Does she shrink from the toil of self-support? What toil, let me ask, could be more hopeless, more endless, more degrading than that from which she turns away?” (293) For Fern, honest, paid labor was far better, more “respectable” even, than a loveless marriage.

This is the message of the story of Mrs. Leon, who dies in an insane asylum. Her story follows hard on the heels of the other subplot, the tale of Mrs. Skiddy, who clearly represents the woman who will be dependent on no man. While she is a comic,

Dickensian figure, Mrs. Skiddy is also a canny businesswoman. She runs Ruth's boarding house, cooking for everyone as well as caring for her two sons and a baby. Mr. Skiddy works as a clerk in a counting-room, but considers that he'd be far happier in California, prospecting for gold. Mrs. Skiddy finally tires of such talk, and warns her husband that if he says it one more time, he'll regret it. Predictably, he does so, and revenge comes in the form of Mrs. Skiddy's disappearance with the two boys, leaving a house full of boarders—and a nursing baby—behind. Naturally Ruth decides to help with the poor, screaming baby, and soon her "maternal magnetism" has calmed him. As Mr. Skiddy walks to the bakery to buy pies for supper, he begins to realize the value and extent of his wife's labor. A wet-nurse, he estimates, would run him six dollars a week, and "city milk" will surely kill the child. And must he spend all his free time holding the child, including walking the floor with him at night? And what about all the boarders? "He never realized before how many irons Mrs. Skiddy had daily in the fire.... He began to be conscious of a growing respect for Mrs. Skiddy" (94-5).

A week later, Mrs. Skiddy returns to find that her husband has hired a nurse, begun "going out" in the evenings with his "old love," and is generally enjoying his newfound bachelorhood. He is not at all pleased to see the mother of his children again, and as soon as her back is turned, he heads for California in earnest. While she catches him once, he eventually does escape, apparently for good. "Just one half hour our Napoleon in petticoats spends in reflection" (108) before making up her mind what to do. She turns boarders into lodgers and settles back to watch the money come in with less work on her part. A year later, the discouraged Mr. Skiddy writes to say that he has had no luck in California and begs "umbly" for return passage. The magnificent Mrs. Skiddy reads the letter and then "drawing from her pocket a purse well filled with her own honest earnings, she chinked its contents at some phantom shape discernible to her eyes alone; while through her set teeth hissed out, like ten thousand serpents, the word 'N—e—v—e—r!'" (109).

These subplots, combined with her columns, clearly suggest Fern's attitudes toward women and work: all women work for a living, some have marriage and mothering as a profession; others support themselves, and children if they have them, as seamstresses or by running boarding houses; some "sink" to prostitution. Those who are wives and mothers are no better than those who work for wages¹¹—indeed, marriage without love is essentially a form of prostitution. Furthermore, wealthy women are linked to poorer women because they buy the goods they make, and because they may even become working women themselves if their husbands and fathers should cease to support them and their children, as they did Ruth Hall.

Mrs. Skiddy may be the comic heroine of a rustic subplot, but she is also tacitly offered as a model for middle-class women, a not uncommon occurrence, according to Susan K. Harris: "as with many other women's novels of the mid-nineteenth century, the unacknowledged model for the successful heroine's behavior is the lower-class woman, whose status frees her from the gender definitions and restrictions of the middle and upper-middle classes" (122). Sharon Hays notes that the ideology of "intensive mothering" was already strong by mid-century for middle-class women like Ruth, but that "attempts to civilize the [working-class] mother's character seem to have little impact.... Such mothers worked for their economic sustenance, and for them there was little distinction between the behavior considered appropriate at home and at work" (38). Because women like Mrs. Skiddy were not bound by "ladylike" behavior, they could offer models of independence for more privileged women.

This connection between all women is clearly established by Fern's column of January 26, 1867, which describes vividly the life of the "working-girls of New York," who rise before light in small, unventilated rooms in tenements houses, shiver through the windy streets in flimsy dresses, and work eleven-hour days in a hoop-skirt factory where

¹¹In 1869 Fern wrote a column entitled "Women's Salaries" about the money men "give" their wives: "I am nauseated at the idea of any decent, intelligent, self-respecting, capable wife, evern being obliged to ask for that which she so laboriously earns" (365).

the “roar of machinery ...is like Niagara” (348). Fern prefaces this grim picture, however, with this question:

Jostling on the same pavement with the dainty fashionist is the care-worn working-girl. Looking at both these women, the question arises, which lives the more miserable life—she whom the world styles ‘fortunate,’ whose husband belongs to three clubs, and whose only meal with his family is an occasional breakfast, from year’s end to year’s end... swift retribution for that father who finds food, raiment, shelter, equipages for his household; but love, sympathy companionship—never? Or she—this other woman—with a heart quite as hungry and unappeased, who also faces day by day the same appalling question: Is this all life has for me? (346–7)

The syntax is strained, but the intent is clear: many a pampered wife is just as miserable as the destitute working woman. In fact, women who marry for money are just as much laborers for hire as their lower-class sisters.

Fanny Fern represents the writing mother as a resourceful business woman, whose labor is no more nor less dignified than that of the seamstress or housekeeper—only better paid. Like Mrs. Skiddy in her rooming house, the writing woman remains at home, yet pulls in the cash to support herself and her children. Motherwork—housework—sewing—writing: the issue is not creativity, but self-reliance through honest work. Throughout her life she insisted that she was no “bluestocking” who considered herself “above” household labor. In 1865 she wrote:

Because a woman can appreciate a good book, or even write one or talk or think intelligently, is she not to be a breezy, stirring, wide-awake capable housekeeper? Is she not to be a soulful wife and a loving, judicious mother? Is she to disdain to comb a little tumbled head, or to wash a pair of sticky little paws?... No woman of true intellect ever felt such duties

beneath her... It is very shocking to know that a woman who writes isn't always dressed in sky blue, and employed in smelling a violet. (332–333)

Fern sees no “either/or” between writing and mothering, because she does not see herself as creating “art.” A woman who writes is a practical person who can mend a stocking or a paragraph,¹² as required. “Never say of an authoress, oh yes—she has talent, but I prefer the domestic virtues; as if a combination of the two were necessarily impossible” (311). Neither Ruth Hall nor Fern herself makes any pretensions about being an “artist;” indeed, Fern’s sarcasm about dressing in “sky blue” and “smelling a violet” seems to indicate a certain embarrassment at the very thought. Though Ruth is frequently called a “genius,” the words “art” and “artist” are never spoken. The idea of the artist conjured up an image not only of leisured, Wordsworthian solitude, but also of self-expression on a public stage, a career choice based on self-assertion and the production of culture. But Fern and the other “literary domestics” of Mary Kelley’s ambitious 1984 study concealed “even from themselves...the fact that they were creators of culture. They represented themselves to self and society as nothing more or less than private domestic women, women of the home” (Kelley 184).

For Ruth, writing is simply a form of “homework.” Her elation at success comes from what she can do for her girls as a consequence. “Ruth felt as if wings were growing from her shoulders. She never was weary, or sleepy, or hungry.... her mother’s heart was goading her on” (174). When her articles are published in a book (resembling *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio*, which sold 70,000 copies), Ruth muses:

She could recall the circumstances under which each separate article was written. Little shoeless feet were covered with the proceeds of this.... One was written with little Nettie sleeping in her lap.... Some virtues—many faults—the book had—but God speed it, for little Katy’s sake!
(175)

¹²I owe this charming figure of speech to E. B. White.

When she learns that the book is “a decided hit,” she realizes that at last she can leave her tiny room and actually buy a house. “Home? Her heart leaped!—comforts for Nettie and Katy,—clothes—food—earned by her own hands!” (181).

Furthermore, the content of Ruth’s newspaper columns is an extension of her mothering. Letters from Ruth’s readers make clear that “Floy’s” articles are written from a maternal perspective. One letter is from a young girl, who says “Mamma has read me some of your stories. I like them very much. You say you love little children. Don’t you think we’ve got a bran new baby!.... I wish I could see you. How do you look? I guess you look like mamma.... I want you to write a book of stories for little girls, and don’t make them end bad...” (189). Another correspondent writes that she sees in “Floy’s” columns “a tender love for helpless childhood.” She herself is “that most wretched of all beings, a loving, but unloved wife.” She is pregnant and has had a dream portending her own death at the birth of her child. “‘Floy,’ will you be a mother to my babe?.... You only can fill my place in the little heart that this moment is pulsating beneath my own” (165). Through the pens of Ruth’s readers, Fern presents the writing woman as a mother whose loving presence is spread over many homes, instead of just one.

At the time that she wrote these columns, however, Ruth was unable to provide a home for her own children. It is for this that Ruth has entered the world of business, learned to negotiate with vulgar, cigar-smoking strangers, borne the gaze of men in office after office. She leaves the domestic sphere, but only for the sake of regaining it on a surer footing. Like the “literary domestics,” Ruth Hall must negotiate a complex cultural position, somewhere between public and private. “Unable in their own minds to leave the home, they were in many significant respects placed beyond the home, beyond female boundaries” (Kelley 111).

This rather precarious positioning of the writing self was facilitated by the use of a pseudonym. While “Floy” and “Fanny Fern” are speaking in public, Ruth and Sara are home with their children. As Ruth’s columns are more widely read, speculation begins

about who she really is, whether “Floy” is male or female, and criticizing her for being too frank, speculating on her marital status, etc. Ruth is amused by all the public stir, but she is not distracted from her only true purpose in writing. Her pseudonym allows her this freedom. “Still ‘Floy’ scribbled on, thinking only of bread for her children, laughing and crying behind her mask....” (133). Kelley notes that the pseudonym was part of a “disjunction of the private woman in the public world,” and a need to limit intentional revelation and discovery. But since the real name of a best-selling author inevitably became public, this anonymity was more “state of mind” than “reality” (128). Certainly this was the case for Sara Parton, whose identity was revealed soon after the publication of *Ruth Hall*, and whose face apparently grew to fit the mask: by 1856, according to Warren, “the name Fanny Fern had gradually become her own in private as well as in public life. Her husband called her Fanny...and she signed her letters Fanny Fern” (“Introduction” to *RH*, xix).

“Floy,” however, is never found out, and Ruth continues to write as a “private” person working at home with only one motive: to support her children. As Kelley maintains, the literary domestics “were quick to rationalize their income on the basis that they and their families needed the support. To justify their pursuit of literary income simply as the right of any individual was neither easy nor likely for them” (146).

Kelley’s word “rationalize” moves us toward a different, more complex view of Ruth’s and Fern’s motives for writing. While Fern clearly presents Ruth’s motive as single, we should not take this at face value. Most critics agree with Linda Huf, who argues that, while “Ruth’s ‘sacred calling’... is not art but motherhood” (32), this is only part of the picture. “Whatever Fanny’s insistence that she had no self-seeking motive in writing, one sees something of her real intent in the satisfaction her heroine feels in having triumphed over her relatives” (33). Fern’s own motives appear to have been complicated. Because this is the highly autobiographical tale of a writer’s life, it is necessary to look also at Fanny Fern and why she (and some of the other women of her time) wrote.

First, in frankly claiming an economic motive, Fern, in the words of Ann D. Wood [Douglas], “challenged and even attacked” “a conventional set of preconceptions as to why women should write” (4). In her essay “The ‘Scribbling Women’ and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote,” she looks carefully at reasons a “lady” could give for breaking into print. Wood argues that to claim to write for profit was to “defile” the “sacredness of the home” (4). At mid-century,

what is happening is clear: women’s motives in writing are being stripped of all their aggressive content, until the woman writer seems practically anesthetized, or rather hypnotized, responding only to the calls of home and God, calls so close to her instinctive womanly nature that she hardly need consciously to hear them.¹³ (8)

In contrast, Ruth does not claim to become a writer because God wanted to write through her, like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner, or because she is “betrayed into print” by well-meaning relatives, like Lydia Maria Child or Catherine Maria Sedgwick. Ruth frankly needs money.

Even for Fern, however, the desire for money could not be served up raw— it is acceptable because it is presented as the maternal. Still, other female writers at the time simply could not bring themselves to admit publicly that they were writing for a living. Wood tells the story of “Fanny Forrester,” another protégée of Fanny Fern’s brother (and probably the source of part of her pen name). “Forrester” began writing to support her birth family when her father could not manage on their New Hampshire farm. She told friends that by writing she was “coining...brains into gold.” Yet when she presented herself to N.P. Willis and the New York market, she invented a tale about “a friend ‘Bel’ [who] had urged her to pretend poverty to win sympathy...[in reality] she is a charming young thing who simply wants a little cash for a new hat!” (11). Clearly she felt that she

¹³My favorite example: “Book! Am I writing a book? No indeed! This is only a record of my heart’s life, written at random and carelessly thrown aside...” (Caroline Lee Hentz, *qtd in* Wood 7).

was more likely to win a wide audience by presenting a frivolous persona than that of a money-grubbing female.

In discerning the complex motives behind the writing of *Ruth Hall*, it is revealing to look at the surrounding circumstances, as described in Susan Geary's 1976 essay, "The Domestic Novel as Commercial Commodity." Fern's autobiographical story of a destitute mother who writes her way to considerable wealth was the result of a deal to produce a "400-page duodecimo volume" for Mason Brothers, who agreed "to use extraordinary exertions to promote the sale thereof, so as, if possible, to make it exceed the sale of any previous work, & will, moreover, use every means in their power to attain that end..." (qtd. in Geary 383-4). This meant, of course, taking on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Wide, Wide World*, neither of which *Ruth Hall* surpassed, though it did very well, eventually selling at least 55,000 copies. The advertising was "for its day, daring, imaginative, and elaborate" (Geary 385). Mason Brothers essentially organized a five-month media blitz of the major newspapers, where advertisements for Fanny Fern's first novel appeared almost daily, claiming that it was "a work of genius, that it would create a sensation, and that it would be a best seller" (Geary 386).

What does it tell us about Fanny Fern's motives for writing, when we remember that she knew she was writing a probable best-seller, at fifty percent higher royalties than her last one (*Fern Leaves*)? Certainly simple economic survival had been left behind. Real, solid wealth, fame, self-expression, and sweet revenge were all clearly at work. Warren claims that "it was Fern's anger at her powerlessness that impelled her to create the narrative of *Ruth Hall*" (Text 74). It was also anger at her relatives. We imagine Fanny Fern, describing them in cruel and graphic terms, knowing all the while that the manuscript she was working on was likely to be advertised more than any previous novel. Was not the pleasure of Fern's revenge even greater, knowing that the unprecedented advertisement of her book would ensure that most literate people in the United States would read that her (fictional) daughter longed to "cut grandma's head off" (192), that her

(fictional) brother the famous editor and poet was a “heartless dog” (159) who told the desperate “Floy” that she had “no talent” for writing (116)? And did Fern go perhaps beyond the caricature that her comic style required and “fabricate a work that would lend itself to sensational advertising” as Geary suggests? (383). Certainly the revenge motive was clear—and shocking—to readers of her day. Wrote one reviewer in the *New York Times*:

If Fanny Fern were a man,—a man who believed that the gratification of revenge were a proper occupation for one who has been abused, and that those who have injured us are fair game, Ruth Hall would be a natural and excusable book. But we confess that we cannot understand how a delicate, suffering woman can hunt down even her persecutors so remorselessly.

(qtd. in Warren *FF* 124–5)

Fame, too, or “ambition” cannot be ignored in this situation—another motive for writing which was unacceptable for women of mid-century. While we shall see in the next chapter that Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ 1877 heroine Avis is indeed ambitious, twenty years earlier this idea could not be expressed even by the outspoken Fern. Where Avis is an artist who paints the timeless myth of the sphynx, Ruth and Fern are journalists producing weekly “fern leaves” —the metaphor suggests the organic and ephemeral. Ruth calls ambition a “hollow thing” (182) and claims that her articles are “written for bread and butter, not fame” (136). To wish to draw attention to herself publicly would have been exceedingly unladylike, and she instructs her children never to tell anyone that their mother is “Floy.” Her publisher/friend John Walter explains with a “tremulous” voice that fame is nothing to her: “The laurel crown indeed is won, but the feet at which she fain would cast it have finished their toilsome earth-march” (193).

Yet in a book clearly depicting her own recent past and self, Fern has the pleasure of frequently describing Ruth (usually in the words of others, rather than the narrator) as “a genius,” speaking of her “justly-earned literary fame” (207), having her mother-in-law

call her book “one of the best and most interesting books [she] ever read,” (203) and allowing her children to say, “We are proud of her...if she is not proud of herself” (209). Ruth submits to an extensive phrenological examination, in one of the longest chapters of the book, and the reader is offered five pages of descriptions of Ruth’s “immense power of will...more than ordinary fortitude...” (168), her deep maternal instincts, and the “finer clay” (169) of which she is made (not to mention her capacity for “strong feelings of resentment”! [169]). Furthermore, the phrenologist asserts, Ruth is clearly “a forcible and spicy writer... In depicting character and describing scenes, you would be apt to display many of the characteristic which Dickens exhibits” (170). Reviewers at the time were quick to note this unfeminine self-praise. Warren explains that,

in an age when a man could say, “I celebrate myself” (Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* was published in the same year as *Ruth Hall*), a woman was expected to remain modest and selfless.... Because she applauded the accomplishments of a character who was based on herself and her own experiences, Fern was criticized for “self praise,” “self-exaltation,” and “self-love.” (FF 125)

Ruth Hall writes to support her children. *Ruth Hall* was written to support Fanny Fern’s children, but also for ambition, revenge, and self-expression. Fern wrote for almost twenty more years—her last column appeared two days after her death, in 1872—long after she had become a “happy woman” again by marrying the successful biographer James Parton. Doubtless she continued to enjoy the money¹⁴ that rolled in and the security and independence that came with it. But her weekly columns make clear that she also wrote in order to express her feelings and ideas, and to influence public opinion. While Fern did not see herself as an artist, a “creator of culture,” she certainly saw herself doing important cultural work. She wrote passionately about schools, preaching, women’s dress (she loved to dress up in her husband’s trousers and walk freely—and said

¹⁴ A prenuptial agreement stated all money from Fern’s writing would be legally hers and her children’s.

so in print—even though it was against the law), venereal disease, marriage, books (she recommended *Leaves of Grass* when it was not respectable to do so), women’s suffrage, slums—in short, many of the public issues of the day.

Fern’s own career exemplified what she wanted for all middle-class women, so far as possible: independence. Financial independence was most important, but intellectual and emotional autonomy, the strength of mind to express opinions and feelings, was also an important theme of her writing. Fern was painfully aware of the plight of the housebound woman who spends all day with the children, who “have, literally, *no* variety in their lives” (344). She knew that it was only too easy to be both bored and boring, under such circumstances. She felt that these women were almost inevitably inferior mothers, full of repressed anger and unable to offer their children the intellectual guidance they would require as they grew older. To these women she recommended writing as a “safe outlet for thoughts and feelings”:

Write! Rescue a part of each week at least for reading, and putting down on paper, for your own private benefit, your thoughts and feelings.... to keep off inanition.... Fight it! oppose it, for your own sakes and your children’s! Do not be *mentally* annihilated by it. (342)

Ruth Hall claimed that “no happy woman every writes”; Fanny Fern suggested that writing would make women happier.¹⁵ She argued that women should read and write; that they should both have and express opinions. Fern publicly fought the notion that women should be totally selfless, simply giving to others all day long. Instead, she wrote that “women, as well as men, should have a right to their own lives.” She even went on in the same column of March 1870 to quote women an old rhyme:

“Look out for thyself,
And take care of thyself,

¹⁵In what may be a reference to Hawthorne’s famous remark, she also said, “What? you inquire, would you encourage, in the present over-crowded state of the literary market, any more women scribblers? Stop a bit. It does not follow that she should wish or seek to give to the world what she has written” (342).

For nobody cares for thee.” (367)

She urged them to take time for the “small pleasures” they needed in order to get through the day: a nap, a book, a walk.

I only know it should go hard but I would try to catch a sunbeam now and then, if it were only that the children might not be demoralized by growing up to look at me in the light of a dray-horse; if it were only that my boys need not expect *their* wives to close their eyes and ears to the beauty and harmony which God had scattered so lavishly about them. (363)

Fern tells the martyred housewife and mother, “nobody will thank you for turning yourself into a machine... Laugh more and darn less; they will like you twice as well. If there is more work than you can consistently do, *don't do it*” (363).

Ruth Hall learns this sort of psychic independence throughout the course of the novel, at the same time that she is learning to be financially independent. Ruth begins as a self-effacing wife who lives for her husband and children. When her parents-in-law treat her badly, meddling in household affairs and criticizing every move she makes, Ruth says nothing, only sighs and hopes that Harry will notice and act. “But was Harry blind and deaf?... Did not his soul bend the silent knee of homage to that youthful self-control that could repress its own warm emotions, and stifle its own sorrows, lest *he* should know a heart-pang?” (23). Ruth masters early on the “self-conquest” of the sentimental heroine. Throughout her trials, first in marriage, then in widowhood, she remains silent. Others consistently speak for her, or about her, or to her.

Eventually, however, as Ruth is thrown upon her own resources and realizes that quite literally no one will help her, she is forced to assert her will, if she wishes to survive to support her children. The final push into autonomy comes when her brother, who has helped other women succeed, rejects her desperate pleas in a heartless letter. She determines to succeed without his help, and begins by *talking back*. “Ruth leaped to her feet.... ‘I *can* do it, I *feel* it, I *will* do it’” (116). The double repetition of the first person

singular, the string of verbs leading from assertion, through emotion, to action—Ruth’s syntax makes it clear that she has begun to construct herself as the subject of her own life, rather than merely the object of others’ rejection, scorn, or pity. She begins to voice her opinions, both in speech and in writing. Indeed, as Susan K. Harris notes,

The question of voice is at the heart of this novel... the work is structured to show, first, how Ruth is defined by the voices of her culture; then, to suggest what kind of voice she might have when she finally begins speaking and writing for herself. (114)

From this point on, Ruth becomes an irresistible force. She knocks on doors, writes late into the night, learns to negotiate for higher pay by playing one editor off another. “This bumping round the world has at least sharpened my wits!” (36) she tells herself as she considers a contract. While Ruth remains unfailingly “ladylike,” she also becomes far more assertive and sure of herself. These two aspects of Ruth’s character, her early persona as sentimental heroine and her later development into an independent woman, are reflected in the odd discursive mix of the novel: euphemistic, sentimental language, concentrated mostly in the first half of the novel, gradually gives way to biting, witty vignettes more reminiscent of Fern’s popular columns as the novel progresses. While Fred Pattee apparently only noticed the former, calling Fern the “most tearful and convulsively ‘female’ moralizer” (qtd. in Walker 2) of his “Feminine Fifties,” Hawthorne appears to have been struck by the latter, when he declared approvingly that Fern “writes as if the devil was in her.... [throwing] off the restraints of decency” (qtd in Smith xxxv). Wood sees the two discourses as an unconscious way of fighting the sentimental subculture, a representation of Fern’s own “two selves...two voices, one strident and aggressive, the other conventional and sentimental” (18). Warren, however, suggests that Fern deliberately used the early sentimental passages to reflect the passive femininity of the younger Ruth, and the bolder discourse to depict a Ruth who has gained autonomy. “The earlier prose reflects the young heroine’s state of mind—innocent and

trusting in her idyllic bower—whereas the later writing conforms to her disillusionment and realistic determination to succeed on her own” (Introduction xxvii). Harris combines these approaches, arguing that Fern deliberately evokes the sentimental discourse in order to undercut it: “Fern used sentimental imagery and language patterning as means, first, of disguising her goal to project a woman who grows into self-definition and verbal power and, second, of bringing the worldview implicit in the sentimental mode into doubt” (112). While we cannot, of course, know whether Fern was conscious that she was writing in two different discourses in *Ruth Hall*, it is a familiar nineteenth-century phenomenon. One thinks of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ *The Story of Avis*, which blends sentimental and feminist discourse as we shall see in the next chapter, and of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which combines the sentimental novel with the slave narrative.

The comparison to Jacobs is more than coincidental. As Warren notes in her biography, Fern clearly knew Jacobs well. Jacob’s daughter stayed at Fern’s house for nearly two years, as a companion to Fern’s daughter, and evidence suggests that Jacobs had confided her story to Fern many years before it was published. Perhaps more important, both Fern and Jacobs were mothers fighting to retain rights over their children, Jacobs from her “owner” and Fern from her father-in-law. Further, Jacobs was working as a nursemaid to Fern’s brother, N. P. Willis, when she wrote her now-famous narrative. Like Fern, she wrote at night, while a child slept nearby. And just as Fern’s writing was rejected by her brother, whom Laura Berlant argues was “a central figure in the sentimentalization of national culture” (446) through his editorship of the *Home Journal*, Jacobs hid her narrative from the same man—her employer, whom she suspected of being pro-slavery. These parallels are fascinating, not least because Elizabeth Cady Stanton called Fern’s novel “a slave-narrative” (Berlant 447), and because, as Warren notes, both women were fighting for freedom to determine what should happen to their bodies and their children (*FF* 303).

However, it is perhaps even more important to note the difference between these two women—the difference that race made. Warren reminds us that while Fern was struggling for independence, Jacobs was fighting for a far more basic right: freedom itself (303). And Berlant can only see Stanton’s remark as (unintended) irony.¹⁶ The endings of the two novels make clear the chasm between the middle-class white woman and the fugitive slave. Both end with the presentation of a document: Jacob’s protagonist gazes at her own bill of sale, while Ruth Hall is the proud owner of a \$10,000 bank note.

Comments Berlant:

Both women have struggled to procure these papers, but while the one denotes the minimal unit of freedom experienced by an American citizen, the other denotes a successful negotiation of the national-capitalist public sphere, a profitable commodification of female pain and heroism in an emerging industry of female cultural workers. (448)

Though Fern was a crusader for the rights of working women and presented positive depictions of Irish and Black servants in *Ruth Hall*, where are her columns about the fugitive slave law, or slavery itself? Of all the public issues of the day, this was perhaps most compelling—yet she seems to have written nothing on the topic. Her close acquaintance with Jacobs and the similarities between them makes this absence even more glaring.

Both novels deploy the sentimental discourse of the day, but in very different ways: Jacobs must use the sentimental to try to achieve “respectability” and the sympathy of Northern White women—like Fern. Fern, standing firmly on White, middle-class ground, is free, at least to a certain extent, to satirize and undercut it. The submissive, sentimental heroine disappears, and by the end of the novel Ruth is fully equipped to stand up to anyone who comes between herself and her children. When she finally has enough

¹⁶Stanton was, to say the least, insensitive to the concerns of Black women. Josephine Donovan’s *Feminist Theory* suggests that Stanton “engaged in racist rhetoric [and]...effectively abandoned the black woman” (23).

money to retrieve Katy from the in-laws, she strides in triumphantly, declaring that her child shall never again cross their threshold. Her father-in-law taunts her: “The law says if the mother can’t support her children, the grand-parents shall do it.” But Ruth now has the money and the confidence to reply, “The mother *can*—the mother *will*. I have already earned enough for their support” (185).

This passage makes clear that emotional and intellectual independence go hand in hand with the economic independence for women which Fern made the central theme of her life’s work. This theme is manifested in *Ruth Hall* in the rags-to-riches, American Dream, trajectory of the novel, which reviewers of the time failed to notice, according to Warren.¹⁷ Whereas the male story of self-reliance and hard work was well known, when it was told of a woman it became both invisible and disquieting. Ruth was criticized with epithets like “unwomanly,” and “vulgar” for behavior that would have been praised in a man. As Fern wrote years later, “Isn’t it the funniest thing in life, that a woman can’t be vital and energetic, without being thought masculine?” (372). Ruth used her vital energy to go from “rags to riches,” and it was not seen as becoming to a lady. As Warren notes, “in *Ruth Hall* Fern’s female protagonist demonstrates all of the qualities of the male individualists as she climbs the ladder of success to fulfill the American Dream,” but the novel was only read as the unladylike boasting of a particular woman (Warren *FF* 139). Throughout her life, Fern insisted that women have what it takes to be able to depend on themselves, and themselves alone, for their “daily bread.” She did not mince words when it came to this subject:

This “vine and oak” style of talk is getting monotonous. There is more “oak” to the women of to-day than there was to those of the past. Else how could the great army of drunken, incompetent, unpractical, idle husbands be supported as they are by wives, who can’t stop to be “gentle

¹⁷ Elizabeth Cady Stanton was the only reviewer who “recognized and praised the novel as a female success story” (*FF* 140).

silent rivulets,” but have to “keep in the public eye” as business women?

(375)

Yet the lesson of *Ruth Hall* and its Horatio Alger-style narrative is not, it seems to me, as Warren argues, “American individualism...[applied] to women” (“Canon Fodder” 14). While Ruth is financially independent of men, she takes her children with her on the climb up the ladder of success. Every triumph is immediately generalized to include her daughters. On her first night in their posh hotel room after leaving the dingy rooming house forever, Ruth lies awake thinking of her newly-gained power, but it is not power to dominate; rather it is “power to hedge [her children] in with comforts, to surround them with pleasures, to make up for every tear of sorrow they had shed” (197). The lesson of the comic subplot rings true: the successful entrepreneur is not Mr. Skiddy, who leaves home for the gold fields, but Mrs. Skiddy, who stays home with the children.

Furthermore, Ruth is happy to depend, when possible, on the good will of those around her. In another move to make her work domestic, Ruth is happy to think of her publisher, John Walter, as a “real, warm-hearted, brotherly brother, such as she had never known” (144). He essentially becomes a member of the family, accompanying her to retrieve Katy, taking her to her husband’s grave, helping with the move to New York. While this relationship with her publisher sounds too good to be true, like many of the incredible details in this narrative it is based firmly in fact. Robert Bonner, editor of the *New York Ledger* and prototype of John Walter, was not only a brilliant promoter (see Kelley 3-6) who saw Fern’s potential financial worth and offered much better pay if she would write for him exclusively, but also a man known for his “fairness to and cordial treatment of his writers, all of whom came to regard him not only as a publisher but as a warm friend” (Warren *FF* 148).

Bonner is a good example of the phenomenon described by Susan Coultrap-McQuin, the “Gentleman Publisher,” men with high moral standards and unwritten agreements with each other not to steal each other’s authors, not to put money first, and

to take good care of “their” writers. “Their emphasis on personal relationships, non-commercial aims, and moral guardianship... made it possible for women to work comfortably in a business that some claimed was far outside their sphere” (28). In Ruth’s relationship to John Walter, Fern represents quite accurately the personalized dealings of a Gentleman Publisher with one of his authors. This personal, and rather paternalistic, type of relationship was not limited to women writers. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s publisher, William Ticknor, “accompanied him on trips, picked out his suits, ordered cigars, paid bills, got postage stamps, and looked for a ‘good dog’” (37). Bonner, while more flamboyant than most of the other Gentleman Publishers, neither smoked, drank, swore, nor gambled (70), and insisted that he would print nothing that “the most pious old lady in a Presbyterian church” would object to (Kelley 4).¹⁸ He treated his authors with kid gloves, frequently sending them “presents” of money and asking nothing in return. Indeed, he closely resembled John Walter, who so chivalrously defends Ruth Hall from slander and gossip.

Finally, to describe the novel as “rags-to-riches” is somewhat deceptive. In reality, it is “riches-to-rags-to-riches.” Ruth’s ascent is decidedly not from lower class to higher. Rather, it is a regaining of her status based on her own efforts rather than reliance on male largesse. It is important to note that Fern’s readers, by and large, were middle-class women like Ruth Hall at the beginning (and end) of the novel. Just as Fern’s journalism presents a disturbing silence on the subject of abolition, so her fiction evokes a bootstrap plot which is no help to the poorer classes. Indeed, historically the American myth of hard work rewarded has tended to keep the poor in poverty, since it clearly also implied its own opposite: the poor must be lazy.¹⁹ Thus the novel does not offer hope for lower-class, uneducated working women to eventually become independently wealthy and own their

¹⁸This “pious old lady” was apparently rather broad-minded, given the remarks in Fern’s columns about prostitution, venereal disease, etc.

¹⁹For a discussion of the ways in which the Horatio Alger metanarrative has had a negative effective on the poor, see *Forgotten Americans* by John E. Schwarz and Thomas J. Volgy (New York: Norton, 1992), especially chapter one.

own homes. Instead it is a cautionary tale for middle-class women who are blissfully ignorant of their precarious situation. These women need to achieve financial and psychological independence for their own sake and the sake of their children.

CHAPTER TWO

“A DIVISION OF LABOR”: ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS’ *THE STORY OF AVIS* (1877)

Like *Ruth Hall*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ 1877 *The Story of Avis* is usually read, at least recently, as a novel in which two genres are at work.²⁰ Carol Farley Kessler argues, in her introduction to the 1995 edition, that “Phelps forged a new plot.... She blended elements of two novels types: the woman’s (or sentimental) novel, and...the *künstlerroman*” (xvi). Jack H. Wilson notes a similar pattern, in his essay on the “competing narratives” in the book: “It is the narrative of the woman artist... worn down by the duties of marriage and motherhood... The second narrative is a bildungsroman that gradually displaces the *künstlerrroman*...” (60–1). Certainly, a reader who picks up this book expecting a straightforward feminist novel about how nineteenth-century ideologies concerning “womanhood,” marriage, and mothering silenced the voices of creative women, will be surprised to find that the feminist novel, which is certainly there, lies in a deep matrix of text proclaiming the sacredness of romantic love.²¹ While these two narrative strands conflict at many levels, mirroring *Avis*’ own inner conflict, a careful reading reveals that both are also efforts to fight the same enemy—“True Womanhood,” with its silent, self-effaced subjectivity—and to define and create a New Woman with an

²⁰While this author is sometimes referred to as Phelps Ward, since she was married several years after she wrote this novel, I will refer to her as Phelps.

²¹It is also interesting to see the contrasting narratives in *Avis* as a reflection of what Nina Baym calls the “two divergent schools of woman’s fiction: the prudent, cautious, measured writing of the northerners... with its correlative sense of limiting circumstances, its emphasis on self-control, calculation, and safety; and the open-ended, flamboyant, colorful work of southern writers... who emphasized experiment, risk, and adventure” (279).

individualized selfhood who is free to enjoy the intimacy of marriage and motherhood as well as to pursue creative ambitions in the public arena.

The central conflict of the novel, which marks out the two narrative strands, is crystal clear. Avis is torn between love and art; she desires both the Ivory Tower and the Sacred Fount. A “hero-artist” might, as Maurice Beebe suggests, try to find a balance between the two. But Avis knows that this is not a possibility for her. “Success—for a woman—means absolute surrender.... Either she paints a picture, or loves a man, there is no division of labor possible in her economy” (69). For a respectable woman like Avis, to drink at the Sacred Fount of Love must necessarily entail marriage and maternity. And this brings with it a loss of self that is incompatible with the production of art. Avis believes that if she does marry, then she must submerge her identity into her husband’s. “I have my work, and I have my life. I was not made to yield these to any man. I was not made to absorb them in his work and his life. And I should do it—if I married him” (107). She should have no separate interests, but simply support his activities, keep his house, and bear his children. She can have this, or she can have the Ivory Tower, which implies celibacy. The woman artist cannot balance “art” and “life”—she is forced to choose between them. This is the ideology of True Womanhood²², and Phelps fights it in both strands of her novel.

This internal conflict, between “artist” and “woman,” is highlighted in Avis’ first encounter with Philip Ostrander, which takes place in Paris before the opening scene of the book and is recounted as flashback. She has been wandering in the “tropical Catholic atmosphere” of the Madeleine, still reeling from her painting master’s proclamation that he is finished with her, that she is ready to make her own reputation in the world. She has been praying silently, and rises from her feet with a “halo” about her. In the twilight, just as she is about to leave, her eyes meet those of a man who is obviously a “fellow-

²²Any reference to “True Womanhood” in nineteenth-century America naturally owes a debt to Barbara Welter, who makes clear the four parts of this ideology: “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (152). However, Phelps herself also uses this terminology.

countryman.” Her first thought is, “There is a remarkable face!” Philip Ostrander appears to her gaze as an aesthetic object, an “amber intaglio.” The narrator describes him at some length, and makes clear that Avis sees him with “an artist’s glance,” that she likes “the shape of his head.” However, he too has a gaze. His “large iridescent pupil” is “concentrated upon her...like a burning glass” (38). Something is communicated between them by their “outleaping eye[s]” and suddenly Avis becomes the one who is looked at. Now it is she who is described—her gloved hand and draped face, her “little Parisian hat”—and she becomes aware of her own “*to-be-looked-at-ness*”:²³ “she felt a great tidal wave of color surge across her face. If the eye of that amber god across the Madeleine had caught an artist, it had held a woman” (39). The two subjectivities which Avis wishes to inhabit, artist and woman, are already shown in opposition. As an artist, Avis looks; as a woman, she is looked at. And, more important, she knows it, and feels “a scorching, maidenly self-scorn” and hurries away.

This portrayal of Avis as beautiful object, including many comparisons to her statue of the Venus de Milo, recurs frequently throughout the book, especially during her courtship with Philip. Avis may be an artist but, the narrator seems at pains to remind us, she is every inch a woman, and that means beauty. In fact, a reminder that the artist is indeed a “real woman” (i.e., that she cares to be attractive to men) is prominent in the opening scene of the book, where Avis, attending the local Poetry Club for the first time on her return from six years in Europe, seats herself quite deliberately in front of some “flaming” carmine draperies. She is drawn to these curtains, we are told, because she has a “fierce kinship” for the color, and because she is extremely sensitive to color itself—“color divorced from form, crude and clear, was to her what the musical notation is to the composer...” (7). She sits near these drapes, the narrator makes clear, because she is “an

²³This term comes from page eleven of Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

artist.” Then suddenly, in a separate paragraph of its own, we have the following “afterthought”: “Besides, she knew perfectly well that the curtain became her” (7). This need to affirm Avis’ essential “womanliness”—that she is beautiful²⁴, and cares to attract men’s eyes—yet also to insist on her “artistic nature,” echoes the two narratives and Avis’ own inner conflict: she “must” be an artist, yet she is also a “woman” deep down inside. She needs her work, but she also craves intimacy—yet the two seem impossible to unite in one person.

The feminist novel or *Künstlerroman* is concerned with both the ideological and the practical obstacles to creative production and public expression by women. Phelps represents her protagonist as prevented from fully developing her artistic gift—and thus her artistic “self”—by the practical obstacles involved in the expectations and duties which come with being a wife, housekeeper, and mother, and by the ideologies surrounding the appropriate societal role of women, which she called “the True Woman.” While it is not simply concerned with the problems created by mothering, it includes mothering as an important part of women’s experience.

By “women,” Phelps generally means “ladies,” educated middle-class white women who might reasonably aspire to doing work that was more broadly meaningful than the drudgery of housework. Phelps is clearly interested in women like herself (and her mother) whom she saw as having creative potential and ambitions which were being stifled by ideas about “women’s work,” including childrearing. In this novel, the story of a woman’s struggle to have a profession as well as a marriage is generalized by the representation of two other women besides Avis whose ambitions to do creative work outside the home have been denied. The clear implication is that while Avis may be unlike other women in some respects (having artistic “genius,” planning not to marry), in

²⁴While Phelps publicly denounced “True Womanhood,” especially the dependency and limitations it implied, she still clearly valued what she calls “womanliness,” including beauty, selfless caring, and “fineness.” For example, Avis’ restoration of the sphinx includes making her “young and beautiful, like any other woman” and replacing the “crude Nubian features” (143).

actuality many women felt that they had to choose between intimacy—love, marriage, and children—and creative, professional work.

Avis' mother, like Phelps' mother, died when her daughter was quite young.²⁵ And, like Phelps' mother, she had artistic ambitions which were cut off by marriage.²⁶ Avis' mother had wanted to be an actress. However, "I married your papa: that is why I never acted in the theatre," she tells her young daughter. But Avis is insistent. "Did you never want to run away after you had married papa? Did you never care about the theatre again?" Avis' mother cannot speak an answer, but only weeps, "a gush of incoherent words and scalding tears" (24). Avis' father confirms, when Avis asks him about it years later, that certainly his wife had real talent: "She had, beyond doubt, the histrionic gift. Under proper conditions she might have become famous." But, protests Avis, "Do you not suppose... that in all those years, shut up in this quiet house, she ever knew a restless longing in that—in those—in such directions?" The professor's answer is, apparently, irrefutable: "'Your mother was my wife,' he said superbly; 'and my wife loved me'" (25).

To her mother on her deathbed, Avis brings a drawing of a bird she has made for her. Then she looks out the window, where the sun is about to rise. She sees the rays of the approaching sun and cries, "'O mamma! the wing!—see the wing the sun has made upon the sky!'" Then her mother dies, with a loud cry, and a reference to a psalm: "'Under the shadow of His wing shalt *thou* abide'" (26). Avis and her mother both have been clearly identified with birds in the preceding pages; now Avis' art, natural beauty,

²⁵Phelps was eight when her mother died; Avis appears to be about that age or younger. The older Phelps was a successful writer, and her daughter believed that she died from trying to keep house, raise children, and write books at the same time. "Her last book and her last baby came together, and killed her.... [She was] torn by the civil war of the dual nature which can be given to women.... It was impossible for her daughter to forget that a woman of intellectual power could be the most successful of mothers" (*Chapters from a Life* 12).

²⁶While there are parallels between Avis and the younger Phelps, the novel is sometimes seen as "a full portrayal of her mother's life" (Buhle and Howe 361).

and Christ himself are drawn into the bird symbol, and Avis' maternal heritage and her sacred calling to be an artist come together on her mother's deathbed.²⁷

Avis' Aunt Chloe, too, had to give up her dreams of having a profession. Although she is the paragon housekeeper, devoted to caring for her brother and making perfect puddings, "a part which is almost as *de rigueur* in the woman's artist novel as that of the foil" (Huf 55), nevertheless in an unguarded moment she admits to Avis that she, too, once had ambitions: "If I could begin life over, and choose for my own selfish pleasure, . . . I would like to give myself to the culture and study of plants. I should be—a florist, perhaps, my dear, or a botanist" (114). But for Aunt Chloe this is simply "thinking strange thoughts, and wishing impossible things' . . . a beautiful heresy" (114–5).

Phelps wrote an essay proclaiming this heresy in 1871, entitled "The True Woman." In it, she calls the ideal which has restricted Avis, Avis' mother, Aunt Chloe and all the women like them an "enormous dummy." She describes the self-effacing, "empty," and silent subjectivity which men had prepared for women as "the gauntest scarecrow ever posted on the rich fields of Truth to frighten timid birds away" (269). This ideology has so silenced women that "nobody knows as yet what the womanly character is." Phelps declares that "woman's nature" has "hitherto communicated with us only by signs. She has had no speech or language" (270).

This silence is represented in Phelps' novel by the sphinx, which symbolizes "the mystery of womanhood" because it is female, silent, enigmatic—and buried up to its chin

²⁷This passage, with its profusion of interlocking images, is typical of Phelps, whose use of images and symbols has been criticized for being convoluted, and at times contradictory. Kessler "forgives" her stylistic gaucheries by reminding the 20th-century reader that "a novel that challenges cultural norms could hardly have been written easily or smoothly" (xxiii). However, it is also interesting to note that one of the most influential books in Phelps' wide reading was Butler's *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and the Course of Nature*, which uses analogy to make theological arguments (Smith xxiv). The influence of this book is clearest in *The Gates Ajar*, with its arguments about heaven based on analogies from earthly experience. However, Phelps' heavy use of images and symbols in *The Story of Avis* may be another form of "arguing" from analogy.

in sand.²⁸ The “great sphinx restored” appears in Avis’ most important artistic vision, before she has fallen in love. In the rather wild panorama which passes through her receptive imagination, the sphinx is linked to sisterhood:

Instantly the room seemed to become full of women.... They swept before her in a file, in procession, in groups. They blushed at altars; they knelt in convents; they leered in the streets; they sang to their babes; they stooped and stitched in black attics; they trembled beneath summer moons; they starved in cellars; they fell by the blow of a man’s hand.... (83)

As these fade away, the sphinx appears, commanding Avis, “Speak for me.” Avis’ artistic gift requires her to abandon the submissive silence of True Womanhood to become a speaking subject on behalf of her sisters who cannot yet speak. Avis begins the next day to paint the greatest canvas of her career, her painting of the sphinx. However, she marries before the sphinx is completely finished, and she never does actually perfect it.

The *Künstlerroman* now becomes a cautionary tale. Just before her wedding, while Philip is absent for a the day, Avis returns to her studio and looks in the eyes of her sphinx. Suddenly she feels compelled to “tear off” her engagement ring, hug the canvas, and solemnly whisper, “I will be true” (120). But when Philip returns, she entreats him gently to put the ring back on, “If you think I deserve it” (120). Avis dares to dream that she might have both intimacy and art, a satisfying family life and a professional, public life. In marrying Philip, she is making a grand experiment. In order for this experiment to work, however, Avis must find a man who is willing to break the mold with her, a man who can reimagine marriage, housekeeping, and childcare in such a way that it need not be a profession for the woman. Avis believes that she has found such a man in Philip Ostrander.

²⁸Andreas Huyssen declares that the sphinx is “that icon which perhaps more than any other in the nineteenth century...stood for the feminine threat to civilization” (in “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other.” *Studies in Entertainment*. Ed. Tania Modleski. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP: 1986. 196.) Clearly Avis’ vision is radical indeed.

The alert reader knows from the beginning that Ostrander will tame and imprison Avis, not free her. Early images of birds drawn to the lighthouse in the storm, only to be dashed against the rocks, have warned of Avis' fate: "Miles away through the night, some homeless bird took wing for the burning bosom of the reflector, and straight, straight—led as unerringly as instinct leads, as tenderly as love constrains...—came swaying, was tossed, was torn, and fell" (13). Not many pages later, Avis struggles to rescue a bird in that same storm, and Ostrander saves her when she slips on the rocks. But the bird which she has brought back from the foot of the lighthouse "upon his heart [lies] dead" (49) when they finally reach shelter. The reader has had ample foreshadowing.

But Avis must learn gradually that she has married a man with a "weak temperament." While before their marriage he had heroically proclaimed, "'I did not ask you to be my housekeeper!'" (110), vowing instead that "'I will take from you only what I can yield to you,—the love of a life. I do not want your work, or your individuality. I refuse to accept any such sacrifice from the woman I love.... A man ought to be above it. Let me be that man'" (107), it does not take many weeks before it is clear that her art will take a back seat to his teaching career. In the matter of choosing a residence, for example, priority goes to being near the campus, even though the house has little room for a studio. And Avis is left to cope with clogged drains, leaking pantries, and butter shortages, while Philip feels free to bring home dinner guests from the university.

Phelps was well-known as a crusader against marriage²⁹ and its expectations that women give up everything in order to simply support their husbands' interests. Kessler notes that Phelps' novels just preceding *Avis* treat marriage in innovative, unconventional ways which suggest that "marriage for Phelps was never a proper or sufficient goal" (xvii). Indeed, *The Story of Avis* is clearly a condemnation of current marriage practice.

However, for most women, then as now, marriage also included children, and Phelps also

²⁹Indeed, when she later married H. D. Ward, they were married "quietly... 'for terror of the newspapers,' ... which rightly discerned the contradiction between Miss Phelps' public misogynous stance and her personal actions" (Stansell 254).

explores some of the ways in which childrearing inhibits women from doing professional or creative work, where it does not inhibit fathers, generally, in the same way. The feminist narrative critiques some of the cultural assumptions surrounding motherhood just as it does those concerning marriage.

Within about a year of the wedding, Avis is feeling “a lowly kinship” with a “brooding, patient” robin sitting on a nest outside her window. A baby results forthwith, but Avis again retains her faith that she can indeed be true to her artistic vision despite this next impediment. Though at first she feels “dumb terror,” she soon reasons that “to be sure the baby was a fact; but he was matched by another,—the nurse” (151). Indeed, Avis dares to hope that “the baby would teach her new words to tell the world” (151). The baby, however, immediately “double[s] up his seriously inartistic fist, and put[s] her eye out” (151). This hint is not lost on the perceptive reader, who cannot be surprised when mothering only makes matters worse for Avis the artist.

Phelps begins by tackling that sacred notion, “maternal instinct.” To the chagrin of everyone involved, not least her own, Avis finds that baby Van Dyke is “*a great deal of trouble!*” (152). He seems to cry all day and all night, and despite the nurse Avis spends many nights walking the floor with him. Finally one morning she says to Philip, “I wish somebody would take it out of my sight and hearing for a while.” Naturally, Philip is shocked. “Why, Avis... don’t you feel any maternal affection for the little thing?” ‘No,’ cried every quivering nerve in the honest young mother, ‘not a bit!’” (150). The narrator goes on to explain that while Avis lacks “maternal passion,” she does have “maternal devotion.” Avis will take care of the baby dutifully enough, but she will have to learn to love him, “like anybody else” (150). Not surprisingly, there is neither time nor energy for art.

Phelps next takes note of the double standard in regard to child-rearing responsibilities. While Avis is expected to stay up at night with the baby, keep house, and paint in her spare time, Philip’s professional life must be sheltered from the baby’s noise

and disruption. He has discovered “the full value and final cause of the ‘spare room.’—an institution not created, as we have crudely supposed, for a chance guest, but for the relief of the father whose morning duties clearly require a full night’s rest” (151). Inevitably, they have their first quarrel, when Avis has been up most of the night with the baby and Philip is angry because the cracked wheat is soggy and the coffee cold.³⁰ Avis tries to lighten things up with “a jest. ‘But you remember you didn’t marry me to be your housekeeper, Philip!’” He is not amused and only murmurs, with “closed teeth,—‘Yes, I remember. I don’t know what we were either of us thinking of!’” (153). Warily, Avis realizes that she will have to put off her art a little longer. She tells herself that “life waits; and art is long”(155), but the artist within her is drowning:

Sometimes, sitting burdened with the child upon her arms, she looked out and off upon the summer sky with a strangling desolation like that of the forgotten diver, who sees the clouds flit, from the bottom of the sea. (155)

Soon another child—a girl, this time—is born, and the difficulties only increase. It is not really possible to separate out mothering from housekeeping and wifely duties in this book. Any one of these things, taken alone, might not have been enough to keep Avis from her art. Yet they cannot be taken alone. Obviously, caring for children involves much housework as well. And from the first, her love for Philip has been mingled with a “maternal yearning” and pity for him because of his civil war wound. This recedes in courtship and early marriage, but Philip’s weak lungs, combined with his even weaker character, mean that it is not long before her feelings for him are almost wholly maternal. Repeatedly the narrator says that she speaks to him as she would a petulant child, that she comforts him as she does her son, that indeed, “her heart assumed a new burden, as if a third child had been born unto her” (177–8).

³⁰Some contemporary reviewers felt quite sorry for Philip with his soggy cereal. For an interesting summary of negative contemporary reaction, see Huf 37–39. For more positive reviews, see the 1995 reprint of *Avis*, 274–278.

However, while Philip is travelling in Europe, recovering from the humiliation of losing his post at the college, Avis has a year alone at home with the children. They need money, and Avis decides to try to paint again, though by now she has “barren brain, and broken heart, and stiffened fingers” (199). Phelps depicts at some length what happens to Avis, despite nurse and hired “girl,” when she ascends to the “room of her own.” Though the door has a lock, the toddler Van finds ways of getting in (such as begging to say his prayers), sitting on her palette, smashing his nose in the door and requiring comfort, and generally being a pest. It is impossible to paint and mother at the same time. “When the outcry is over, and the sobbing has ceased, and the tears are kissed away, and the solid little sinner lies soothed upon the cramped and forgiving arm, where is the strength and glory of the vision?” (202).

The morning creeps by, as she tries to ignore Van and complete a sketch, but finally “like a scythe upon the artist’s nerves, that sound which all the woman in her shrinks to hear,—the cry of a hurt baby” (203) brings her out into the hallway, where she finds Van asleep, and the nurse places her crying baby girl in her arms. This is how her former art teacher, who had seen her talent early, predicted her success, sent her to Florence with references, and pronounced her wedding “the burial of the most promising artist in New England” (126–7), finds her: “pinioned, with both children, patient and worn, with the bright colors of her paints around her, and the pictures, with their mute faces to the wall” (204). He is now acting as her agent, and has come to tell her of the wild success in New York of “her sphinx,” which sold on its “second day out,” and which the gallery owner wishes to photograph and sell in reproduction. He says she must give up “sketches” and portraits and art lessons and paint more pictures from her imagination, like the sphinx. ““You—you!—life is before you now,”” he tells her (205).

But in reality life is already behind her. “It was before my marriage that I painted the sphinx. Don’t be too much disappointed in me if there are never any more pictures.... We all have our lives to bear” (205–6). Only now does the reader learn that Avis actually

finished off the sphinx in a hurry in order to pay the bill for Philip's school debts (another character flaw—he should not have married with unpaid debts). She had painted an Arab child in the foreground, “with a finger on his lips, swearing her to silence” (205).

Although Avis knew that the painting was not ready, she had to compromise her art in order to support Philip. Avis will not now speak for the sphinx; instead, she has “struck the great sphinx dumb with the uplifted finger of a child” (205).

Phelps represents the practice of mothering as enmeshed in both the drudgery of housekeeping and the “sacred” work of married love—intimacy. “Woman’s work” involves a great deal of tedious, mind-numbing labor, but it also calls for creativity and imagination. Phelps shows Avis decorating their house with her impeccable taste, painting the china, picking the fabrics, creating an aesthetically pleasing home. Nevertheless, exalting and important as this work may at times be, it is not enough for women precisely because it is private. Phelps’ narrative is less concerned with creativity *as such*, and more concerned with *where the work is accomplished*. Her essay on “The True Woman” makes clear that she wants women to be allowed a larger stage, to be able to do work that will be seen by the public:

When women are admitted to their rightful share in the administration of government; when, from the ballot to the highest executive honors and uses, they shall be permitted fairly to represent, in their own characters, the interests of their sex; when every department of politics, art, literature, trade is thrown open, absolutely, without reservation, to the exercises of their energies...when marriage and motherhood no more complete a woman’s mission to the world than marriage and fatherhood complete a man’s...only then can we draw the veil from the brows of the TRUE WOMAN. Only then shall this sad Sphinx...unclose her marble lips and lift her weary head to take her well-earned blessing. (271-2)

Avis' artistic success is marked less by the beauty and power of her pictures than by having paintings praised by famous artists, shown in major exhibits, and purchased by museums and important collectors. Phelps knows that women are creative in the private sphere, but she does not value this work very much. Rather, she finds it a pitiful waste that a "great talent" like that of Avis should be squandered on painting china and coloring baby shoes. "She brought the whole force of her professional training to bear upon the shade of dye which might renew a baby's cloak" (199). For Phelps, this work is on a continuum, but there is a central break which occurs at the point where private creativity becomes public. A painting must be displayed publicly, or it is "mute."

Another important distinction for Phelps seems to be that between creative work which is performed in order to support oneself, and that which is simply the expression of "genius." When Avis' former teacher finds her "pinioned" by the children in the studio, she offers him a story to explain the difference in her work before and after marriage:

"Mr. Maynard, once a visitor came into Andrea del Sarto's studio. It was after his marriage. He was dabbling away at some little thing. He looked up and said, 'Once I worked for eternity: now I work for my kitchen.'"

"Confound the kitchen-work!" cried Mr. Maynard savagely. (204)

Avis apparently accepts the descent to "kitchen-work" as inevitable: it happened to Andrea del Sarto, after all; why not to her? But Mr. Maynard has nothing but contempt for the story. He wants better for her, as does Phelps. Whenever Avis paints because she needs money, she lowers herself, presumably because she is no longer free to simply follow her imagination. Creative work is diminished when it is done out of necessity. The artist must be free to follow his or her visions wherever they lead. The practice of mothering and the practice of painting conflict because an artist must be free, and a mother is hindered by the needs of her children, both emotional and financial.

This preference for art that is free and disdain for art produced for money may seem contradictory, since Phelps herself was financially independent because of the

success of her writing, and indeed the great quantity of nineteenth-century American novels by women was due, in part, to their need to support themselves. However, Phelps was probably experiencing the change in self-perception by women writers after the civil war. As Baym points out, in the 1870's literary women in the United States were just starting to think of their authorship as art (32). It seems clear that Phelps is beginning to see herself as a more serious literary artist, in her abundant (if awkward) use of imagery, in her George Eliot³¹-style narrator, and by the very fact of her subject matter in *Avis*. And for her, an "artist" was someone who was concerned with more than just putting food on the table, who had a vision and tried to represent it faithfully.

If we look closely at what it means to be an artist in this *Künstlerroman*, we note Phelps' ambiguities as she makes this transition from professional writer to "artist." In general, writing was considered a respectable activity for middle-class women, since it could be done in the home. It must be done, however, not out of a desire to express oneself or gratify a craving to "be creative," but out of religious conviction, even prophetic vision (Huf 53), or a need to provide for oneself and one's family, as in the case of Ruth Hall. When the notion of being "an artist" appeared on the horizon, with it came visions of the Romantic Poet, the lawless eccentric whose genius drove him to create.

Where Fanny Fern was scornful of such Wordsworthian visions, Phelps apparently found the notion seductive, as well as deeply disturbing to her identity as a "respectable" professional woman. This disturbance comes through in Phelps' use of scriptural imagery, especially allusions to Eve in Eden, to depict Avis' "call" to be an artist. By setting the scene in an apple tree in her father's garden, Phelps implies that her choice is not simply between two good alternatives, but between good and evil. One morning when she is sixteen, and supposedly making puddings with Aunt Chloe, Avis escapes to the orchard with *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Browning's long verse *Künstlerroman*. There, "coiled... in

³¹Phelps admired Mary Ann Evans a great deal, corresponded with her, and even seems to have meant *Avis* as a response to Dorothea's narrow possibilities in *Middlemarch* (Kessler xviii).

the apple-tree" Avis reads all day her "girl's gospel," seeking for "any full, rich nutriment" (31). But the narrator suggests that she is actually ready to consume anything, including forbidden fruit:

Poison or nectar, brimstone or manna, our lips slake at the nearest, be it what it may, in the crisis of that fine fever which comes but once in life.

Avis was not without capability of relishing a certain quality of poison, not too fully flavored, of prismatic tints, and in a lily's shape, like hyacinths.

(31)

Avis does not consume poison or brimstone, however; instead, the virginal moment brings Christ himself, unseen, to feed her sacred manna:

But it was silent as a convent in the apple-boughs; the growing day drew on a solemn veil of light; upon the sea the steps of unseen sacred feet were stirring—and so the manna fell. (31)

This same ambiguity is repeated just before the restless Avis has her major vision of suffering, silent womanhood and the sphinx. Avis the artist will do anything to achieve her vision and restore the "syncope of imagination" which torments her:

By any case—'by virtue or by vice, by friend or by fiend, by prayer or by wine'—the dumb artist courts the miracle of speech.

Angel or devil, who is it that troubleth the torpid waters? Equally the soul makes haste, lest another should step down before her. (78)

This time, instead of eating proverbial manna, Avis actually takes out a "slender bottle" and drinks orange flower liqueur, "an amber bead, sluggish and sweet"(79) from her own private Sacred Fount. Interestingly, the virginal imagery is repeated, this time with fully intended irony: "In the veins of the buds that girls wear at their bridals runs a fire of flavor deep enough for [women]. The wine of a flower has carried many a pretty parisian to an intrigue or a convent. Could it carry a Yankee girl to glory?" (80).

Has Avis yielded to a “devil,” a “fiend,” by drinking the “wine” as she does? Certainly the structure of the sentence implies so, parallel as the three words are. Emphatically, Avis does not pray for her vision—instead, it comes from a bottle. Yet it sustains her “God-given” gift and provides the impetus for the best painting of her life.

This ambiguity about Avis’ gift reminds modern readers of how entrenched were the ideas about what was truly appropriate for a woman, even in a deeply-committed feminist like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Nevertheless, had Phelps simply written a novel about a woman who is an artist, her protagonist might have succeeded, much as Sarah Orne Jewett’s does in *A Country Doctor*. However, Jewett’s protagonist remains unmarried and makes it clear that she does not claim to be “like other women”—that is, she gives up intimacy with a husband and children for ambition. She is not a model for “womanhood,” because not all women could be called on to forego marriage and motherhood. But Phelps’ protagonist “falls in love,” marries, has children, and dares to hope that she might be both a “woman” and an artist.

The conundrum of Avis’ life is that she believes that both her natures—“woman” and “artist”—were created by God. Avis cannot question the idea that God made her, and she knows full well *what* He made her: “God gave her the power to make a picture before he gave her the power to love a man” (69) she thinks to herself as she is refusing to marry Philip. Later, after she has realized that she loves him, she tells him that God “has set two natures in me, warring against each other. He has made me a law unto myself—*He made me so. How can I help that?... I am different. And God did it.*” (107)

Avis clings to the idea that God made her as she persists in believing that eventually things will come right. After the first baby is born, for example, she is struck with a “deep religious fervor.... She thanked God that her life’s purpose, for which she believed He had created her, would be more opulently fulfilled by this experience” (151). However, she eventually comes to wish “with all the wild, hot protest of her nature, that the spirit of this gift with which God had created her—in a mood of awful infinite irony, it

seemed—would return to Him who gave it... She wished she were like other women....” (206). In the end, her gift does go, but she refuses to give an inch in her belief that she was created by God an artist, that this fact, which does not fit into the True Womanhood ideology, nevertheless demands explanation. Her friend Coy, the blonde foil to dark Avis, is indeed as near as possible to being a True Woman. She claims to be blissfully happy in her marriage and motherhood: “‘It is Nature!’ she cried. ‘Explain it how you will.’ ‘But I,’ said Avis in a low voice, after an expressive pause,—I am nature, too. Explain me, Coy.’” (249).

Phelps’ argument here is a sort of syllogism: what God makes is natural; God has given some women an artistic gift; therefore, it is natural for some women to be artists. Since there is no room in the True Womanhood philosophy for the woman artist, it fails to explain Nature—i.e., the fact of real women. For the creators of the scarecrow called True Woman, Nature requires woman only to “find in the ‘sweet, safe corner...behind the heads of children’ scope for her activities and content in her adjustment to them.... The ‘true woman’ instinctively merges her life—social, political, commercial—in that of her husband” (269). But the existence of Avis proves that at least some women are also “naturally” creators of Culture.

Phelps sees a possibility for beginning to break down this wife/mother versus artist binary for middle-class women by suggesting that the practical obstacles could be addressed by husbands who truly love their wives enough to spend money on housekeepers and nurses, to respect their professional needs as much as their own. Marriage and childcare need not be a “profession”—“a division of labor”—should indeed be possible. However, this opportunity for middle-class women rests on the shoulders of other women, the servant “girls,” cooks, and nurses—Tillie Olsen’s “essential angels”—who will have to do the drudgery instead.

Running a household at this time was certainly a back-breaking operation. In Susan Strasser’s 1982 study *Never Done: A History of American Housework*, the

dimensions of that task are made clear. Many households had a neighboring farm girl living in to help, but it was only rarely that a wife could be free of housecleaning, cooking, and childcare. “Few households, Northern or Southern, had enough extra hands to permit the lady of the house to be an administrator or hostess alone” (33). For Avis actually to be as free to paint as Philip is to teach would require a major investment in servants, especially a capable, adult housekeeper. Clearly, these serving women would not have the opportunity themselves to be creative artists. Phelps’ solution depends on the idea that some women will do the housework for other, more “gifted” women. When Avis climbs down from the apple tree and walks into her father’s study to inform him of her decision to be an artist, she thinks to herself, “Aunt Chloe had made the pudding alone, and the professor had eaten it.... Very well. Other women might make puddings” (33).

This scorn for the drudgery of housework—and those who do it—is evident again in the vivid scene early in her marriage, when Avis, still “radiant” from an hour in her old studio, returns home to find that their third “girl” is having trouble with the drains, there is no butter, rainwater has gotten into the flour barrel, and “it’s meself as well-nigh forgot it till this blissid minute, on account of iron’-day and the breakfast so late, ye’ll own yerself.... But it’s himself as left word wid me while yez was gone, as there would be four gentlemen to dinner” (139). Phelps’ imitation of an Irish accent is no surprise here, as most household servants at this time were immigrants, and overwhelmingly from Ireland (Strasser 164). This depiction of an incompetent Irish domestic (third in a series) represents a common attitude at the time. A gradual shift over the first half of the century from native-born “girls” to immigrant (mostly Irish) serving women led to a myth of the “good help” of the past (recall the loyal servants of Ruth Hall) and the slatternly foreign servants of the second half of the century. According to Elizabeth O’Leary, “this well-documented shift left most critics of the domestic scene nostalgic for what they described as a previous golden age of service” (112). Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, writing in the 1869 *American Woman’s Home*, bemoaned the replacement of “self-

respecting daughter of farmers” by “a foreign population” (qtd in O’Leary 112). This stereotypical Irish housemaid, reproduced faithfully by Phelps, was drunken, idle, superstitious, and temperamental—thus her propensity to inconvenience her employer by quitting.

While the desperate middle-class woman might reluctantly employ such women to do her drudgery, since she had few alternatives, she was clearly warned that she must care for the children herself. The dangers of letting children be raised by the help are outlined by Faye Dudden in *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America*. Dudden notes that women were cautioned that domestics might “expose children to excessive heat or drafts, or push the baby buggy too fast, or administer opiates or punishment for crying. They were notoriously supposed to impart fears and superstitions to young children” (147). The anti-Catholic, anti-Irish subtext in the criticism of these “superstitious” women is clear. Dudden quotes a grandmother who is relieved at the dismissal of her grandchildren’s nurse: ““Another year of Kitty Neal would have remedilessly ruined them”” (148). Further, as O’Leary notes, anti-Catholic bias was so strong that young mothers were warned that their Irish nursemaids might ““secretly carry an infant to a priest, and have it baptized in the Catholic church”” (115).

This anti-Catholic, Anti-Irish hysteria, along with fears about other immigrants, was reaching a fever pitch in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. As Susan Lancer notes in her essay on “The Yellow Wallpaper,” especially in New England, where “agricultural decline, native emigration, and soaring immigrant birth rates” (425) generated fears that the old Anglo-Saxon stock would be overrun, mistrust of “foreigners” “reached the proportions of a movement in the 1880’s and 1890’s” (425). “Whiteness” came to be redefined:

“White” came to mean only “Nordic” or Northern European, while
 “yellow” applied not only to the Chinese, Japanese, and light-skinned

African-Americans but also to Jews, Poles, Hungarians, Italians, and even the Irish. (426)

In the absence of the good “native” farm girl of the past, Avis herself must “descend from the sphinx to the drainpipe in one fell swoop” (140). While the narrator acknowledges in the same passage that to keep house is “to bring creation out of chaos, law out of disorder,” still it is a “strain,” especially to Avis’ sensitive artistic temperament, a “yoke” under which women far stronger than Avis “had yielded their lives as a burden too heavy to be borne” (140). But this strain on the artist is apparently not an undue burden for the more serviceable “Bridget” who ought to be doing this work for Avis, if her husband were more careful to respect her talents and abilities.

It does not appear to be any part of Phelps’ project in this novel to “elevate” housekeeping, or show the dignity of women’s labor in the home—unlike mid-century “domestic” writers like Catharine Beecher and Sarah Josepha Hale, who campaigned for the elimination of servants, and argued strenuously that women should do their own housework. They felt that the existence of a servant class ran against the democratic American spirit, and also claimed that housework was good for upper-class women’s health and character. Furthermore, Beecher wanted to “redeem woman’s profession from dishonor” (Strasser 187) by putting the care of the home and children back into the hands of women of the higher social classes. Their campaign failed, however, and not only did upper- and middle-class women continue to rely on servants whenever they could, but housework and those who performed it actually lost status as more and more immigrants did the work. “The Irish seemed more lower-class because they were in domestic labor,” historian Blaine McKinley writes, ‘and the work itself seemed more menial because the Irish dominated it’ (O’Leary 113).

It may seem unduly harsh on Phelps’ to suggest that she simply shifts the burden of household drudgery to lower-class, “Yellow” and “Black” women. After all, Phelps does express a notion of sisterhood which includes “all women,” both in *Avis* (see for example

pp. 82–3) and in *The Silent Partner*. Kessler comments that Phelps was “ever sympathetic to the help that one woman supplies to another’s liberation from drudgery,” and “depicts with humor and feeling the plight of household servants” in her later works (260. n. 2). However, in *Avis* the servants are nameless, incompetent—and speak in a thick Irish brogue. And her comments about the “crude, Nubian features” of the sphinx, which Avis must make beautiful, along with her portrait of a fatuous (though well-meaning) Black manservant in Florida, indicate a “racialist” if not racist attitude, typical of the time.

Certainly no Black women, nor any Irish, Italian, Jewish, or any other “foreigners” need apply to help fulfill Phelps’ dream of the “Woman” who will be actively producing public art in the coming generations: this woman will not simply be white; she will be “White.” Just as this woman’s husband and father may still have a profession, Phelps argued that middle-class women ought to be able to be wives and mothers yet still have public ambitions if they like. These practical changes would require a change in the men, in their thoughts and feelings about marriage. Odd as it may seem, this change is projected more by the “sentimental” strands in Phelps’ novel than in the failed *Künstlerroman* of the feminist novel.

The story of Avis’ and Philip’s lessons in romantic love makes up this other narrative strand of *The Story of Avis*. The elements which are recognizable as descending from what Nina Baym calls the “woman’s novel,” and which she identifies as ending with *St. Elmo* in 1870, include a plot centered on the “formation and assertion of a feminine ego” (12) many “trials and triumphs” (22), and an emphasis on domesticity and the centrality of the home (26). Like the authors of these women’s novels, Phelps looks forward to a “new woman and, by extension, the reformation of the world immediately around her” (20). This narrative is less interested in Avis as “artist” and more concerned with her life as “woman.”

One of the most salient differences between the two narratives lies in the attitude expressed toward female silence. Whereas the artist is called upon to speak, the “woman”

is admired for her "reticence" and "delicacy" in remaining silent when a lesser woman might have spoken unnecessarily. Here, silence is conflated with being "ladylike," with preserving an important middle-class marker (Lystra 17). "Avis did not chatter about such things [as housekeeping problems]. She had a fine power of selection in her conversation... which he admired" (149). Time and again, Avis is presented as superior because of her ability to keep silence. This silence creates an air of mystery around her which Philip finds attractive, even seductive.

An exquisite reticence hung over her, which he would not, if he could, have shaken. Her expressions of endearment, like her caresses, were rare, rapturous, and rich... he sat shut out, as if he had tried to life the veil of Isis, or to woo the Sphinx of the desert to open her stone lips (117).

The silent sphinx is again in the "sentimental" narrative an apt symbol for "womanhood," this time because of its associations with the mysterious East.

Yet women are mysterious not because they are so inherently, but because men do not care to try to understand them. Since men do not listen, "strong women" like Avis prefer to remain nobly silent. Avis expresses this philosophy playfully in her first encounter with Ostrander, at the Poetry Club. Avis tells Mr. Ostrander, "'It is better to be dumb than to be misunderstood,!''" as they examine her drawing of Una and the knight.³² This is an approach which Avis practices assiduously throughout the novel, remaining silent time after time in the face of provocation, disappointment, and joy.

In the "woman's" narrative, female silence is seen as strength, a way in which someone who is powerless rises above a situation. As Jane Tompkins points out, the sentimental novelists took women's submission and turned it into self-control and thus

³²This silence represents strength for the wife and mother, where it would be weakness for the artist. Avis and Ostrander are discussing her art in the encounter when she makes the rather off-hand remark about preferring to be "dumb" rather than to be "misunderstood." While she is flirting as a woman, the artist in her also has her say. Ostrander asks her, "'Who said that?'" and she responds, "'How do you know that I did not say it?'" (10). She has extolled silence, yet she asserts her own right to speak, to make quotable epigrams, like a public figure. The artist in her speaks about the silence of the woman.

spiritual power (162–163). When nothing can be accomplished by speaking, it is better to remain silent, in control of oneself if not of the situation. Women are even forbidden to share life's deepest wounds with each other, as Susan Wanamaker, Philip's abandoned lover, tells Avis: "That's the worst of being a woman. What you go through can't be told. It isn't respectable for one woman tell another what she has to bear" (164). Yet she turns this silence to her advantage, for while she knows that she has surprised Avis with her story, she says nothing. Women cannot speak to each other of their sorrow, perhaps, but they can turn their silences to good use: "It is not often," says the narrator,

that we are reminded of the quickly-flashing capacity for passionate attraction and generous devotion which renders the relation of woman to woman one of the most subtle in the world.... This little wretched, excited creature turned her face from Avis with a sense of having divinely outwitted her. She knew perfectly well that Philip Ostrander had never told his wife of that affair; but his wife should never know that she knew it. (164)

In the economy of the sentimental novel, silence is the marker of a strong (and ladylike) woman.

While this depiction of female silence lines up Phelps' narrative with those of the women's novelists studied by Baym, the differences between this sentimental strand of the novel and Baym's "overplot" are also important. Probably the most striking difference is Phelps' emphasis on romantic love. According to Baym, the "sentimental" novel asserted that "marriage cannot and should not be the goal toward which women direct themselves" (39). They showed the necessity for a woman to be able to stand alone without a man, to be self-sufficient and strong. But Phelps begins with a character who is strong and teaches her the importance of romantic love. While the other strand of this novel clearly portrays Phelps' conviction that women must not let marriage be their only goal in life, in the

sentimental narrative Avis learns the true centrality, indeed the immortal sacredness, of “married love.”

Avis has assumed since girlhood that she will never marry. She has thought little about intimacy with a man because she believes it to be incompatible with her ambitions as an artist. “The plain word is, that I do not, and I must not, think of love, because the plain truth is, that I cannot accept the consequences of love the way other women do... My ideals of art are those with which marriage is perfectly incompatible” (68-9). For her, finding that she is in love is “like death” (106). And certainly, the early scenes of courtship and love have undercurrents of erasure and imprisonment. In admitting to Philip that she loves him, she has “yielded some impalpable portion of her personality.... [She has] taken the first step in a road which led to some undefined but imperative surrender of her nature” (101). And, in an often-quoted passage, when she has agreed to marry him, the narrator tells us that “she put both hands, the palms pressed together as if they had been manacled, into his” (110).

But after the many trials of their early married life, after she has caught him flirting with another woman in her own parlor, discovered that Philip “shirks” at the university, learned that he had deserted a woman to whom he was once essentially engaged, and been informed that he no longer loves her—in short, having faced the reality that she has married a man with a weak character, Avis confronts the meaning of married love. When Philip has left for Europe, in a passage about the nature of Avis’ faith, she thinks “with a dread which shook to the roots of belief” that there is something more deadly than not being loved: no longer loving.

That Philip should cease to love her—this could be borne. There was a worse thing than that. All was hers while she yet loved him. She wrestled with her retreating affection as Jacob of old wrestled with the angel... She fought for her faith in all that makes life a privilege, or death a joy.

No argument for the immortality of the human soul seemed to her so triumphant as the faith and constancy of one single human love. (201)

Avis learns that her faith in God rests on her faith in human love. Readers of *The Gates Ajar* (which surely would have meant the vast majority of her contemporary audience, since only *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold better) would recognize here the emotional, hopeful arguments of Aunt Winifred, who is convinced that our earthly love is a shadow, an analogy, of what the blessed will experience in heaven. Avis begins to see that while she initially resisted love, once she has loved another human she must continue to do so, because it reflects her faith in God and the afterlife; indeed, it proves her fitness for it. But she is deeply distressed to be linked with a man who is so unworthy. Especially the mother in her is ashamed to have provided such a man as the father of her children: "It seemed to her a kind of mortal sin that she should have bestowed upon her children a father whom she might not bid them kneel to worship" (178). Marriage is a shrine, but Philip is an unworthy god.

When she and Philip go to Florida in hopes of curing his consumption, she finds that the beauty of the landscape reminds her of Eden, and brings on thoughts of her "buried tenderness." Still, all she can do for Philip is "her duty," which is to nurse him as patiently and carefully as she can (217). Philip, too, is gradually learning about love. He becomes impatient with this "motherly kind of affection," regrets his own weakness of "temperament," and wishes he could "command in her that idealization which is the essential condition of the love that woman bears to man" (223). As regret awakens in Philip, he begins to see how holy and precious Avis' love for him has been. "Her love, he thought, like the statues of Angelo, had been struck out at the beginning from the holy marble; his, like the work of lesser sculptors, from the experimental clay" (231). He is learning humility, and seeing that Avis' artistry informs her intimate relations just as much as it does her paintings.

Gradually, as he recognizes her worth and his own weakness, he asks her to love the best in him, his “ideal” self. “It does seem to me that there must have been something in me worth loving, or you wouldn’t have cared for me in the first place” (230). In the Florida twilight beside a lonely river, they sit quietly together long into the growing darkness. Then, back in their room, Philip says, “Come, my poor girl, poor girl! Don’t you *know* how tired you are?”” Avis suddenly feels all the “repressed suffering of a woman to whom it has been given to carry her husband’s nature, as she has lifted that of her children, through a lonely and laborious married life.” At last, she turns to him “like a fascinated girl to her lover” and he takes her in his “starved arms, “praying that “only his ideal of himself might touch his wife at that moment” (232).

This concept of the ideal self was central to Victorian experiences of romantic love, according to Karen Lystra’s careful reading of nineteenth-century American love letters, *Searching the Heart* (7). Through the intense intimacy of courtship, in which all the innermost feelings were to be shared, gradually the lovers came to know each other’s “true” or “essential” selves, as opposed to the selves which were seen in public and by casual acquaintances. This apprenticeship in self-revelation, which could last a lifetime in a successful companionate marriage, had several effects. One was to bolster growing American individualism and the sense of the self as separate, different from others, unique:

Two persons, by intensively sharing their interior lives, enriched and sharpened their separate subjectivities.... Thus individualism—defined in terms of a romantic experience of the self—was strengthened in a process that made each participant feel less self-contained and alone in the world.
(54–5)

The Victorians’ deep commitment to idealized romantic love also contributed to the trend away from strict Calvinism and institutionalized religion toward more individualized religious practice. In many ways, romantic love became a religion, with its own sacraments, sacred texts, and ritual practices. The line between human and divine

love became blurred—all “Love” was sacred, a gift from God (Lystra, ch. 8). Phelps was a major player in this move toward more personal, private religion. *The Gates Ajar* is a veritable handbook for rejecting the unfeeling logic of trained ministers for the heartfelt, intuitive knowledge of a loving soul who communes with God in her closet. Baym notes that the woman’s novel usually showed its heroine’s religious life as interior and personal, detached from patriarchal religious institutions (44). *The Story of Avis* is no exception. Avis has always had a deep sense of the sacred in her life, a belief that God guides her and watches over her, though she seldom speaks of her faith. This silence is respected by the narrator as “ladylike” (201). However, after Philip dies in her arms on a Florida beach, she comes to see even more clearly that her love for Philip, and his for her, is immortal. As she travels back to Massachusetts, she feels his presence strongly, and this time it is only his “ideal” self which comes to her. In fact, their relationship is improved considerably by his death:

Philip seemed quite near,—nearer than when it had been possible to be conscious of any imperfection in himself or in their union. Only his ideal visited her heart. She was not without a strange, exultant sense that now she never could see a weakness or a flaw in him again. (242)

She feels that she is once again in their “bridal time,” that their life together is “undivided...the story without an end” (242). Philip has become an angel, like Roy in *The Gates Ajar*, whose loving presence will remain with her till she joins him in heaven at her death. Religion and romance have become one.

That *The Story of Avis* should end in this way, with the failed artist learning to embrace eternally the soul of the man who has essentially destroyed her, certainly sounds like regression, a disappointing return to female dependence and wish-fulfillment. Critics have tried to deal with these disconcerting contradictions by demoting this part of the narrative to a sort of subplot, or pointing out the ways in which it contradicts and

undercuts the feminist plot.³³ However, it is also possible to see this part of the novel as another attempt, in the private realm of the heart, to create a space where a woman could have more real power over her life, to continue undermining the ideal of the True Woman by encouraging mutual respect, rather than female submission, within the home.

Lystra points out that a third important consequence of the Victorian ideology of romantic love was actually to provide opportunities for men and women to cross gender boundaries emotionally, experiencing themselves as continuous with their lover, learning to see life, at least in part, from her or his point of view. "By bridging the gender gap and encouraging men's empathy in women's lives, romantic love weakened certain aspects of patriarchal family relations" (229). Some men learned to identify their own interests with those of their wives, and thus relationships in the home became more nearly equal. Lystra's readings of hundreds of letters between husbands and wives convinces her that companionate marriage, when combined with romantic love, became "a powerful counterbalance to male dominance in nineteenth-century male-female relationship" (233).

What Phelps wants for women is not simply more rights and opportunities; she wants men to actually feel that women are their equals, and to treat them as such at all levels, including, perhaps especially, in the home. "Woman is not man's ward. Man is not woman's guardian," she proclaims in "The True Woman" (270). She looks forward to the day when "important changes have swept and garnished the whole realm of household care; when men consent to share its minimum of burden with women" (272). More pointedly, in this famous passage at the end of *The Story of Avis Phelps*' narrator describes the new woman and the new man whom she believes will some day emerge in American society:

³³Kessler essentially ignores these passages, focusing instead on the material before Avis' marriage in her discussion of the sentimental novel in *Avis*. Concluding that Avis will "miss the happy ending" of the typical woman's novel, she returns quickly to the feminist novel (xvi-xvii). Wilson argues forcefully that the ideologies of patriarchal religion, which called on women to serve others, undercut the aesthetic concerns of Avis the artist. "A feminist text did begin to emerge and ...it fell prey to the myth of a metaphysical center" (73).

We have been told that it takes three generations to make a gentleman: we may believe that it will take as much, or more, to make A WOMAN... [A long passage describes the new woman, with her “intellectual command” and “radiant physique.”]...—such a creature only is competent to the terrible task of adjusting the sacred individuality of her life to her supreme capacity of love and the supreme burden and perils which it imposes upon her. (246)

In this passage Phelps unites these two narratives which seem so much in conflict. The “terrible task” of Phelps’ new woman is twofold: she needs to develop her “sacred individuality,” with all that this implies in terms of creativity, opportunity, and ambition; she also must develop her “supreme capacity of love,” in order to have satisfying intimate relationships, including marriage and motherhood, with their accompanying “burden and perils.” And the ideal of romantic love, with its sacred immortal ties, was in the late nineteenth century actually a force for both developing individualism and creating more equal, satisfying relations in the home. Phelps’ new man is just as much a part of her vision, a new man who has submitted to the sacrifices required by love: “No man conceives what a woman will do or dare for him, until he has surprised her nature by the largest abnegation of which his own is capable. Let him but venture the experiment, if he will find himself vanquished by her in generosity to the end of the sweet warfare” (246–7).

But Avis is not yet this new woman, nor Philip, manifestly, this new man. While Phelps resolves Avis’ conflict by looking to the future, for Avis there is no resolution. Philip dies, and she returns to her studio for a year, but “my pictures come back upon my hands... They tell that my style is gone” (244). She wonders how her life might have been,

if her feeling for that one man, her husband, had not eaten into and eaten out the core of her life, left her a riddled, withered thing, spent and rent,

wasted by the autocracy of a love as imperious as her own nature, and as deathless as her own soul. (244)

Avis has lost the zero sum game between “life” and “art.” Here the feminist novel seems to have won out: Avis recognizes that romantic love has ruined her. Yet the next sentences give dominance to the sentimental: “But she would do it all over again,—all, all! She would never love him by one throe the less.”

This contradiction, this unsolved riddle of her life, is expressed in her longing that things might have been different: “She did not know how to express distinctly, even to her own consciousness, her conviction that she might have painted better pictures—not worse—for loving Philip and the children; that this was what God meant for her, for all of them, once, long ago.” There is nothing inherent in either subjectivity, wife/mother or artist, which makes them innately opposed. The silence of the True Woman is merely a male construction, not a God-given imperative. In the world turned upside down which Phelps envisioned, life and art support each other, the zero-sum game is beaten, and the love for friends and family produces “better pictures—not worse.” No longer is intimacy a female province—men are admitted into the sacred temple of Love—nor is art a male domain (though it is still a privilege for the middle class).

But Avis does not live in this world. At the end of the novel her ambitions turn to her daughter, the aptly-named “Waitstill.” While the little girl is “perfectly able to bide her time,” she is also a “logical little body, clear-headed, speaking only when she had something to say...and prefer[ing] not to allow herself to be compromised on any matter on which she was not perfectly clear” (244). Avis turns from her own disappointments and vows, “My child shall not repeat my blunders” (245). Wait is given a Rousseauesque education, kept out of school (Phelps seems to scorn conventional schooling as much as conventional religion), and allowed to roam the fields and woods “with no more restriction than a cricket” (255). In this way, Avis hopes, she will have a chance to do better than her mother. “It would be easier for her daughter to be alive, and be a woman,

than it had been for her, so much as this, she understood" (247). Interestingly, Wait's choice seems to be different from that of her mother. While Avis had to choose between being an Artist and being a Woman, Wait needs to simply "be alive" as a woman. Art for the next generation of middle-class women will not be a privilege wrested from men, but simply part of being human, of being alive. Avis' maternal practice from now on will be focused on making possible for her daughter what was not possible for her. The two narratives of Avis' life, Phelps suggests, will unite in a new generation of women who will have the opportunity to choose both intimacy and art.

CHAPTER THREE

“THINK OF THE CHILDREN!”: KATE CHOPIN AND *THE AWAKENING* (1899)

The move from *Ruth Hall* and *The Story of Avis* to *The Awakening* must be measured in more than years. It represents a shift from the middle-class, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon North to the elite, Catholic, Creole South; from the sentimental, domestic novel to the subtle, European-influenced novella; from the nineteenth century to the verge of the twentieth. Where *Ruth Hall* writes in order to support her children, and *Avis*' artistic ambitions are destroyed by marriage and motherhood, Edna Pontellier abandons both her children and her art in search of an elusive selfhood which is unavailable to her. Edna can neither be “mother” nor “artist” because the maternal creativity she needs exists only across a divide of race and class which she will not cross.

The Story of Avis ends with the protagonist accepting what has happened in her own life, but hoping for better for her daughter, who should be well on her way to being the New Woman hovering just beyond the horizon. Phelps hopes that life will be easier for the next generation of women artists than it was for her mother and herself. For them, she hopes, the possibility of both creation and procreation will be a human right, rather than a male prerogative; a division of labor will be possible for women. In 1889, Kate Chopin—ten years after Phelps' novel, at the very start of her own career as a writer—wrote a very short story about a young woman who is confronted by the same choice that faces *Avis*. Paula Von Stoltz, in “Wiser Than a God,” is a pianist living with her widowed mother. As the story opens, her mother is expressing disappointment that Paula has hired out her gift to provide dance music for festivities at the house of a rich family. This is

definitely a come-down for a young woman who is preparing for a career as a concert pianist. Paula, however, is pragmatic: “The pot must be kept boiling at all hazards, pending the appearance of that hoped for career” (39). At the dance, she attracts the attention of George Brainard, the eligible young scion of the family, and within a few months he asks her to marry him. Like Avis, she admits to being “in love,” and like Philip Ostrander, George protests that, “I don’t ask you to give up anything in your life. I only beg you to let me share with you” (46). Paula does hesitate; unlike her doomed foremother, however, she is “wise” and chooses a career instead of marriage. She moves to Europe and achieves artistic and financial success.

Ten years later, Chopin wrote *The Awakening*. In the intervening years she had thought a good deal about what it meant to be a woman artist. While “Wiser Than a God” simply echoes the either/or offered to Avis, providing a simple ending when Paula chooses a career over marriage, *The Awakening* takes a woman who begins to create art when she is already married, already a mother—like Chopin herself—and explores what happens when the alternatives are no longer simple, when the choice itself must be rejected. Phelps seems to have put her faith in a New Man who would provide both more household help and more respect for his wife’s career. But Edna finds that more servants, a larger studio, even an absent husband and children, cannot overcome the ideological barriers facing the mother-artist. Instead of things being easier for the “New Woman,” the gap between mothering and art appears to have widened even further.

As the woman writer begins to see herself creating “high” art at the turn of the century, mothering and art are splitting apart. In *The Awakening* they are represented by two different characters who appear as possible role models for the protagonist. Edna, however, finds that she cannot make this choice and rejects it as not meaningful, but can imagine no synthesis, no third way which would allow her the freedom to create both nature and culture. And just as art and mothering are moving apart, so is “art” moving further away from “life.” Ruth’s and Avis’ lives and choices echo those of their creators;

Kate Chopin succeeded where Edna fails, as both mother and writer. The irony of *The Awakening* is that a canonized novel with its own cottage-industry of critical works should depict a defeated artist. As Nina Baym notes, while Kate Chopin was able to create Edna Pontellier, “Edna could never have imagined, or given textual life to, Kate Chopin” (xl).

Kate Chopin belongs to the group of American women writers studied by Elizabeth Ammons in her 1991 study, *Conflicting Stories*. Ammons argues that these women at the turn of the century considered themselves to be artists “in the modern high-culture sense of the term.... determined to invade the territory of high art traditionally posted in western culture as the exclusive property of privileged white men” (5). Chopin was one of the oldest of the seventeen women whom Ammons studies; she was also one of the few mothers. Chopin, as a mother of six, had more children than fifteen of the other women writers combined.³⁴ Ammons’ profile of these women as a group is of women who chose not to be mothers, and who accepted the either/or choice between art and motherhood as necessary, even welcome: “For the most part, the women writers I discuss did not believe that it was either possible or desirable to combine the traditional middle-class role of wife and mother with the role of artist” (9).

Chopin, however, while she did not begin writing until her youngest child was eight years old, was intimately involved in the lives of all her children as they were growing up. As Toth notes, “she seems to have enjoyed motherhood: her children... adored her and never wanted to leave home” (*Vocation* xx). Although she had domestic help, Chopin was certainly never wealthy after her husband died and was apparently thoroughly involved in running her large household. When asked by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, just after the appearance of *The Awakening*, to describe “where, when, why, what do you write?” she described her writing as simply one more household task—though one suspects that even contemporary readers would have detected more

³⁴The sixteenth woman, Edith Summers Kelley, had three children. The other fifteen produced four (Ammons 9).

than a *souçon* of sarcasm: “I write in the morning, when not too strongly drawn to struggle with the intricacies of a pattern, and in the afternoon, if the temptation to try a new furniture polish on an old table leg is not too powerful...” (qtd. in Toth *KC* 365). The need to be “womanly” remains, but is clearly fading fast.³⁵ Yet despite the apparent ease with which Chopin was able to be both artist and mother, she must have felt the conflict between these two roles acutely, for it is at the heart of *The Awakening*.

Adèle Ratignolle, the “faultless Madonna” and “mother-woman,” is presented by the text as one pole of an opposition which confronts Edna as she is “becoming herself” (77). Adèle is pregnant throughout the nine-month span of the book, giving birth at the end. She is constantly commenting on “her condition,” and using it to elicit little services from the people around her. The narrator suggests that pregnancy is more or less a permanent condition with her. “About every two years she had a baby. At that time she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one” (27). Adèle is indeed a “mother-woman,” her identity thoroughly submerged in her husband and children, “defined by [her] reproductive capacity and social caretaking role” (Schweitzer 169). The narrator’s description of this type of woman is quite precise:

It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings.... They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (26)

While the wing imagery here is often shown by critics to link Adèle with the caged birds which open the novel and the broken-winged bird at the end, the even more pronounced allusion to angels is less often remarked. The mother-women are religious icons, both worshipped and worshipping. The comparison of Adèle to the Madonna is apt, for she,

³⁵Gina Burchard carefully examines Chopin’s conflicting needs to be an “artist” and to be “womanly” in her 1984 essay on “Kate Chopin’s Problematical Womanliness.”

too, is an object of devotion who nevertheless must kneel before her own child. As Deborah Barker notes,

The mother-women, like the Madonna, are in a position of adoring and of being adored as both worshiper and angelic figure, but in both positions they are effaced as individuals. The Madonna's... value is strictly positional. It is not what she does but what is done to her.... (64)

Just as Mary's role was receptive, becoming a vessel for the male Word, so the role outlined for privileged women like Edna and Adèle is a negative one, for they are expected to put family first in heart and soul, but to do virtually nothing about it. As Baym points out, "the elite woman's role demanded that she be devoted to home and children in spirit, even though no actual labor was demanded of her.... [She lead] a life of mandatory idleness and forced dependency" (Introduction xxxvi). The references to Veblen in writing about *The Awakening* are legion: Adèle and Edna and the other women at Grand Isle are means to display their husbands' wealth. Their function is almost wholly decorative, and their conspicuous leisure is an important class marker for their husbands. One recalls the ritualized scene where the box of expensive chocolates, *patés*, and wines arrives from Mr. Pontellier and is publicly shared among the wives and children at Grand Isle, and he is declared to be "the best husband in the world" (26); or Mr. Pontellier's famous gaze at his wife, "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property" (21).

Again the allusions to the Madonna, the timeless icon and museum piece, are apt, for the fully-realized mother-woman comes as close as humanly possible to being a living work of art. The text insists on Adèle's luscious beauty, which resembles a sunny portrait by Renoir: "the spun-gold hair... the eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red that one could only think of cherries" (26). Her attraction lies in her fullness and fertility, her slightly plump arms and full neck, and her exquisite hands which "adjusted her gold thimble ... as she sewed away on the light night-drawers" (27). Yet the narrator is clear that all her beauty is on the surface, like the plane of a

canvas: “there was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent” (26).

This is why Edna feels so compelled to sketch Adèle: she already looks like a *tableau vivant*, and wants only for someone to copy her down. “Never had that lady seemed a more tempting subject than at that moment, seated there like some sensuous Madonna, with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color” (30). But the portrait is a failure; Adèle is disappointed because it does not look like her, and Edna crumples it up. Barker suggests that Edna’s inability to represent Adèle realistically is a function of the inherent erasure of the mother-woman: “The problem of depicting Adèle as a sensuous Madonna lies in the contradictory position of the mother-woman.... To identify with the maternal body as presented by Adèle would mean that Edna too would be effaced as an individual” (66). The two subject positions—mother and artist—are mutually exclusive: one cannot draw and be erased at the same time. Edna cannot depict the absence of the mother-woman, for to do so would be to erase herself—and then who would hold the brushes?

Edna is aware that she herself is not a “mother-woman” like Adèle, and cannot see herself engulfed in domesticity like the other Creole women. Her fondness for her children is “uneven, impulsive” and “their absence was a sort of relief [that] seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (37). Yet she is drawn to Adèle’s luscious sensuality and “entire absence of prudery” (28). This is a world which she has never known, raised in her strict Kentucky Protestant household:

The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty. Then the candor of the woman’s whole existence, which everyone might read, and which formed so striking a contrast to her own habitual reserve—this might have furnished a link.

(32)

Edna opens up to Adèle, telling her things about her own inner world which she has never before revealed to anyone; this intoxicates Edna, “muddled her like wine, or the first breath of freedom” (37). An important part of Edna’s “awakening” is to her own body and the pleasures of the physical world: swimming, eating, sleeping, making love. This is the attraction of Adèle.

Edna’s choice is not between being an artist and being a mother, but between making art and being art—a “flawless Madonna” like Adèle. The “mother-woman” position represented by Adèle offers Edna the sensuous life of the body which she craves but also defines her as decorative object rather than active subject. Because she is called “mother,” Edna fails to realize that she does little mothering. Her functions as mother are almost wholly ceremonial and supervisory: the goodnight kiss, the soothed injury, the criticism of the nurse. Edna must be there; she must exclaim and commiserate at appropriate moments, but the real work of mothering falls to the nameless “quadroon” nursemaid, who feeds, bathes, clothes, and watches over the two boys. Edna is in many respects merely the biological mother; she performs precious little actual mothering, even when she is with the children; and throughout most of the book, the children are with their grandmother (and, of course, the nursemaid, who stays with them wherever they go). Actually mothering her children never seems to occur to her as an option. Similarly, Adèle, mother of three children under the age of six, is inevitably dressed in immaculate white, takes long walks, naps frequently, sits for her portrait—and offers “a thousand endearments” to her children when the nurse brings them to her. The alternative presented to Edna in Adèle is not that of literal mother but of theoretical “mother-woman,” of a certain effaced (yet also privileged and exalted) subjectivity linked to biological motherhood and to cultural assumptions about the sacredness of M-O-T-H-E-R.

Because Edna is thus alienated from her actual “motherwork” by a gulf of race and class, mothering for her is in essence reduced to giving birth—to biology. While she longs for a sensuous life of the body, as a woman she cannot escape the ultimate “in body”

experience: the pains of labor. The nursemaid performs her other labors as mother, but no one else can give birth to the (white) child which she must provide—the only productive act required by her life as consumer and displayer of her husband's wealth. The nature/culture binary presented to Edna is starkly simplified by the final childbirth scene with its "torture": (female) body/nature vs. (male) mind/culture.

To suggest that Edna chooses between mothering and art is to participate with Edna in the erasure of the "quadroon," who remains at a "the respectful distance which they required her to observe" (30). This is not to say that Edna's dilemma is "not real," only that it is ideological, and that it rests not only on assumptions about the role of the leisured upper-middle-class wife, but also on the role of the dark menial who does the actual work of mothering without receiving any of the sacred worship reserved for the white Madonna. "The quadroon nurse was looked upon as a huge encumbrance, only good to button up waists and panties and to brush and part hair" (26).

Ironically, much feminist commentary on Chopin's novel—like Edna herself—fails to distinguish between this ideology about mothering and the actual mothering which is accomplished by the nursemaid. In so doing, it demeans the dark woman's labor one more time, pointing out the negatives involved in Edna's privileged "mothering" in this novel—the lack of autonomous subjectivity, the self-effacement required by her role, her objectification by her husband—yet praising motherhood *as metaphor* as a positive, liberating aspect of the novel. Carol Stone, for example, argues that Chopin "questions the assumptions that childbirth and child care are a woman's principal vocation, and that motherhood gives pleasure to all women." Yet, she goes on, "*the birth motif... is a metaphor* for the rebirth of the book's protagonist... as artist" (23, italics mine). Similarly, Schweitzer sees "competing versions of motherhood at work in this text: the social and existential demands of motherhood which oppress Edna, and the *metaphors of self-birth and seductive, maternal sea* which liberate her" (164, italics mine).

This contrast between motherhood as experience (whether as ideology or as labor) and motherhood as metaphor is echoed in Chopin's use of slavery as a metaphor for the privileged white woman's relationship to her husband and children. Edna refuses to be her husband's possession; her children seem to be "antagonists who had...overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery" (136). As Alice Hall Petry remarks, "Chopin seemed less interested in Blacks as such than in white women treated as de facto Blacks by virtue of their loss of personal freedom and/or their lack of financial independence" (25). In both cases, one experience—mothering or slavery—is displaced by another—rebirth or marriage—by becoming its figure. And, as we have seen, in both cases a person of color serves as a metaphor for a more privileged white.³⁶

While Chopin's metaphors—and many white feminist critics' responses to them—efface the dark women who do the hidden work of mothering, Ammons takes this process one step further, in effect flipping it over to reveal the Black presence behind the very form of the novel. While she describes *The Awakening* as "the privileged white female fantasy of utter and complete personal freedom [spun] out to its end, which is oblivion" (75), she also argues that Chopin did not finally "succeed in keeping black women out" (75). Both white maternity and white childhood in Chopin's South are guided and shaped by black women, and *The Awakening* is "structured as a pregnancy [in nine months and thirty-nine chapters]." Therefore, she argues, "to say... that *The Awakening* is based formally on the experiences of pregnancy and maternity...is to introduce the idea that *The*

³⁶This effacement of the "quadroon" and the other domestics is also at the heart of the critical argument over whether or not this novel is "universal." Cynthia Griffin Woolf seems to have begun the argument in 1973 by declaring that Edna "interests us not because she is 'a woman,'... [but] because she is human" (234). In 1980, Baym agreed that Chopin was using "a female protagonist to represent a universal human dilemma," but argued that it also addressed "specific women's questions" (xxxix). More recently, in 1988, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese states that "Chopin gambled on presenting woman's nature as a universal problem" (39). The subtext of this discussion is the question of whether or not Edna's dilemma is shared by men—thus making it "universal, human." Ivy Schweitzer's comments on this discussion in 1990 are enlightening; however, although her essay is very much about race, this discussion focuses on the way *the maternal* has been marginalized. Only Ammons (1991) draws her readers' attention to the fact that "Edna's story is not universal, although most white feminist literary criticism has failed to acknowledge the fact. It is the story of a woman of one race and class... a narrative of sororal oppression across race and class" (75).

Awakening formally derives from African American culture” (76). Because birth for a white woman was mediated and interpreted by Black women, Chopin’s novel, shaped like a pregnancy and ending with a birth, is inevitably formed by (again hidden) Black midwives. Furthermore, Ammons argues that the storytelling of dark nursemaids, who must have told Kate stories as she was growing up, informs Chopin’s prose as much as that of Maupassant, the European male whose stories she translated and consciously imitated. Like finding an African-American voice behind *Huckleberry Finn*, Ammons’ efforts to reveal the hidden Black presence in *The Awakening* are an answer to Toni Morrison’s question for Chopin: “What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or [her] critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that presence had on the work?” (qtd. in Ammons 75).

Finally, race in *The Awakening* is further complicated by issues of class, and the fact that Edna, in her alienation from her own mothering and the idleness which she must maintain as leisured symbol of her husband’s wealth, thinks that her exhaustion is caused by her having “to keep too many servants. I am tired bothering with them” (100). In a sense she is correct: she is tired of having no meaningful work, of having other people do everything for her. Nevertheless, her view of the servants is clearly not one of empathy³⁷; rather, she conceives them as her own oppressors. Michele Birnbaum notes the similarity of Edna’s attitude to that of the colonial: “Chopin’s heroine enacts the paradox of the imperial self who appears to rule while being herself ruled. The unbearable contradiction of being both free agent and yet acted upon is characteristic of the colonizer’s position” (303). Thus Edna both ignores the “quadroon” who does her mothering for her and feels herself “enslaved” both by her servants and by her children’s demands. Edna succeeds in painting the nursemaid’s portrait where she failed with Adèle because she is comfortable

³⁷Anna Elfenbein argues that Edna’s lack of empathy for the people of color who work for her is “in part the product of a domestic routine that deadens Edna’s ability to feel, except as she and other privileged white women have been programmed to feel. Such a routine eliminates the possibility of subversive thoughts or vital connections with the experience of other women” (143).

seeing herself as subject in relation to the objectified servant. She does not reach across the gulf and race and class necessary to identify with this woman who is practically-speaking the mother of her children.

* * *

The alternative to self-effaced "mother-woman," as presented to Edna, is "artist," represented by Mlle. Reisz. She is very much the foil of the luscious, superfeminine Adèle. When we first see her, she is "at intervals objecting to the crying of a baby... a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others" (43-44). She is a dried-up spinster who lives alone with her aging, almost deformed body, subsisting on chocolates and Chopin.³⁸ Yet she gives meltingly beautiful performances and is respected, if disliked, by all at the resort. Edna, with her awakening sensuality, is touched to the core by Mlle's music. "The very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (45).

Mlle. Reisz sees art as requiring "the courageous soul...that dares and defies" (83). Elaine Showalter suggests that "her voice in the novel seems to speak for the author's view of art and for the artist" ("Tradition"181). She herself is described as "self-assertive," and her solitary, eccentric habits mark her as an artist in the Byronic tradition. Many critics agree that the identity which she offers to Edna is essentially masculine. Schweitzer, for example, describes her as someone "who, at the expense of intimacy and attachment, pursues a career and achieves the individuation and autonomy Gilligan defines as masculine" (170). Certainly the view of the artist presented in Chopin's early story, "Wiser Than a God," is that it is an inheritance from the father. Both of Paula's parents want her to have a career. However, when George asks her to consider "some other

³⁸Showalter credits Nancy Miller with putting a name to the "internal female signature" in women's writing, here alluding to Kate Chopin's ambitions as an artist ("Tradition"181).

calling... a calling that asked only for the labor of loving” (45), the narrator tells us that he finally has a true glimpse of the “artist” in her: “George had known Paula only as the daughter of the undemonstrative American woman. He had never before seen her with the father’s emotional nature aroused in her” (46). Her ambition to succeed as an artist is part of the European, male heritage from her German father, and her success comes when she returns to Germany. “You may have seen in the morning paper, that the renowned pianist, Fraülein Paula Von Stoltz, is resting in Leipsic, after an extended and remunerative concert tour” (47).

This European heritage would have signified “highbrow” art to Chopin’s readers, a concept which developed over the second half of the nineteenth century and was firmly in place by 1900. This development is described by Lawrence Levine’s 1988 study, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Levine notes that in the earlier part of the century there was far more cultural unity in the United States, with opera, Shakespeare, Beethoven, museums, and books by authors like Dickens generally enjoyed by everyone, regardless of education and social class. Gradually, however, a distinction was made between the “sacred” and civilizing effects of “high” culture and the vulgar, essentially destructive effects of the “low.” Particularly interesting are the racial overtones: northern Europeans were thought to have higher foreheads than did southern Europeans and Negroes—thus phrenology reflected the good taste of “true” Americans. “Highbrow” cultural tastes included the European—Mozart, Wagner, Flaubert—and disdained “rustic” American art: “the process of sacralization reinforced the all too prevalent notion that for the source of divine inspiration and artistic creation one had to look not only upward but eastward toward Europe” (140).³⁹

Where Paula is a grand success, however, Edna never succeeds as an artist, even though she has “a natural aptitude” (30), works “with sureness and ease” (93), and is even

³⁹Even European “nature” was better. “An Italian sunset is better than a Californian...” (Charles Eliot Norton, qtd. in Levine 145).

beginning to sell her paintings (100). The obstacles to Edna's becoming an artist are not material, as were Avis'. Avis is impeded by drains and dinners, by a sick husband, fussing children, and lack of funds. She doesn't have enough "help," can't seem to find time or leisure to concentrate on her art. Edna has no such problems. She has nursemaid, housemaid, cook—"too many servants," by her own account. She has her own bright, fully-equipped *atelier*, and even moves to her own house by the end of the novel. The children are cared for pretty much full time by the Black nursemaid; and for about half of the nine months of the novel the children are not even in the same city with their mother. Indeed, she almost seems to spend more time with her children when she is painting them than otherwise. Furthermore, she has no need to earn money—at least, not to support her children.⁴⁰ Avis' art is partially ruined by the need to do "hack" work—portraits, mostly—instead of her "true calling" to paint allegorical, museum art, like her sphinx. Edna can essentially paint what she likes, when she likes. She certainly has "a room of her own and five hundred pounds a year." What, then, stops Edna? Why does she "fail" as an artist?

The most common answer is that Edna is just a "dabbler," who doesn't have the "strong wings" required by Mlle. Reisz's view of the artist as subversive. Joyce Dyer says that Edna "dreams of becoming an artist, [but] lacks the courageous and solitary temperament great art demands" (129). Carol Christ argues that "Mademoiselle Reisz rightly senses that Edna is not sufficiently dedicated to [art] to make it her whole life" (35). Nancy Walker says that she "fails for lack of sufficient talent and commitment" (*Historical* 72). Many insist on the opposition between the inherently "subversive" artist and the necessarily conventional mother. Stone, for example, says that "Edna drowns herself because she cannot live as a conventional wife or mother any longer, and society will not accept her new found self. The solitude she enjoys makes for artistic growth, but

⁴⁰However, she is acutely aware that her dependence on her husband's money is a problem in her struggle for freedom, and she is very proud of being able to support herself at the end of the novel with money from painting, bets on the horses, and a small inheritance.

she is bound to children, home, social duty” (30). Wendy Martin argues that Edna can neither paint nor focus her energy on any particular goal because she lacks the “habits of mind associated with masculine mastery” (22).

But Edna simply cannot imagine herself as Mlle. Reisz. This view of art as solitary, alienated activity will not work for her, with her newly awakened sensuality. She is repelled by the ugly Mlle. Reisz. She seems “strikingly homely” to Edna, who discovers her “standing beside the window, engaged in mending or patching an old prunella gaiter” (82). As they sit on the pianist’s “little bumpy sofa” she admits, “I don’t know whether I like you or not” (82). To imagine herself as Mlle. Reisz, Edna must imagine herself single, unattractive, marginalized. “Mademoiselle Reisz’s story suggests that Edna will lose her beauty, her youth, her husband, and children—everything, in short, but her art and her pride—and become a kind of New Orleans nun” (Showalter “Tradition” 182).

It is possible to read Edna not as a failed artist so much as one who rejects the conventional view of the artist offered by Mlle. Reisz. Clearly, she represents the “Ivory Tower,” with her lonely apartment and solitary, eccentric lifestyle. Dried up like her signature rusty violets, she has passion only, it seems, for music. And while Edna is in some ways repelled by her, she does try to find her own Ivory Tower by moving to her own little house, despite her husband’s alarm. However, the Ivory Tower tradition also includes celibacy, since it is based on an assumption that “there is only one kind of creative energy...[and] the artist must spend himself, sacrifice his physical being, in artistic creation” (Beebe 17). Clearly a woman with husband and children must abandon them when she moves to her Ivory Tower—which Edna does seem to be on the verge of doing. When she tells her boys about “the little house around the block,” they ask, “Where would they sleep, and where would papa sleep? She told them the fairies would fix it all right” (115–6).

Still, celibacy is far from what she has in mind: she also wants to drink from the “Sacred Fount.” For a man, this has traditionally meant travel, adventure, passion, and free sex—experiences generally thought inappropriate for a woman. Indeed, for a woman the “Sacred Fount” tradition has meant trouble if “experiencing life” was interpreted to mean anything but marriage and children (as it does for Avis). But Edna wants precisely this male experience of sewing some wild oats. She wants to fall in love with Robert, go freely about New Orleans without an escort, make love to Arobin, and generally experience the seductive life of the body. The reader is reminded of Woolf’s Judith Shakespeare, whose brother went off to London and hung about the theater, while she, trying to drink likewise at the Sacred Fount, soon found herself with child and deemed it expedient to “kill herself one winter’s night” (AROO 48).

The only view of art culturally available to Edna is this masculine view of creativity, based on the antithesis of domesticity: some choice between rootless freedom and chaste solitude. Is Edna actually trying, albeit perhaps unconsciously, to redefine creativity, to find her own definition of an artist which moves beyond this life/art binary? There is a body of feminist criticism which argues just that.

Barker, for example, argues that Edna “establishes her own criterion as an artist... [which] stresses the importance of process” (73). She sees Mlle. Reisz as a “childlike anorexic figure who has developed her art at the expense of her physical desires,” whose conception of the artist as one who “must sacrifice the self for art” is rejected by Edna (73). The narrator says that Edna, “being devoid of ambition, and striving not toward accomplishment,... drew satisfaction from the work in itself” (93). Barker associates Edna’s art more with Adèle than with Mlle. Reisz, arguing that it is she who inspires her to paint, and she to whom she shows her sketches. Edna is attempting to depict her own desire, to explore her vision as a woman, “to transcend a male tradition” (79).

Similarly, Elaine Apthorp argues that Chopin, along with Cather and Jewett, developed an alternative, “feminine” model for creativity, “an alternative practice of art, a

creativity which is intersubjective, which dissolves boundaries in erotic fusion between self and other” (3). While this conception of art is only partially realized by Edna or even Chopin herself, according to Apthorp, the reader may “safely practice the subversive imagination that the protagonists [Edna Pontellier and Cather’s Lucy Gayheart] so unsafely attempt to model” (4). Apthorp sees Edna as a deft, successful painter, unwilling to buy into Mlle. Reisz’ conception of art as “jealous God, demanding from its priestesses the sacrifice of sensual and communal experience and commitments” (7). Instead, all three turn-of-the-century writers are trying to represent a portrait of the artist “as sensitive listener, harmonist, and interpreter for whom the making of art is inseparable from the making and sharing of life” (7).

Schweitzer, too, sees Edna caught by a masculine conception of life and art which are inadequate to her needs. She argues that Edna is searching for a “phallic subjectivity” with “freedom and independence unencumbered by responsibility” (175). The selfhood offered by Adèle is blank: a self-effaced Angel in her husband’s house who cannot produce art, only decoration. But the selfhood offered by Mlle. Reisz is equally problematic, not only because it is “male,” but also because it is based on self-absorption and self-possession, an Emersonian “self-reliance” which is finally a dream. Unlike Apthorp, Schweitzer does not read Edna as actually using her art subversively. Rather, argues Schweitzer, it is through her art that she tries to achieve this phallic subjectivity, “by becoming a producer, rather than remaining a re-producer” (175), seeking to enter more deeply into the world that commodifies and objectifies. Still, she agrees that this subjectivity cannot satisfy Edna, that she longs for a more maternal conception of the self.

Yet, being a mother, woman, and subject reciprocal with objects; speaking a language capable of expressing difference not as lack but as otherness; having a community to support and encourage such a sense of selfhood—these are not possibilities in the world Edna inhabits. (179)

Similarly, Ewell reads the ambivalence of the novel's ending as an indication of "the limits of the late nineteenth century's definitions of selfhood.... an ego, an I, that is only and always in control. Such a self is ever subject, never subjected to its responsibilities and relations to others..." (164).

It is difficult to know to what degree Edna rejects the conventional view of the artist; clearly she is feeling her way throughout the novel, trying one thing and another instinctively. She does almost no thinking, no theorizing. "One of these days," she said, "I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am" (103). But she never does. What is obvious, however, is that the alternatives offered to her are both powerfully attractive and mutually exclusive. The autonomous, "male" subjectivity identified with the "artist," with its illusion of agency, gives her energy and freedom; because of it her art "grows in force and individuality" (100). "I don't want anything but my own way," she tells Dr. Mandelet near the end, yet she realizes that this way of being is in direct contradiction to the sensuous "female" subjectivity offered by Adèle. To give it up is not only to become dried up, ugly, and "masculine," but also to give up her children. This, too, is unacceptable: "I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives" (133). It is important to remember, however, that she not only feels guiltily that she must be a respectable "mother-woman" for the sake of her children; she also desires them hungrily. "She wept for very pleasure when she felt their little arms clasping her, their hard, ruddy cheeks pressed against her own glowing cheeks. She looked into their faces with hungry eyes that could not be satisfied with looking" (115). What Edna wants is to be able to assert herself freely and yet at the same time have the sensuous life of the body presented by Adèle. The zero sum game of the masculine artist tradition will not work for her. What she seems to require, whether or not she has actually envisioned it, is an intersubjective view of life and art, based on reciprocity and mutual recognition, a view in which life and art enhance each other rather than being opposed.

Kathryn Seidel offers a close reading of Edna's art which suggests that she may indeed be moving toward such a conception of art, based in experiences of childbearing and mothering, experiences of fluidity, merging, and intersubjectivity. Seidel's careful examination of Edna's paintings divides her artistic career into three phases and suggests that Edna begins to see art as a way of connecting with others, that she is searching for a concept of "art as enhancing community" (234), a concept unavailable in her culture. Edna begins by painting realistic paintings based in patriarchal values, turns to "rebellious portraits" of her children, father, and servants (including the nursemaid), and finally ends with "daring, original drawings" (229).

Edna's first phase, according to Seidel, includes her failed portrait of Adèle as Madonna, which puts Edna in the position of the male artist fixing the female on the canvas as object of worship and desire. As we have already seen, however, Edna cannot wholeheartedly embrace this subjectivity. Further, she apparently has little respect for simple realism. She rejects this type of work in a ceremonial visit to Adèle, presenting her with most of the sketches. Adèle admires the pictures for their mimetic value: "this basket of apples!... One might almost be tempted to reach out a hand and take one" (75). Edna obviously doesn't think much of this type of praise and she leaves the Ratignolle home depressed at the "domestic harmony" she has just witnessed, which she thinks of as "colorless," a "region of blind contentment" (76), clearly no place for an artist.

Soon Edna begins her second phase, painting portraits of everyone in the house (except, the reader notes, her husband, who would surely not sit still for such "folly"). She works in her upstairs atelier with "great energy and interest," painting the boys, the "quadroon" (the maid watches the children), then the maid, and eventually her own father when he comes to visit. Seidel sees this phase as opening with her argument about painting with her husband, who "perceives her as another madwoman in the attic" (231). The paintings of the maid with her loosened hair, and of the "quadroon" nursemaid, if Seidel imagines them correctly, are indeed rather daring. "Not displayed as a slave...nor

as a figure in the background...., this woman addresses the canvas as the sole model. In fact, it would be many years before American and European painters featured such subjects in the foreground" (231).

Certainly, as Elizabeth O'Leary notes in *At Beck and Call: Representations of Domestic Servants in Nineteenth-century American Painting*, a Black woman who cared for white children was almost invariably painted holding the white child, not in a portrait by herself. Furthermore, it is the child who tends to dominate the painting, placing a white hand over the Black arm, sitting bathed in golden light, and looking directly at the viewer. In contrast, the "formula black Mammy" "sometimes bends near to give the infant or toddler a caring look, but the child usually appears oblivious" (149). Paintings such as these not only portrayed the status quo of White dominance, they also helped maintain the myth that the "eternal mother to scores of white children" had no children of her own, "a convenient perception that dispelled worry over divided loyalties" (149). In fact, of course, many of these women did have their own children, whom they were forced to neglect while they tended the master's children.

Edna may indeed be painting her nursemaid's portrait, but we should remember that while there is no mention that the Black woman has children of her own whom she neglects, not merely to tend Edna's children but also to enhance Edna's career as an artist, this may very well be the case. Further, the narrative keeps this woman nameless and describes her as "patient as a savage" (77) before Edna's palette. How can we be sure that the "quadroon" is not presented as stereotyped Mammy? And while the maid has indeed removed her cap (and thus her status as domestic servant?), yet it is her "back and shoulders" which interest Edna, not her character. The scarce evidence is at best ambiguous; the reader is not convinced that Edna actually conceives the maid and the "quadroon" as subjects.

More conclusive, perhaps, is Edna's painting of her father. The former Confederate colonel experiences his daughter's gaze as a threat calling for the same

courage he needed during the war. “Before her pencil he sat rigid and unflinching, as he had faced the canon’s mouth in days gone by” (88). Seidel sees Edna here as Medusa, “whose gaze paralyzes... By painting her father, Edna gains the ability to define him” (232). The narrator explains that Edna “discovers that he interested her... and for the first time in her life she felt as if she were thoroughly acquainted with him” (89). These sessions seem to help her feel closer to her father, and Edna’s work in portraiture may be seen as “a way of understanding herself and her close relationships” (232), art in the service of affiliation and community, as well as her own emerging selfhood.

Edna’s final phase occurs after she has moved into her the “pigeon house,” which critics consistently link with Virginia Woolf—but do not agree whether it is a cage (Martin 21, Schweitzer 175), a slave cabin (Schweitzer 313), or truly a “room of her own” (Seidel 232). Here Edna paints a portrait of the “rake” Arobin, and we learn that she is making quite a few sales. Seidel argues that Edna is creating herself through her art; by becoming “a worker, a producer, not a mere emblem of her husband’s wealth as a leisure-class wife, she resists seeing herself as a work of art and thus a commodity.”⁴¹ Seidel sees Edna’s task as trying to give birth “to a new female-centered model of creativity, not one subsumed by biology nor one in which she is transformed by the patriarchy into a work of art” (234). Unfortunately, she is not able to do so, because she lacks a community or tradition of female artists to support her work.

However, it is possible to see Edna as working in a female tradition which she does not recognize, or even admire. Showalter describes Edna as “fated to reenact...the rituals of femininity” (“Tradition”185). This tradition, inspired by Adèle and the other mother-women, is that of domestic art, “creativity channeled into the production of social and domestic harmony” (Showalter 185). Not only is Adèle herself a piece of decorative art, but she rationalizes her piano-playing as a form of mothering, much as Fanny Fern saw

⁴¹In contrast, Schweitzer argues that “by selling her means of self-expression, she converts her unalienated labor into commodities” (175).

her writing. “She was keeping up her music on account of the children...because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (43).

Edna takes this domestic art and turns it on its head, staging instead her own birthday dinner as *coup d'état* before leaving her husband's house. It is an aesthetic masterpiece, a Swinburnian “Last Supper, a final transformation of will and desire into bread and wine, flesh and blood” (Gilbert 327), the performance art of the hostess-as-genius. The table is a fantasy of gold and red—brass candelabra with yellow silk shades, candlelight, champagne, yellow and red roses, golden flatware, and crystal glasses holding a cocktail “that looked and sparkled like a garnet gem.” Edna herself is dressed in gold satin, lace “the color of her skin,” and “a magnificent cluster of diamonds that sparkled, that almost sputtered, in Edna's hair” (108–9). At the climax of the dinner, when some of the women have turned Victor LeBrun into a local Dionysus, with garlands and a white silk scarf, a guest recites two lines from Swinburne which sum up the evening in both color and mood:

““There was a graven image of Desire
Painted with red blood on a ground of gold.”” (110)

The linking of death and desire epitomizes Edna's mood: sensual ecstasy coupled with the “chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern... acute longing [for] the unattainable” (110). As Bernard Koloski notes, this moment foreshadows Edna's suicide: the rest of the poem paints a picture of “insatiable Satiety” and “Death [standing] aloof behind a gaping grate” (609). Edna has transubstantiated the concrete into the abstract, in a sort of reverse artistry. Instead of expressing abstract ideas as paint on canvas or words on paper, she has transformed meats, vegetables, and fruits into an expression of her own fears and desires. Further, she has created an invisible bond between her world-weary guests: “The moments glided on, while a feeling of good

fellowship passed around the circle like a mystic cord, holding and binding these people together with jest and laughter” (110).

Nevertheless, as a *coup* it is a failure. Edna’s “palette” of crystal, gold, linen, silk, wine, and all the other expensive “*mets*” and “*entre-mets*,” are funded by her husband. Perhaps the most extenuating interpretation that can be offered is that it is “her final parodic use of her husband’s wealth” (Schweitzer 183). But as political statement it is empty. As Showalter concludes, “Edna may look like a queen, but she is still a housewife. The political and aesthetic weapons she has in her *coup d’état* are only forks and knives, glasses and dresses” (Showalter 186). Furthermore, while Edna may be a consummate artist-as-hostess who has created a stunning aesthetic experience, the social harmony is thin, based mostly on inebriation. She herself helps to destroy the mood in the erotically-charged “scene” with Victor LeBrun, brother of the man she believes she loves. Afterwards she admits to Arobin that the dinner was “stupid” because it tired her so much (113).

This dinner scene epitomizes the transitional, ambiguous position of the entire narrative. Chopin, like the other women writers of her generation, wanted to be an “artist,” to be taken seriously as a creator of serious fiction. The only definition of the artist available to her, however, was masculine. The way forward lay through alien territory. Yet she would not turn back: she rejected domestic fiction, and with it domestic art. Both Ruth Hall and Avis were not just producers of culture; they were also domestic geniuses, able to turn their homes into havens of aesthetic harmony. But Edna is not interested in her home. She neglects the cook, does not care to shop with her husband for new “fixtures for the library.” Further, Edna declares that Adèle “isn’t a musician” when her husband suggests her as a model of someone who “keeps up her music [but] doesn’t let everything else go to chaos” (77).

The view of art as something to enhance domesticity is presented by the text as a trivializing and feminizing of art. Because the “mother-women” like Edna and Adèle do

not actually perform the work of mothering, but pay others to do so, they are also disconnected from “domestic” art, passive consumers and themselves mere decorations. Ruth and Avis are certainly presented as attractive, but they are also active mothers whose loving attention to the beauty of their homes is based in a sense of connection and affiliation—of creating a home, and not just being one of many valuable objects belonging to their husbands. This sense of domestic art is absent from *The Awakening*. Indeed, it is no longer art at all—merely decoration, like the woman who makes it.⁴² Chopin is trying to move toward what Teresa de Lauretis calls modernist aesthetics: “art is what is enjoyed publicly rather than privately, has an exchange value rather than a use value, and that value is conferred by socially established aesthetic canons” (134–5).

Yet her portrayal of this sumptuous dinner, in her lush, impressionistic style, betrays a certain respect for the woman who made the aesthetic decisions which created this scene. It may be read as having the “two modes of the feminine” which Lauretis sees in some scenes of feminist cinema, in which character and director (or in this case, writer) interact, “the one...made representable by the critical work of the other; the one...kept at a distance, constructed, ‘framed,’ to be sure, and yet ‘respected,’ ‘loved,’ ‘given space’ by the other” (138). While Chopin consciously rejects domestic art, she employs the “high” art of her delicate prose to create a “virtual set piece of feminist aesthetics” (Showalter 185), immortalizing the moment and “elevating” her art.⁴³

Chopin rejected “feminine” art and wanted desperately to be admitted to the club of “real” (i.e., male) artists whom she admired—Maupassant, Ibsen, Whitman—her fiction presents the inner lives of women in ways that her male precursors could not. Showalter suggests that “both the author and heroine seem to be oscillating between two worlds,

⁴²There are quite a few instances in the novel where Edna herself, and not just Adèle, is described by the narrator as having a “noble beauty of modeling” (33) or a forehead that is “smooth, white, and polished” (73), representing her as an art object in a way that seems to undercut Edna’s desire *not* to be possessed by anyone.

⁴³Since, as Sandra Gilbert notes, Edna is “still swimming” (328) at the end, it is tempting to think she made to England, changed her name to Clarissa, and continued giving sumptuous dinner parties. (See next chapter for more on Virginia Woolf and the hostess/artist.)

caught between contradictory definitions of femininity and creativity, and seeking either to synthesize them or to go beyond them..." (170). This struggle to find a place which is neither "feminine" nor "masculine" is Edna's dilemma as well: she cannot be both Adèle Ratignolle and Mlle Reisz, yet she can find no alternative. Thus Edna swims to her ambiguous death, unplanned but inevitable, both "a bird with a broken wing" and "some new-born creature." As Ammons makes clear,

the wild, primordial maternal power that Jewett and Dunbar-Nelson are able to embody in living women... is in Chopin's work disastrously split apart into the separate figures of Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Motherless, the would-be woman artist drowns. Edna's story is one of profound modernist angst, or great personal desperation and pain.
(74)

Significantly, the two writers whom Ammons cites as able to embody "wild primordial maternal power" in their fiction are childless, writing as daughters. Furthermore, the mother figures whom they create hark back to an earlier, pre-industrial age. The deep connection with the land and the sea based on drawing sustenance from them with her own hands, which Cather and Jewett depict as the source of the mother's power and creativity—this connection is not available to the leisure-class Southern White woman. Chopin creates no Antonia, no Mrs. Blackett, because she would have to cross a barrier not just of class but also of race: the pre-industrial mother figure for the Southern writer is Black, the "quadroon" nursemaid who is nameless, nearly invisible in Chopin's narrative. The maternal creativity which Edna seeks grows out of real motherwork, not a mere designation as "mother-woman." Edna cannot find the third alternative based in female creativity because she cannot see, much less learn from, the dark woman who mothers her children. For her, the gap remains.

This split between "mother" and "artist" into separate characters seems to reappear as a split between "life and "art" in women's *Künstlerromane* of the time, as they move

further from autobiography. Where *Ruth Hall* is quite an accurate depiction of Sarah Parton's life, and *The Story of Avis* is based on the experiences of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and her mother of the same name, *The Awakening* does not represent the experience of Kate Chopin.⁴⁴ Nancy Walker states that "*The Awakening* is far from autobiographical. Kate Chopin and Edna Pontellier were the products of very different backgrounds..." (*Historical* 67). She points out Edna's Protestant upbringing in contrast to Chopin's strong Catholic education, and the fact that Chopin both traveled and read far more widely than Edna ever had, and was thus far more sophisticated than the "innocent" Edna. And although Emily Toth's 1990 biography does emphasize ways in which Kate and Edna may have been similar, convincingly superimposing some of her famous character's feelings onto the facts of the writer's life, certainly the events of the story are unlike anything that ever happened to Chopin.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Chopin was a widow in her late thirties when she began to write; Edna is a married woman in her late twenties when she tells Mlle. Reisz, "I am becoming an artist. Think of it!" (83).

The contrast between Edna and her creator is striking. As Showalter points out, "Edna's [final] triumphant embrace of solitude could not be the choice of Kate Chopin the artist. A writer may work in solitude, but literature depends on a tradition..." ("Tradition" 168). Edna finds a room of her own—and commits suicide; Chopin finds a female tradition, and stands upon it. Edna's only really subversive behavior is social, not artistic. While she may have started to "dare and defy" in her art, it is mainly in her sex life that she has crossed the line of acceptable behavior for a respectable woman. If she continues on the course she has undertaken—adultery, open infatuations with other

⁴⁴Similarly, Cather's *The Song of the Lark* is not autobiographical in any strict sense, and Jewett's *Bildungsroman. A Country Doctor* does not depict her own life.

⁴⁵Toth cites a local story, reported in the newspapers, about an older, married woman who, while at a resort, was attracted to a good looking young man who insisted on teaching her to swim. When he left the resort, the woman was reported to have telegraphed him daily, and given him a diamond pin on his return. The young man's father then arrived and took his son away. "The elderly lady mourned, then quarreled with her husband and the hotel help and they heard the husband say 'something about 'puppy-love letters' and an 'asylum'" (334).

men—she will ruin her boys' chances in society. The problem for Edna is not that she can't paint with the boys in the house, but that "in the closed Southern Catholic society of New Orleans in 1899, divorce was not tolerated and knowledge of Edna's scandalous sexual behavior would have made her children social outcasts" (Christ 35). Kate Chopin, however, led a respectable life as widowed mother of six, with a place in the social life of St. Louis.

But where her personal life allowed her to fit into society, Chopin's art, especially in *The Awakening*, was another matter. It is here, in her artistic life, that she resembles her famous character. Her novel was labeled "poison" by one reviewer and generally viewed as shocking and outrageous because it depicted a woman (a mother!) who rejects domesticity for love outside of marriage. Showalter argues that Chopin is working out of, and rejecting, both "domestic" and "local color" fiction in this novel, and that the former is what was particularly daring: "Much of the shock effect of *The Awakening* for readers of 1899 came from Chopin's rejection of the conventions of women's writing" (177). Indeed, Edna Pontellier can be read as almost the precise opposite of a Ruth Hall. As Barker notes of Edna, "not only does she not need the extra income to aid her family, she uses it to leave her husband and set up her own household where she is free to entertain other men" (71).

Just as Edna died for her sexual sins, Chopin paid rather dearly for breaking with literary conventions of women's writing. While she may not have realized quite how shocking the book would seem, she soon found out. Whether the fact that she wrote very little after this novel is due to its reception or to her own failing eyesight and health is unclear. What is clear is that she felt a need to try to make amends and get back into society's good graces. Hence her somewhat disingenuous remarks:

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. (qtd. in Martin 9)

At this time (July 1899), Chopin's eighteen-year-old daughter was preparing for her "debut" into St. Louis society the following winter, and Chopin had begun smoothing the way. She was very conscious of a need to remain respectable. Furthermore, Chopin never did even try to publish "The Storm," her story of decidedly guilt-free adultery which is so popular today. It was found among her papers when she died. Chopin knew that an artist did have to dare and defy—but she herself could only go so far. Like Edna Pontellier, she had to "think of the children."

CHAPTER FOUR

“ALMOST LIKE A WORK OF ART”: VIRGINIA WOOLF AND *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE* (1927)

The gap between mothering and art reaches its widest in *To the Lighthouse*; it also begins in this novel to come together again. In *The Awakening* there is a central mother/artist/protagonist who stands at the point of a triangle between two alternatives: “mother-woman” and “artist.” In *To the Lighthouse* there is no central protagonist who tries to be both mother and artist. Instead we have the two—Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, the mother of eight and the “skimpy old maid, holding a paintbrush” (181). Yet Mrs. Ramsay’s mothering, her ability to bring people together and make “life stand still here,” is very nearly art, and Lily Briscoe finds the meaning of both life and art, at least for the moment, as she cries out, “Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!” In Lily’s final, central stroke, the two poles are reunited—theoretically.

The similarities between *The Awakening* and *To the Lighthouse* are striking. Both take place at a seaside resort, and revolve around the maternal sea, its sound and its images. Where Woolf relies often on metaphors of floating, swimming, and drowning, Chopin’s character floats, swims, drowns. Both Mrs. Ramsay and Adèle Ratignolle sit for their portraits as Madonna. And both novels represent art in the figure of an aging “spinster.” Finally, a dinner party is at the heart of each. Nevertheless, the differences are crucial, for Edna cannot find a way to unite the two subjectivities presented to her, but Lily has her vision of art and life based on both affiliation and autonomy. True, Mrs.

Ramsay is dead, and Lily's painting will be destroyed or hung in the attic—Woolf's reconciliation is only theoretical—but the way is paved for the mother-artist of the future.

The critical literature surrounding *To the Lighthouse* is, of course, vast. That which concentrates on Mrs. Ramsay tends to hover around the question of her influence, whether benign or smothering, creative or crippling, on the “daughter” and artist, Lily. What does she bequeath to her that is worth keeping? Early criticism tended to see Mrs. Ramsay as the ideal mother, epitome of maternal warmth and sensitivity, with the trip to the lighthouse as well as Lily's second attempt at her canvas “sponsored” and sustained by her hovering spirit. However, by the 1970's the tide had turned against her, with feminist critics beginning to suggest that Mrs. Ramsay is controlling, dominating the family. Her ghost must be “slain” so that “the relations of the family [can be] properly adjusted” (Proudfit 38), and the woman artist can succeed only if she rejects the Mother and “accepts her [own] validity as a single woman... whose power comes not from manipulating others' lives to fulfill herself” (Lillienfeld 372). According to this view, Lily must escape from the smothering presence of Mrs. Ramsay in order to “reclaim a full image of the self” (Squier 282).

With the 1980's came a focus on “androgyny,” and attitudes toward Mrs. Ramsay softened. Adams, for example, argues that Lily defines herself “somewhere to the left of ‘beak of brass’ and somewhere to the right of ‘fountain of fecundity’” (94). Mrs. Ramsay ceases to be the Terrible Mother and can be seen as an artist, though her art is limited. For Susan Gubar, who places *To the Lighthouse* in the context of the development of the female *Künstlerroman*, Mrs. Ramsay is no longer a devouring monster who must be slain, or even a ghost to be exorcised; instead her life is celebrated by the daughter's art. Nevertheless, the daughter's life still “repudiates the strictures that structured the mother's” (“Birth” 48). Indeed, the daughter's art is seen as “recompense” for this rejection. Rachel Blau DuPlessis also sees in the twentieth-century an “emergent daughter,” often writing about a “‘thwarted mother’ type of artist” (91). Though Lily's

art requires both mother and father, Duplessis argues it “is much closer to the model Mrs. Ramsay had presented,” (97) because it is grounded in an aesthetic that is connected and interpersonal, immersed in life.

Finally, in 1989, Marianne Hirsch’s *The Mother-Daughter Plot* emphasizes a movement of “contradiction and oscillation” between “longing for connection and a need for disconnection...” (96) Arguing that it is impossible to reconcile Woolf’s call both for a “woman’s sentence” and for androgyny, she suggests that *To the Lighthouse* be read in the light of the “both/and” of feminist aesthetics described by DuPlessis in “For the Etruscans.” Thus, says Hirsch, “in my reading, Lily’s strategy is not the adoption of an androgynous artistic identity, but of a dual, perhaps duplicitous posture which...embraces contradiction” (110). Thus criticism of *To the Lighthouse* has followed a sort of spiral, with Mrs. Ramsay coming back into favor, though only partially.

Mrs. Ramsay is Woolf’s “Angel in the House,” Chopin’s self-effaced mother-woman. She lives for others, empathizing so intensely, especially with her husband and children, but also with anyone else within reach, that she believes that she reads their minds and knows what they need before they do. Throughout “The Window” she sits still for Lily’s painting, amuses her son James with a catalogue and a story, knits a sock for the lighthouse keeper’s son, responds to her husband when he approaches, plans who shall marry whom. She watches everyone carefully, especially the men (“Indeed, she had the whole of the other sex under her protection.” [6]), noticing their needs and desires, imagining their pasts and their futures. “They came to her, naturally, since she was a woman, all day long with this and that; one wanting this, another that; the children were growing up; she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions” (32). Yet all this giving has its rewards, for others respond to her, often doing what she wishes them to do: staying for dinner, talking to the person next to them, getting engaged. She is also rewarded by the attitude of men toward her: “an attitude towards herself which no woman could fail to feel or to find agreeable, something trustful,

childlike, reverential" (6). She is mother to all she surveys, and receives the homage this entails.

Especially does her husband require her reassurance, her sympathy. The "arid scimitar of the male" drinks at her maternal fountain: she provides the reassuring domesticity that he requires. "She assured him, beyond a shadow of a doubt, by her laugh, her poise, her competence (as a nurse carrying a light across a dark room assures a fractious child), that it was real; the house was full; the garden blowing" (38). She makes him feel that she will never abandon him, never allow him to be without her motherly care, though at a price to herself. "So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was lavished and spent..." (38) And while this does in one sense erase her, exhaust her, smudge her edges, it also gives her a sense of fulfillment, "the rapture of successful creation" (38). This is her art.

Mrs. Ramsay attempts to bring order out of chaos, to bring domestic harmony—flowers, food, health, love—to everyone. She desires that everyone who is single should marry and have children. She fusses over the garden, makes sure that the food is perfect, draws everyone into the conversation. It is not truth she cares for; no, truth is often the enemy of comfort and order. The truth about the weather, for example, need not be expressed to the child who dreams of going to the lighthouse; the truth about the cost of restoring the greenhouse must be kept from her husband. Distressing facts are avoided, covered like the skull in the bedroom which she wraps in her shawl. It is still there, but different, transformed, by her maternal genius for compromise, for accommodation.

Just as truth can be the enemy, so also Mrs. Ramsay finds herself fighting sometimes against life itself, because it destroys that which she wants to build.

Life, she thought.... a sort of transaction went on between them, in which she was on one side, and life was on another, and she was always trying to get the better of it, as it was of her... but for the most part, oddly enough,

she must admit that she felt this thing that she called life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance. (59–60)

Later, as she imagines for a moment, irrationally, that Paul, Minta, Nancy, and Andrew are late to dinner because they have been drowned, “again she felt alone in the presence of her old antagonist, life” (79). This fear of life itself is linked to the sound of the sea, of the waves breaking. Normally this sound reassures her with its “cradle song, murmured by nature,” since it seems to suggest that nature works with her to mother, soothe, and protect. But sometimes, “suddenly and unexpectedly,”

like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly [it] beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow.... (16)

Time itself, then, is above all Mrs. Ramsay’s enemy, the enemy of the peaceful domestic order which she works so hard to create. This becomes clear especially at the celebrated dinner scene, with its perfect *Beouf en Daube* and edible centerpiece. When she sits down at the head of her table, she seems in quiet despair, exhausted by the long day, wondering “what I have done with my life?” (82). She watches the young lovers and feels nothing for her husband, feels nothing at all but detachment as she watches herself ladle the soup. She has nothing, “only this—an infinitely long table and plates and knives” (83). She looks at the shabby room without beauty or connection, and sees that there is no wholeness or completeness. “Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate.” The infinity of table and plates and dinner guests must be given shape and meaning—and she must summon the energy to do it, for no one else can or will. “The whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her” (83).

This act that she is about to perform is specifically identified in her mind with fertility and femaleness. “Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it” (83). She may bring together the separate

elements into a whole because she is a woman, a mother. Further, the essence of her art is ephemeral, timebound: she must perform within time, with the ticking clock, the pulsing heartbeat. The effort she makes to bring herself out of nihilistic torpor is compared to that of shaking a watch that has stopped—"and so on and so on, she repeated, listening to it, sheltering and fostering the still feeble pulse" (83). Yet as she approaches her creative epiphany, she is poised on the verge between life and death, and had she not been able once again to revive that pulse, she might be grateful to be spared the tremendous effort that is required: "as a sailor not without weariness...thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the sea" (84).

Unlike Edna Pontellier, Mrs. Ramsay cannot allow herself to drown, even metaphorically, because she feels responsible to all the people in her life. She begins her work with pity, pity for William Bankes, who sits next to her, "poor man! who had no wife, and no children and dined alone in lodgings except for tonight" (84). He is starved for domesticity (thinks Mrs. Ramsay) and she must provide it. She also pities Charles Tansley, but he resents it, reads it as condescension. And he cares nothing for her domestic harmony, which he sees as shallow and "respectable": "It all seemed to him silly, superficial, flimsy. Why did they dress? He had come down in his ordinary clothes.... They did nothing but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat. It was the women's fault. Women made civilisation impossible with all their 'charm,' all their silliness" (85). Nevertheless, he does not escape her, he likes and admires her, for her beauty.

Meanwhile, as Mrs. Ramsay chats with William Bankes the reader sees another glimpse of her relationship both to time and to other people, for she is amazed to discover from William that people she knew long ago are still carrying on in the same house. She goes back "like a ghost" to a particular day twenty years earlier, finding that "that particular day, now become very still and beautiful, had remained there, all these years" (87). Even more amazing to her—to the perplexity of William Bankes—is that these

people have continued to exist when she wasn't thinking about them: "For it was extraordinary to think that they had been capable of going on living all these years when she had not thought of them more than once all that time" (88). Mrs. Ramsay empathizes so strongly with people, tries so hard to feel what they are feeling, that she begins to believe that they exist *because* she thinks about them, like some goddess who creates and sustains the world by imagining it. Adams sees this as a mark of Mrs. Ramsay's "chilling" vanity: "she is finally incapable of seeing [people] except in relation to herself" (99).

Mrs. Ramsay is trying to extend domestic order to William Bankes, to Lily, to Charles Tansley, but they are resistant. What all three oppose in their minds to this dinner, this family scene, is "work." William Bankes feels that he "prefers to dine alone," does not really like "family life," and finds it a dreadful waste of time to be sitting there, taking so long over a meal, with servants coming in and out. "If he had been alone dinner would have been almost over now; he would have been free to work" (88). Yet as he sits, waiting for Mrs. Ramsay to give orders to servants, strange thoughts come into his head. He finds himself wondering about life, about why humans insist on living and procreating and prolonging the species. "Foolish questions, vain questions, questions one never asked if one was occupied. Is human life this? Is human life that? One never had time to think about it. But here he was asking himself that sort of question" (89). He feels it is foolish, a waste of time. Yet perhaps this is one purpose of Mrs. Ramsay's art: to nudge people toward thinking about life, her "old antagonist," and what it can possibly mean.

Mrs. Ramsay enlists the other women in her own "work"—bringing together everyone at the table into a comfortable, domestic wholeness. Lily, for example, though she toys with the idea of not being "nice" to the man next to her, not aiding him in asserting his ego, "so that he may relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity" (91), recognizes Mrs. Ramsay's silent plea that she is "drowning," that "unless you apply some balm to the anguish of this hour and say something nice to that young man there, life will run upon the rocks" (92). And so, for "the hundred and fiftieth time" Lily consents to be

nice, even to Charles Tansley, because Mrs. Ramsay wishes it. And Minta, too, with her “fine instinct,” makes a remark about the neglect of Shakespeare which comforts Mr. Ramsay. “And Mrs. Ramsay saw that it would be all right for the moment anyhow, he would laugh at Minta...” (108).

As things are going well, and Lily has soothed Charles Tansley, Mrs. Ramsay feels free to return in her mind to that day in the past which is fixed and sealed like art, “like reading a good book again, for she knew the end of that story, since it had happened twenty years ago” (93). She finds this comforting, safe: in contrast, the present moment is precarious, full of the unknown, the unexpectedness of her enemy: “Life...shot down even from this dining-room table in cascades, heaven knows where” (93). And indeed, things almost instantly take a turn for the worse. Charles Tansley has begun talking politics—fishing, unemployment, the government. William and Lily and Mrs. Ramsay herself are bored; they do not really care about the fishermen. Mrs. Ramsay turns to her husband, wishing he would say something, when suddenly his face is distorted; he is furious because old Augustus Carmichael, the poet, has asked for more soup. “She saw his anger fly like a pack of hounds into his eyes, his brow, and she knew that in a moment something violent would explode...” (95).

She must do something to distract everyone from his anger, his pettiness. ““Light the candles,”” she says instantly. Suddenly in the flickering light the centerpiece, composed by Rose of fruit and shells, becomes newly visible. Mrs. Ramsay sees “Neptune’s banquet...vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus,” and she and Augustus are united in aesthetic appreciation of the “lolloping red and gold” (97). The reader recalls Edna’s table, with its gold silk lampshades and red wines, its yellow and red roses. But Edna’s art is predominantly self-assertive, a declaration of independence, where Mrs. Ramsay’s is affiliative, domestic. Suddenly, her dinner party has come together into the wholeness which she has been trying to create: “The faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into

a party round a table” (97). Life and death are being kept at bay, out there in the darkness, and the present moment is safe. “Here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily” (97).

The difference is not merely on the surface, in the seeming. “Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there” (97). Immediately the latecomers return, the *Beouf en Daube* is served, and all is again well. Paul tells Mrs. Ramsay what has happened—referring to himself and Minta as “we,” and thus assuring her of the engagement which she has desired and planned. “They’ll say that all their lives, she thought, and an exquisite scent of olives and oil and juice rose from the great brown dish...” (100). For Mrs. Ramsay, the promise of future domesticity—the lifelong intimacy of marriage, children to carry it all on—mingles with the lovely aroma of the perfect food and is completed, fêted by it:

This will celebrate the occasion—a curious sense rising in her, at once freakish and tender, of celebrating a festival, as if two emotions were called up in her, one profound—for what could be more serious than the love of man for woman...bearing in its bosom the seeds of death: at the same time these lovers, these people entering into illusion glittering eyed, must be danced round with mockery, decorated with garlands. (100)

For Mrs. Ramsay this engagement evokes both tragedy and comedy, fall and rise, death and dancing.⁴⁶ Her dinner has become a sort of ritual, an initiation marking a liminal moment in life. This is Mrs. Ramsay’s religion, thinks Lily: “[she] exalted that, worshipped that...and yet, having brought it all about, somehow laughed, led her victims, Lily felt, to the altar.... the emotion, the vibration of love...bound for adventure...launched...” (101). Jane Lillienfeld argues that the dinner party is a festival

⁴⁶Similar associations with romantic love occur in *Night and Day*: “‘We were in a little boat going out to a ship at night,’ she began. ‘The sun had set and the moon was rising over our heads...It was life, it was death. The great sea was round us. It was the voyage for ever and ever’” (qtd. in Lee 77).

of the Great Mother, where the “horny pink-lined shell’ [in the centerpiece] is like that manifestation of The Terrible Mother’s awesome power, the vagina detenta” (356) and “the meat in the dish [appears to be] composed of the bodies of the couple who give themselves in love” (358). The Mother requires “suffering, transformation, and sacrifice” as she leads the young toward marriage, the “death to the singular self” (358). While this violent language seems out of step with the tone of the scene, nevertheless Mrs. Ramsay is essentially baptizing the couple into the communal life which she herself cherishes.

And now, in the banter about Minta’s brooch and English food and Mr. Ramsay’s boots, Mrs. Ramsay suddenly feels that they are all floating securely on an upcurrent, an “element of joy” rising up from them all and hanging in the air, “holding them safe together.” As she helps William Bankes to another portion of beef, she feels that they are experiencing eternity in that moment: “something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out...in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral.... Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures” (105). The perfect *Beouf en Daube*, with its golden juices and exquisite fragrance, becomes a metonymy for this “moment of being”: “Here, she felt, putting the spoon down, was the still space that lies about the heart of things, where one could move or rest” (105). As hostess and mother she presides, serving out what they need, providing for them all. “‘Yes,’ she assured William Bankes, ‘there is plenty for everybody’” (105).

At this moment, Mrs. Ramsay feels that “her eyes [are] so clear” that she reads each guest’s thoughts and emotions unveiled, as though they were trout in underwater darkness, suddenly lit by a lamp. But not just revelation comes to her—unity and completeness as well. “Something to the right, something to the left; and the whole is held together; for whereas in active life she would be netting and separating one thing from another...now she said nothing. For the moment, she hung suspended” (107). This is her artistic epiphany, the moment outside of time, where she “sees life clearly, and sees

it whole.” As she listens to the conversation, reading what each one is thinking and feeling behind their words, her eyes are drawn to the fruit, the center of this dinner table.

Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene; until, oh, what a pity... a hand reached out and took a pear and spoilt the whole thing. (109)

For Mrs. Ramsay, food—its color, texture, aroma—and the table at which one eats, can bring people together in a moment of aesthetic harmony and domestic security which brings revelation and completeness. But it is by its nature ephemeral—the beef is finished; a hand reaches out and takes a pear.

She looks at her children, laughing at some private joke, and is sad: “it seemed to her that they would laugh when she was not there” (109). Already the suspended moment is turning to melancholy. Dinner is over. She waits as her husband tells a story, listening to the voices, but not to the words. She feels that she is in a cathedral, with voices “crying out the Latin words of a service” (110). Suddenly her husband recites a bit of poetry, and she knows that the words are “saying quite easily and naturally what had been in her mind the whole evening”: ““And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be are full of trees and changing leaves”” (110). Life and time, her old adversaries, come crowding back—but she has had her vision, made them stand still for a moment, before all passes away:

With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta’s arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past. (111)

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Lily, the artist, cannot fully accept Mrs. Ramsay's view of life. During dinner, while she has often responded to Mrs. Ramsay, to her pleas for help in managing the men, she has also silently criticized and resisted her. When she is kind to Charles Tansley, for instance ("Woman can't write, women can't paint"), she feels that the price has been too high. "She felt Mrs. Ramsay's gratitude..., but what haven't I paid to get it for you? She had not been sincere. She had done the usual trick—been nice" (92). Lily has just as much empathy as Mrs. Ramsay. She, too, reads others minds and knows what they are thinking, feeling, expecting, "as in an X-ray photograph" (91). But she feels the tug of truth as Mrs. Ramsay does not. Indeed, she feels that she will never really know someone if she allows herself to simply "be nice." "She would never know him. He would never know her" (92). At times she feels that Mrs. Ramsay's pity is misplaced, her empathy mistaken in what it imagines another to be feeling. "It was not true, Lily thought; it was one of those misjudgements of hers that seemed to be instinctive and to arise from some need of her own rather than of other people's. He is not in the least pitiable. He has his work" (84).

Work. This is what Mrs. Ramsay leaves out, but the refuge to which Lily resorts again and again. As she thinks how old and tired Mrs. Ramsay looks, and of her need to pity others, Lily remembers "all of a sudden as if she had found a treasure, that she had her work. In a flash she saw her picture, and thought, Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle" (84). Her work—her art—rescues her from the whirlpool of other people's emotions into which Mrs. Ramsay pulls her. A little later, frustrated by the insincerity of human relations, she sees the "salt cellar, which she had placed there to remind her...and her spirits rose so high at the thought of painting tomorrow that she laughed out loud at what Mr. Tansley was saying. Let him talk all night if he liked" (93).

Yet Mrs. Ramsay also has her "work," for unlike Edna Pontellier she is a practicing mother. She does need servants to cook, serve, and clean because her household is large, and household conveniences not yet available. She has not cooked the

Boeuf en Daube nor given their children their baths. But she spends her time reading to the children, amusing them, actively planning meals, ordering food, running errands. Her “art” depends in part on her presiding at the table rather than running back and forth to the kitchen, but her most important tool is empathy, and she works in the midst of life. Mrs. Ramsay’s art is not elite or exclusive; it is the art of the kitchen, the nursery, the dinner table—not the sequestered *atelier*. Virginia Woolf herself was certainly classbound, as is Mrs. Ramsay, but Woolf tried hard to empathize with “Mrs. Brown” in the railway carriage, and recognized her own limitations in this area. Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner is quite different from the exclusive society *fêtes* of Edna Pontellier or even Clarissa Dalloway.

This “work,” however, is not what Lily has in mind. Lily’s work requires a certain amount of solitude and separation. Where Mrs. Ramsay puts the needs and feelings of others above everything else, Lily reminds herself that what others say can only matter so much. At some point she refuses to give in to the egotism of a Charles Tansley, to the need of men to assert themselves, to feel superior, especially to women. “Why did her whole being bow, like corn under a wind, and erect itself again from this abasement only with a great and rather painful effort?... I must move the tree to the middle; that matters—nothing else” (86). Lily’s work is a safe place where she can escape the effacement, the invasion, which she sees in love and marriage. “At any rate, she said to herself, catching sight of the salt cellar on the pattern, she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle” (102).

Lily’s art requires that she resist Mrs. Ramsay and her insistence that women give and sympathize. When Mrs. Ramsay is dead, Mr. Ramsay appeals to Lily for the pity and attention which he misses: “But with Mr. Ramsay bearing down on her, she could do nothing. Every time he approached...ruin approached, chaos approached. She could not paint” (148). The artist cannot be always giving, giving. The artist needs some boundaries, some sense of self separate from others:

But he'll be down on me in a moment, demanding—something she felt she could not give him.... That man...never gave; that man took. She, on the other hand, would be forced to give. Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died... Really, she was angry with Mrs. Ramsay. With the brush slightly trembling in her fingers she looked at the hedge, the step, the wall. It was all Mrs. Ramsay's doing. (149)

Lily resolves, despite her anger, to give him what she can. But when he comes at her with all his neediness, she feels she cannot do it. She feels inadequate, unwomanly, “a peevish, ill-tempered, dried-up old maid” (151). Finally, his demands for pity and sympathy standing “in pools at her feet,” she exclaims, ““What beautiful boots!”” (153). She feels terrible—yet he is delighted. He is proud of his boots, loves to talk about them. They have reached “a sunny island where peace dwelt, sanity reigned and the sun for ever shone, the blessed island of good boots” (154). Suddenly Lily feels the sympathy for him which she could not muster earlier. Tears come to her eyes, and she sees the widower as “a figure of infinite pathos” (154).

But it is too late; the children have come and Mr. Ramsay no longer requires her: he has become leader of the expedition to the lighthouse. They are gone, and Lily returns to her painting, but she feels “curiously divided, as if one part of her were drawn out there...the other had fixed itself doggedly, solidly, here on the lawn” (156). She finds herself divided between art—her canvas, solitude, separation—and affiliation—others and their needs.

The gap between mothering and art, between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, is widest here. Ten years earlier, as Lily was painting the first picture, she remembered how Mrs. Ramsay had visited her room late one night to chat, insisting that

they all must marry, since in the whole world whatever laurels might be tossed to her (but Mrs. Ramsay cared not a fig for her painting)... there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman...has missed the best of

life. The house seemed full of children sleeping and Mrs. Ramsay listening; shaded lights and regular breathing. (49–50)

For Mrs. Ramsay, art—painting, writing— is nothing compared to being a mother, presiding over a house full of sleeping children, or doing “good deeds” for others. “One could not imagine Mrs. Ramsay standing painting, lying reading, a whole morning on the lawn. It was unthinkable. Without saying a word...she went off to the town, to the poor...” (196). For her, “that matters—nothing else.” Yet, Lily thought, “she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself,” and she finally laughed at Mrs. Ramsay and her domesticity, her desire that others should live lives like her own: “She had laid her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s lap and laughed...almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand” (50).

Mrs. Ramsay seems to agree with Charles Tansley in his taunting of Lily, that “women can’t write, women can’t paint,” for she only finds Lily’s attempts to paint amusing: “Lily’s picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face, she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously...” (17). Lily’s art is mildly comic, a substitute for marriage because she has not Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty. Yet art can be taken seriously in a man, for she imagines that her son James might turn out to be “a great artist; and why should he not? He had a splendid forehead” (31). For Mrs. Ramsay, artistic ability seems to rest in both gender and physiognomy: an ugly woman paints insignificant pictures; a man with a splendid forehead may become a great artist. Her views on the subject are conventional, Victorian—like herself.

Yet in spite of Mrs. Ramsay’s dismissal of her own work, Lily recognizes that Mrs. Ramsay’s maternal power to bring wholeness to life, to unify groups of people, is a sort of art. Standing there before another canvas, with Mrs. Ramsay long dead, she remembers another day, on the beach:

It seemed to depend somehow upon Mrs. Ramsay sitting under the rock....
 But what a power was in the human soul! she thought. That woman
 sitting there writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity...
 she brought together this and that and then this, and so
 made...something—this scene on the beach for example, this moment of
 friendship and liking—which survived, after all these years complete,... and
 there it stayed in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art. (160)

Lily sees the connection between her own painting and Mrs. Ramsay's ephemeral art. At the most basic level, Lily has no illusions that any of her canvases will be immortal, hung on public walls: "It would be hung in the servants' bedrooms. It would be rolled up and stuffed under a sofa" (158). She paints because in the process she may experience "illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (161), just as the candles lit up the faces at Mrs. Ramsay's dinner table. As she stands with her brush in her hand, Lily recognizes that she with her paints is trying to do just what Mrs. Ramsay was:

Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, "Life stand still here"; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing...was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. "Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" she repeated. She owed it all to her. (161)

Lily, who has resisted domesticity and used her work to protect her from the demands that she "be nice," that she be erased like the women around her by marriage and mothering, nevertheless owes her art, her ability "to make of the moment something permanent" to Mrs. Ramsay.

As Lily stands before her blank canvas, thinking of Mrs. Ramsay, trying to find the courage to begin, she asks herself why she paints, why she enters the "perpetual

combat... a fight in which one was bound to be worsted" (158). Lily reminds the reader of Edna Pontellier on the beach about to take her last swim, as she stands on the brink of making the first mark on her canvas: "she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul...hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt" (158). Both women are alone, naked, newly born into the world. But the woman artist has progressed in twenty-eight years—unlike Edna, Lily finds a way to unite her divided soul.

At last she puts paint to canvas. She begins to walk this "odd road...this of painting. Out and out one went, further and further, until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea" (172). She dips her paint brush "into the past," recapturing that moment ten years ago, when Mrs. Ramsay sat in the window with James in her lap. She thinks of Mrs. Ramsay's intentions for them all, that they should marry and have children and be happy, and she "triumphs" over Mrs. Ramsay (175), because Paul and Minta have not been at all happy, because she has successfully resisted marriage. Lily thinks of the "mother and child" in the window—"a subject which, they agreed, Raphael had treated divinely"(176)—and her insistence that Madonna and child can without disrespect be rendered as a "triangular purple shape." Again the reader recalls Edna's failure to realistically portray Adèle. Lily succeeds where Edna fails, in transforming the sanctity of Victorian "Motherhood" into art, by standing back and seeing it as one shape among many, one of life's colors, but no longer overwhelming, overpowering. She has removed the personal. As Sharon Proudfit suggests, "One of the masses, the dark triangle, the wedge of darkness with which Mrs. Ramsay identifies herself, is no longer bound up with emotions outside the formal relations of the picture" (38). The daughter can achieve her vision when she can stand back and see the mother from "the island of good boots"—the realm of the impersonal. "She had only escaped by the skin of her teeth though, she thought...it had flashed upon her that she would move the tree to the middle, and need never marry anybody" (176).

And as she stands there, remembering, she is suddenly filled again with longing for Mrs. Ramsay; she has triumphed over her, yet she also needs her, needs her to show Lily how to paint her picture, how to make wholeness and meaning from “a centre of complete emptiness” (179). The morning has become a still pool. She waits for something to emerge: “a hand would be shoved up, a blade would be flashed” (179). She realizes the her picture itself is the answer. “‘You’ and ‘I’ and ‘she’ pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint...even a picture like that...‘remained for ever’” (179). Suddenly she is crying. She wants to stand defiantly on the lawn with the old poet Mr. Carmichael and demand to know the meaning of life, “an explanation, why was it so short, why was it so inexplicable.... If they shouted loud enough Mrs. Ramsay would return” (180).

For a time Lily does feel her presence, a sort of vision she has had on and off since her death, of Mrs. Ramsay putting on a white wreath to join the dead. Once again she is able to paint. Then Lily turns and looks out to sea, finds a brown smudge which must be Mr. Ramsay’s expedition to the lighthouse, imagines them all out there, far away. Turning back to her canvas, she is struck by some disproportion: “For whatever reason she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary” (193). Separation and affiliation; the solitude of art and the tumble of life; Ivory Tower and Sacred Fount; thinking and feeling—Lily wants some kind of unity, of completeness, if only for a moment. She wants to get at “the thing itself before it has been made anything” (193); she wants “to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, [that’s a mother and child,] and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy”(202).

Suddenly Mrs. Ramsay does indeed return, sitting in her place at the window, knitting once again the stocking for the lighthousekeeper’s boy, casting her shadow on the step: “There she sat” (202). Lily’s reaction seems odd: she rushes to the edge of the lawn to look for the boat. “And Mr. Ramsay? She wanted him” (202). Back and forth

the narrative goes, between the lawn and the boat, between Lily and Mr. Ramsay, house and lighthouse, like Lily herself trying to bring everything together. As he springs lightly onto the rock, Lily sends out her emotions and thoughts toward him, stretching “her body and mind to the utmost. Ah, but she was relieved. Whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning, she had given him at last” (208). She has seen Mrs. Ramsay, sent out her sympathy to Mr. Ramsay—now she turns at last to her canvas with tears in her eyes.

With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (209)

Lily has remained unmarried, insisted on seeing things her way, on standing alone before her canvas. Yet she has also learned to love the world, both people and things, by creating unity, however fleeting:

To choose out the elements of things and place them together and so, giving them a wholeness not theirs in life, make of some scene. or meeting of people (all now gone and separate), one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers, and love plays. (192)

Thus love becomes art, to see all things simply as they are, but also as miracles slipping into eternity, and to capture the moment somehow. Mrs. Ramsay did it through caring intensely for everyone as though they were all her children; Lily Briscoe does it by putting colors on canvas.

The gap between art and mothering is represented by Lily’s central stroke. Woolf presents a model of creativity based on the mother’s domestic art of connection, yet which nevertheless still requires solitude, the locked door. Indeed, the central stroke may be seen as providing not unity, but a balance of opposing forces that will never really be united. As Jane Fisher argues,

Since Lily's 'line there, in the centre' completes her composition by formally dividing it, her painting only achieves an ironic sort of closure or unity. This closure by division effectively combines Mrs. Ramsay's emphasis on unity with Mr. Ramsay's principles of linearity. (106)

In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf writes that, "Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father" (103). Indeed, this concept seems to have been worked out "practically" in *To the Lighthouse* before it was presented theoretically two years later. Lily Briscoe takes her vision of life and art from Mrs. Ramsay but rejects her domestic medium. She chooses instead to take from the father, from Mr. Ramsay, the self-containment, the questing linearity, required for the artist of words and paint. As Keith May argues, "Lily is, surely, a surrogate for the author.... Virginia Woolf had to express the multiform 'feminine' experience with words, those instruments of 'masculine' order. She represented with the tools of her father the vision of her mother" (98). As Lily expresses it, "Feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing: but...clamped together with bolts of iron" (171).

In Woolf's representation of female creativity, the mother provides the model, while the daughter actually performs the art. This type of "elegiac" narrative is typical of the early twentieth century, according to Gubar, DuPlessis, and Hirsch. They see the daughter giving new value to the domestic, breaking down barriers between art and life. As DuPlessis notes, such narratives are often based in autobiography, and a need to compensate for the losses in the mother's life:

The daughter becomes an artist to extend, reveal, and elaborate her mother's often thwarted talents.... the mother is the daughter's muse, but in more than a passive sense. For the mother is also an artist...in unconventional media... [who] struggles with her condition to forge a work, usually one unique, unrepeatable work—an event, a gesture, an

atmosphere—a work of synthesis and artistry that is consumed or used.

(94)

Susan Gubar sees Woolf's narrative "disentangling a maternal psychology and aesthetics from biological motherhood... a 'tribute'...to the domestic artistry of the mother" ("Birth" 47). She sees the daughter/artist refusing "to invoke a binary opposition to biological immanence" (50). Thus the gap between art and mothering becomes, for Gubar, a "generation gap" negotiated "in a sometimes guilty, sometimes tender effort" ("Birth" 49) by the daughter-artist to remember her mother while also standing at a distance.

The result is the daughter's art, not the mother's, and while they are doing something similar—"making of the moment something permanent"—Lily's canvas is also different from Mrs. Ramsay's dinner. The difference lies in the medium and well as in the relationship to time. Mrs. Ramsay's medium is life itself, and therefore, as Thomas Vogler points out, her art is by its very nature "self-consuming": "the catalogue is consumed in use, the green shawl goes, the Rayleys' marriage is not what she had hoped,... the beef is eaten, the dinner ends, and the house itself is brought to the brink of annihilation" (36). Mrs. Ramsay dies, and "time passes." Her art lasts for a moment and then plunges into the past. Nevertheless, it is also important to remember that it lingers on as memory, in her mind, and in the minds of her guests. As Kate Adams notes, "for Mrs. Ramsay, the moment made endures only so long as it is remembered, only so long as the subjects of her canvas recall that it was she who made them part of something whole" (98). Yet perhaps one could omit the "only," for Mrs. Ramsay believes that Paul and Minta will remember that evening "however long they lived" (113).

Still, Lily's art is different. While Mrs. Ramsay shapes the present moment, turning it into memory, Lily with her paints recaptures a moment in the past. Lily does not finally have her vision until her art becomes a reconstruction of a moment ten years earlier, a memory of Mrs. Ramsay sitting in the window. Vogler suggests that for Lily, "art is a

form of active memorializing, a special way of seeing the past and continuing its relevance in the present” (36). Yet, Lily’s art is not merely a static piece of “high” art to be hung on a wall. Its fate as object is not important. Rather, it shares what Vogler calls the “basic limitations of life; its eternity is not in the canvas to be ‘hung in the attics’ any more than Mrs. Ramsay’s is in the beef to be eaten and digested” (36). Rather it is a process, “a clarification of life achieved within life itself” (Vogler 36). Clearly, Lily’s art is more like Virginia Woolf’s, at least in this novel; she reaches into her childhood to recreate and transform her family and their summers in St. Ives.

The similarities between Lily’s art and Virginia’s are those between the art of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, a collaboration and rivalry which continued throughout their lives. As Diane Gillespie notes in *The Sisters’ Arts*, Lily Briscoe’s creative process parallels that of both sisters, writer and painter, in many ways, including “her desire to communicate both the solidity and transiency of life, her tendency to reduce people and objects to essential shapes” (221). However, the differences between the novelist’s art and the painter’s is crucial, and involves, once again, time. The viewer experiences the painting in a flash, a single moment of recognition based on shape and color. The reader experiences a book in time, one word following the next, so that a *process* is recreated with each reading. Thus while Woolf at times envied the purity of painting, she could present the creative process in a way that Bell could not. Indeed, a painting of someone writing a book is a far different proposition from a book about someone painting a picture, for we experience with Lily, in time, the hesitations and choices she makes as she tries to make of “life stand still here.” As Gillespie notes,

Woolf’s novel has certain advantages. It includes Lily Briscoe and her painting. To the extent that Lily’s struggles to create her painting parallel Woolf’s creation of her novel, it can include as part of its content the struggle that went into its own creation. Lily’s painting can only demonstrate the fruits of such a struggle, the finished form which denies

the effort.... Woolf creates a portrait of Lily Briscoe creating a portrait, however abstract, of Mrs. Ramsay, but she creates her own portrait of Mrs. Ramsay and her own partial self-portrait besides. (222)

Lily seems to represent both daughters. Certainly *To the Lighthouse* is Woolf's most autobiographical novel, and the portrait of the artist as painter is accompanied throughout by what Ellen Rosenman calls a "shadow writer discretely beside the painter... 'Women can't paint, *women can't write*'...and 'the sight, *the phrase* had its power to console'" (93, italics by Rosenman). As Woolf brings mothering and art toward a theoretical reunion, closing the gap between life and art, autobiography starts to become more possible again. Kate Chopin's short stories and novels never come close to autobiography; references to her life are carefully removed and abstracted. Apparently seeing herself as an "artist" rather than simply a woman earning a living for her family meant transforming life more thoroughly than it had for Fern and Phelps. *The Awakening* is a transitional book, the "first aesthetically successful novel to have been written by an American woman" (Showalter 170). As such, it seems to represent quite a bit of anxiety *not* to be personal, not to write in the "feminine" forms of journal, letter, memoir.

Virginia Woolf certainly shared this anxiety about the personal, according to Hermione Lee. She had a great fear of being thought "sentimental" and held that art was more powerful and persuasive when the "merely personal" was drained off, especially for women. Lee quotes Woolf: "how vain, how personal, so they will say, rubbing their hands with glee, women always are: I can hear them as I write" (595). Much of her life as a "modernist" was spent escaping from "the personal," that oppressive, claustrophobic miasma of Victorianism, attaining "the island of good boots." Still, especially in *To the Lighthouse*, much is autobiographical, and Woolf recreates both her mother and herself, much as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps did in *Avis*. Indeed, it is a commonplace of Woolf criticism, doubtless because Woolf herself suggested it, that she wrote *To the Lighthouse* as a sort of therapy, a way of both mourning the parents and escaping from their dead

hands: "I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts [sic] do for their patients" ("Sketch" 81).

Phyllis Rose, one of many Woolf biographers, suggests that in this narrative Woolf was

working out of a way in which she can see herself as her mother's heir while still rejecting the model of womanhood she presents. She does this by conceptualizing Mrs. Ramsay as an artist, transforming the angel in the house, who had been for the Victorians an ethical ideal, into a portrait of the artist. (169)

Yet Rose also sees Leslie Stephen as an important model for his daughter:

To succeed as a writer Woolf found it necessary to model herself largely on her father, adopting his compulsive methods of work, and rather laboriously acquiring a sense of self that ran the risk of becoming the 'masculine' egotism she hated. (161)

The connection between mothering and art, between affiliation and separation, remains theoretical. Mrs. Ramsay herself does not paint; her creative efforts are "almost" art. Lily does not marry, will not have children. Indeed, the mother must apparently die before the daughter can have her vision. The death of Mrs. Ramsay is interpreted in various ways. Sharon Wood Proudfit argues that she dies because the daughter needs to leave the pre-Oedipal space before she can be an artist: "While Mrs. Ramsay lives, while the desire to be sheltered in the cradle of Mrs. Ramsay's warmth is sustained, Lily cannot finish her picture..." (32). Susan Squier presents Lily as a female Oedipus who needs to cooperate with the father, and can only do so when the mother is out of the way:

Woolf questions this myth of "the sterility of men" in *To the Lighthouse*, showing us a collaborative effort of creative insight embodied in Mr. Ramsay's trip to the lighthouse and Lily Briscoe's painting. Through their

separate tasks, the man and the woman learn together to live as adults, without Mrs. Ramsay's support. (283)

Hirsch suggests that Mrs. Ramsay's death is a direct result of her "art": "Mrs. Ramsay's stance as artist is, for women, a dangerous one to live up to because her aesthetic perfection is bought at the expense of her life" (112).

At the end of the day, however, Mrs. Ramsay is still dead. Whether she must die because she is the smothering, infantilizing, cannibalizing Terrible Mother or because her own art of "giving, giving, giving" kills her, the mother is certainly gone and only the daughter remains, paintbrush in hand. As Hirsch notes, "these texts about mothers are elegies; they are not composed by the daughters until the mothers are dead." This "daughter's art" takes from the mother life itself, but rejects the material conditions of motherhood, which conflict with the necessary conditions of art, the now proverbial room and five hundred pounds: "There must be freedom and there must be peace" (AROO 104). The actual mother creates "almost art" out of life itself. The daughter preserves the mother's vision in solitude, looking back in peace and quiet. A maternal art has been theorized; it remains for a mother to actually write or paint herself.

CHAPTER FIVE

“LET’S ALL WRITE A BOOK ABOUT IT”: MARGARET DRABBLE AND *THE MILLSTONE* (1965)

In “How Not to Be Afraid of Virginia Woolf,” written in 1972, Margaret Drabble declares, “We need privacy, said Virginia Woolf; each woman needs a room of her own. And here I sit in my own room in Bloomsbury, feeling myself uncannily a product of her imagination” (70). According to Drabble, Woolf did not live to see women like Drabble herself, “women novelists with many children, rushing from typewriter to school to butcher...but they were about to be born and she welcomed them. She did her best to create them” (72). Woolf’s idea of maternal creativity becomes real in the person of Margaret Drabble and her characters. Motherwork and cultural work are no longer simply compatible in theory. The gap between biological and cultural production has closed, united in one person who both writes and cares for children. However, that person cannot be called both “artist” and “mother.”

Margaret Drabble was early dubbed the “novelist of maternity” (Showalter 305), based on her first five books. Indeed, she decided to write her first novel, *A Summer Bird-Cage*, because pregnancy had brought her acting career to a standstill, and it is well known that her first three novels “coincide approximately with the gestation of her three children” (Orr 230). These early novels (1963–69) deal with the difficulties of young, educated, upper-middle-class women who are trying to find an identity after university, often through combining a career with marriage and mothering.

While Drabble's later novels (seven more since 1970) have become more "universal," with more characters, male protagonists, and much broader settings and subjects, she received a remarkable amount of disdain for writing about mothers and children before she "moved on." Peter Firchow, for example, writing in 1976, obviously likes Drabble's work; nevertheless, he begins with nearly four pages of apology for deigning to write about her. "It is difficult to take someone seriously whose most intense personal preoccupations... concern the care and feeding of babies" (94), he opines. However, she is "serious," even "remarkable," though she "hides her lights in rough homespun" (95). As if this were not enough insults for one brief article, he goes on to call her a "miniaturist" (96) because she writes about "female heroines with identity crises" (95).

Criticism from the "other side" has not been lacking either. Perhaps most notably, Ellen Cronan Rose criticized Drabble in 1980 for her conservatism, especially her emphasis on the joys of motherhood, concluding her study of Drabble "by urging her to provide more positive feminist blueprints for women" (129).⁴⁷ In 1983, Moran felt the need to defend Drabble, suggesting that while she won't admit to writing "about feminism," nevertheless she has "conducted her own life in a manner most would call liberated" (10). Furthermore, she is happy to note that Drabble has left behind the "'dog-eared problem'" of the "educated, promising young woman who, upon marrying and having a baby, suddenly finds 'her horizons shrunk to diaper size'" (6).

Nevertheless, Drabble used these early "solipsistic," "agoraphobic" novels to explore a large theme: "the feminine conflicts between biological and artistic creativity" (*Literature Showalter* 306). This conflict is distilled and decanted very nearly to its

⁴⁷Here is Drabble's humorous jab at "feminist blueprints":

My mother, you know, was a great feminist. She brought me up to be equal.... You know what her creed was? That thing that Queen Elizabeth said about thanking God that she had such qualities that if she were turned out in her petticoat in any part of Christendom, she would whatever it was that she would do.... I have to live up to her you know. (*The Millstone* 33)

essence in Drabble's third novel, *The Millstone*, where the protagonist is an unwed mother who gives birth to her child without informing the father, yet continues successfully to write for a living. Thus heterosexual love and marriage are removed from the equation, and only maternity remains. This situation allows Drabble to explore the boundaries between nature and culture, art and life. While women are "fated" to be linked to "nature" by pregnancy and childbirth, rather than preventing them from participating in culture, this fact can connect them to both life and art in new, redemptive ways.

Rosamund Stacey, a single, upper-middle-class, White woman in her early twenties, comes as close to immaculate conception as is possible in a realistic novel. She is uninterested in sex, but embarrassed to admit this "character flaw" to her friends in "swingin' 60's" London. She has two "boyfriends," each of whom thinks she is sleeping with the other. She loses her virginity at last, on a "one-night-stand" with a man whom she thought was gay, and he disappears from her life. When she realizes that she is pregnant, she makes a brief, half-hearted attempt at an abortion but soon decides to keep the baby. Rosamund is writing her dissertation on sixteenth-century love poetry; she has 500 pounds a year from fellowships and tutoring, and a flat of her own—or rather, her parents' flat, while they are in Africa. While this is Woolf's prescribed material minimum for a woman who wishes to write, it turns out to be the requirement for having a baby as well.

Much of the criticism of *The Millstone* centers around Rosamund's reliability as first-person narrator. It all started with Susan Spitzer, writing in 1978, and her Freudian reading of Rosamund's—and Drabble's—psyche. She argues that Rosamund's narrative of personal growth is merely "a smokescreen of sorts created the better to obscure the character's infantile fantasy...for Rosamund if not for Drabble herself..." (86). At issue here is Rosamund's unconscious mind, and the distinction between it and Drabble's own unconscious. "To what extent Margaret Drabble has expressed Rosamund Stacey's unconscious *unconsciously*, it is difficult to say" (88). While Spitzer cannot prove that

Drabble is just as much a victim of the penis-envy that motivates Rosamund, she sees no indication in the narrative that the author is any more self-aware than the character. She argues that “critics of *The Millstone* have been misled by Drabble’s character” because she “‘seduces’ us into approving her” with her wit and the impression she gives of being self-critical (104). Further, she feels that, like Drabble, most female readers of the book identify so closely with Rosamund that their egos “triumph” along with her “over the dim yet fearful conflicts that are so much a part of our psychic make-up.” She suggests that readers and critics should resist this temptation, though “it is not at all clear Drabble intended us to do so” (104).

In 1986, Pamela Bromberg looked specifically at the problems of evaluating Rosamund’s honesty and self-awareness as she narrates her own story. She agrees with Spitzer that one of the issues is “authorial distance,” and that the “self-enclosed first-person narrative form of *The Millstone* produces three levels of inescapable uncertainty for the reader” (180). Those three uncertainties involve first, Rosamund’s unconscious motives, which may lead her to distort the facts of the narrative in ways that the reader cannot interpret; second, Rosamund’s own “fate,” and whether she actually has grown or only believes that she has; and third, “Drabble’s problematic relation” to the narrative. “Does Drabble identify with, sympathize with, or criticize her character?” she asks. “Without going beyond the novel we cannot arrive at any satisfactory answer” (181–2). Thus Bromberg concludes that there is essentially no solution to this problem: we will never know how much to believe Rosamund, how self-aware she is, or how closely identified Drabble is with her own character.

In her 1991 *Margaret Drabble: A Reader’s Guide*, Valerie Grosvenor Myer, while agreeing with some of Spitzer’s insights, defends both Rosamund and Drabble from her charges, at least partially. “To be fair, I believe Rosamund (and her creator) are perfectly aware” (42) of many of the things Spitzer argues are unconscious: the unacknowledged desire to have a baby, the fear of pregnancy and childbirth. Myer argues

that while Drabble's younger self may indeed have identified with her protagonists, including Rosamund, "the alert reader does not" (44). She further suggests that Drabble was reading Freud when she wrote *The Millstone*, and that Rosamund herself mentions Freud and the trickeries of the unconscious mind. "Rosamund is perfectly aware of her own tendency to self-deception" (47). Myer concludes that the book is full of "ambiguous truths [and]... ironies" but remains "a small masterpiece" (47).

Clearly any reading of this book must take into account Rosamund's motives, both conscious and unconscious, especially surrounding her pregnancy. Why does Rosamund "accidentally" get pregnant, when she has avoided it for so long? One of her "boyfriends," a writer named Joe who is scorned by her other friends because he successfully turns out a novel a year (rather like Drabble herself), is quick to analyze her reasons for getting pregnant and failing to abort: "All women want babies. To give them a sense of purpose" (48). Naturally Rosamund is annoyed at the implication that she "has a secret yearning for maternal fulfillment" (47). Joe also suggests that "they won't let you keep it" (47). She finds this idea, that "some unknown authority would start interfering with my decisions" (47), even more disturbing. In Joe's eyes her pregnancy has turned her into a helpless female body, yearning for babies which she won't be allowed to keep. Joe knows that she has stepped over the brink, into the messy depths of "nature."

Her other novelist friend, Lydia, also assumes that Rosamund unconsciously wanted a baby. "I suppose the truth is," she concluded, "that you must really want it. On some level, don't you think?" I shrugged my shoulders, for I did not know the answer." (71). In any case, the difference between accident and unconscious longing is moot. Both Drabble and Rosamund believe in Fate, and clearly female biology is a part of Rosamund's "nature" which she can no longer, should no longer avoid. Rosamund's comic attempt at an abortion illustrates this pretty clearly. She is working up her courage to do the deed with a bottle of gin and a hot bath, when the bell rings announcing three friends, including Joe and Lydia. She is "well brought up" and feels obliged to offer them

a drink; they discuss “literary creation” and consume most of the gin which Rosamund needs to abort her biological creation. As they are finally leaving, Rosamund considers inviting them to stay and watch her “ordeal.” In fact, they would no doubt welcome a chance to gather material for their writing: “they would have leaped with alacrity at the prospect of such a sordid, stirring, copy-providing evening” (18). However, she shrinks from offering up her life for their art and lets them go.

When they are gone she resolves to get on with her task. “It would be so unpleasant, I could not let myself off” (18). However, she is too inebriated to regulate the rather delicate hot water heater and the only bath she can run is stone cold. She drunkenly concludes that it might be “no such bad thing, however impractical and impossible,” for her to have a baby. “It would serve me right, I thought, for having been born a woman in the first place.... I might as well pay, mightn’t I, if other people had to pay?” (19). She resolves to face the facts of female biology and have her child.

Rosamund has managed up to this point to escape the consequences of inhabiting a female body. She has avoided sex, and the complications that go with it, and is successfully negotiating academe. Her life is free, convenient, and unimpeded. Indeed, she asks herself (admittedly while drunk), “I couldn’t pretend that I wasn’t a woman, could I, however much I might try from day to day to avoid the issue?” (19) However, while Rosamund is conscious that she has so far escaped the vicissitudes of femaleness, Spitzer’s comments on *why* she has rejected her female body are helpful. She notes that Rosamund is repelled by the “bloated human people”—the pregnant women⁴⁸—that she now sees “crawling” everywhere, like insects (102). Furthermore, Lydia is “in a word, woman, the adult woman... who gets involved with men” (103). And Rosamund sees Lydia as “dirty,” with her pasty skin, “tawdry” clothes, and stained raincoat. “Natural, not

⁴⁸In a somewhat milder mood, Rosamund notes the contrast between these real women and the pregnant woman of popular lore: “One hears much, though mostly from the interested male, about the beauty of a woman with child, ships in full sail, and all that kind of metaphorical euphemism.... but the weight of the evidence is overwhelmingly on the other side” (64).

civilized, is Lydia,” concludes Spitzer (103). Rosamund knows that to be a woman is to be entangled in “nature,” and she recognizes that eventually she must face facts: hence her “accidental” pregnancy.

By becoming pregnant, she comes directly into contact with what it means to be on the “wrong” side of the nature/culture binary.⁴⁹ Pregnancy, she discovers, initiates her into a society of persons bound together simply by the fact of being female. This becomes especially clear at the prenatal clinic. She is appalled at the sight of the other pregnant women: depression, anemia, exhaustion, and misery prevail. She feels alienated from these sorry women—many of them moaning and complaining—but recognizes that she is in fact one of them.

It struck me that I felt nothing in common with any of these people, that I disliked the look of them, that I felt a stranger and a foreigner there, and yet I was one of them, I was like that too, I was trapped in a human limit for the first time in my life, and I was going to have to learn how to live inside it. (65)

Being a pregnant woman, bound by “nature,” means that the differences of “culture” are diminished, though certainly not eliminated.

Birth, pain, fear and hope, these were the subjects that drew us together in gloomy awe, and so strong was the bond that even I, doubly, trebly outcast by my unmarried status, my education, and my class, even I was drawn in from time to time.... Indeed, so strong became the pull of nature that by the end of the six months’ attendance I felt more in common with the ladies at the clinic than with my own acquaintances. (68)

Rosamund’s upper-middle-class background has allowed her to remain isolated from the limitations imposed on others by class as well as gender. She has had a solid

⁴⁹Rose notes that “the real impetus for [Drabble’s] first novel was provided by a book she read during her last year at Cambridge, a book she acknowledges affected her profoundly, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*.” (1).

socialist upbringing, with parents who sent her to state schools, used National Health, and asked “the charlady to sit down and dine with us.” However, the effect was not quite what her parents intended: “the charlady went off with all the silver cutlery in the end, she despised them” (32). It was “a disastrous experiment in education,” yet clearly Rosamund is still very self-conscious about her privileges. Nevertheless, she is in for a shock when she enters the waiting room of a local clinic: “here, gathered in this room, were representatives of a population whose existence I had hardly noticed” (42). Many are foreign, or old, or mildly insane; almost all are down-at-heel and depressed. “Those who looked worst of all were, ominously enough, the mothers: there were four mothers there with young children, and they looked uniformly worn out” (43). She wonders where the bright, attractive mothers are, “with their Christopher Robin children” (43). After she leaves the clinic, she is worried,

not because it seemed that I was really going to have this baby, but because I had been so surprised and annoyed that I had to wait so long. Everyone else there had looked resigned; they had expect to wait... I wondered on how many other serious scores I would find myself ignorant.... (44)

Soon Rosamund comes to believe that her pregnancy is an neither an accident nor “the effect of divine malevolence... . It seemed to have meaning” (74). She begins to feel that this experience of having a child has been sent to teach her something, “to reveal to me a scheme of things totally different from the scheme which I inhabited, totally removed from academic enthusiasms, social consciousness, etiolated undefined emotional connections, and the exercise of free will” (75). Her Ivory Tower of education and class is being flooded by waters from the Sacred Fount of Real Life, and she comes to learn emotionally what she has only known intellectually:

The facts that I now discovered were precisely the same facts that my admirable parents had always so firmly presented to our childish eyes: facts of inequality, of limitation, of separation, of the impossible,

heartbreaking uneven hardship of the human lot. I had always felt for others in theory...but now, myself no longer free, myself suffering, I may say that I felt it in my heart. (77)

One day at the clinic a pregnant woman, large and foreign-looking, with a toddler and a baby, asks her to hold the sleeping infant while she goes in for her exam. Rosamund cannot refuse and soon finds herself hefting the weight of a real baby for the first time in her life. "A sense of the infant crept through me, its small warmth, its wide soft cheeks, and above all its quiet, snuffly breathing" (79) After ten minutes or so, the woman returns and Rosamund has her own exam. But on the way home she sees the woman again, watching one child play with trash beside the road, holding another in her arms, while a third swells her womb. "She stood there, patiently waiting, like a warning, like a portent, like a figure from another world" (80).

Rosamund realizes that before her pregnancy she would have simply walked by this woman and her children without seeing them. Now she wonders how she can get down the road at all, with the burden that she is carrying. "The weight of her child was heavy in my arms, and...I saw that from now on I, like that woman, was going to have to ask for help, and from strangers too: I who could not even ask for love or friendship" (80). This weight, the weight of an infant, is the "millstone" which is Rosamund's salvation: being "dragged down" into the depths of the human predicament is just what Rosamund needs. Not only does she discover her connection to these "others"—the connection of human limitations—but she realizes that she will have to give up being a member of the class which stoops to give and learn herself to ask for help. The "masculine" dream of autonomy is gone. "I felt my independence threatened: I did not see how I was going to get by on my own" (45). As Drabble notes in her introduction to the 1970 edition, "independence, as I tried to show in the book, is a double-edged blessing. It cuts people off from one another: there's no surer way of making contact with other people than when one has to ask them for help" (x).

Rosamund's pregnancy is a time of trial, for she sees no "light" at the end of any "tunnel," has not imagined that having a baby will be a delight; indeed, has hardly imagined a baby at all: "gin, psychiatrists, hospitals, accidents, village maidens drowned in duck ponds, fears, pain, humiliations. Nothing, at that stage, resembling a baby" (39). And the birth itself certainly offers more reminders that pregnant women are often infantilized and patronized. The nurses do not, for example, believe her when she tells them how frequent her contractions are. "When I told them, they said Nonsense, but when they investigated they naturally found me to be right" (109). During most of her brief, intense labor she is left alone, told that nothing will happen for hours; finally the baby is actually born without the midwife because none of the nurses will believe her descriptions of what she is feeling. When the baby arrives, however, it is love at first sight. She finds her daughter's eyes grave and charming as she looks at her mother with "seeming recognition" (114). She lies awake for two hours feeling pure happiness, "something I had not gone in for for a long time" (115).

Drabble is famous for her "feminine," open endings, for allowing her novels to simply stop. *The Millstone* ends with George, the father, finally seeing his baby. In her final, ironic joke, the "virgin" mother and her baby are reunited with the unsuspecting father on Christmas eve. The reader may expect closure and a "happy" heterosexual ending. Instead, Rosamund refrains from telling George that he is the father, even though she likes him. She realizes that a man, even a sweet good man like George, is no longer enough for her: "it was too late, much much too late. It was no longer in me to feel for anyone what I felt for my child" (191). She has learned maternal love, and it is enough. She cannot go back to the "half-knowledge" of life which was hers before Octavia. "I neither envied nor pitied his indifference, for he was myself, the self that but for accident, but for fate, but for chance, but for womanhood, I would still have been" (191).

Rosamund's story is presented in contrast to an intertext, the didactic moral fable for young women. John Hannay defines intertextuality as "this sense of life repeating a

previously heard story, of life predestined by the patterns that have shaped our consciousness" (2). Hannay sees Drabble's pervasive use of allusion and "the codes and conventions governing the form, genre, and style" of other, familiar texts as linked to her belief in fate, chance, and providence. He argues that "her characters achieve wisdom, to greater or lesser degrees, by recognizing the intertext of their fate and, in different ways, by accommodating its demands" (16).

The most obvious "intertext" of *The Millstone* is *The Complaint of Rosamund*, a sixteenth-century poem by Samuel Daniel, whom Rosamund is studying. This cautionary tale for young girls about "Fair Rosamund," the mistress of Henry II who was murdered by his jealous queen, serves to alert the reader that Drabble's text, as Peter Firchow points out, is "a reversal of the traditional plight of the violated maiden" (97). Rosamund-the-narrator consistently presents her past self in terms of literary versions of her own predicament: "I walked around with a scarlet letter embroidered upon my bosom, visible enough in the end, but the A stood for Abstinence, not Adultery" (21). She sees herself as a modern-day Hester Prynne, but her shame rests not in being unwed but in rejecting the body.

Rosamund's relation to this intertext is fairly obviously ironic: instead of being poisoned by a jealous queen, Rosamund finds that an illegitimate baby is quite a status symbol, "just about the last word" (84). Thanks to Lydia, her hospital bedside in the evenings resembles a literary *salon*, where she lies, "surrounded by flowers, receiving much correspondence and many visitors every day" (124). Further, rather than her baby bringing her shame and ruining her life, Octavia brings her self-knowledge and great joy. And yet Rosamund does indeed have lessons to learn from her predicament, and hers is certainly a moral fable. As Drabble herself makes clear, "my books are not about feminism or babies, but salvation" (qtd. in Myer, *Reader's Guide* 17).

The title echoes this double meaning, for while Rosamund's "millstone" is clearly Octavia, the illegitimate child who arrives from nowhere to drag her mother down, the

baby also brings her mother “amazing grace.” “Grace,” according to Drabble, consists in “being in tune with the purpose of life, . . . in harmony with some other purpose” (284).

Rosamund recognizes the meaning of her pregnancy and maternity and changes her life in accordance. In this other sense, the baby is more a life preserver than a millstone. The reader is driven to look at the actual text to which the title alludes:

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18: 5–6, RSV)

Far from being the weight of a child around an adult neck, the millstone is a protection for the child, hung around the neck of anyone who harms it. The child actually stands in the place of Christ, bringing Rosamund her salvation. Better to drown than to have aborted this child; better to drown than not to learn the lessons she brought.

Another critical discussion about *The Millstone* centers around just this point: the lesson Rosamund does (or does not) learn from pregnancy and mothering. Nancy Hardin’s 1973 reading, like my own, argues that “Rosamund’s pregnancy forces her to come to terms with the world around her in a more totally involved sense than her perusal of literature could ever offer.” She suggests that Rosamund’s “undigested Fabian background” gives way to “real social awareness” (31–32). However, Valerie Grosvenor Myer’s 1974 *Margaret Drabble: Puritanism and Permissiveness* takes a sharply opposing view. In line with her general thesis that Drabble’s characters need to fight their puritan background in order to achieve full humanity, Myer sees Rosamund as “not quite mak[ing] it.” “Puritan withdrawal and isolation mean negation for Margaret Drabble,” (111) says Myer. But Rosamund’s rejection of heterosexual love at the end of the book means that she “ultimately . . . stands condemned . . . a pathetic failure, a severed head” (176).

Peter Firchow is firmly optimistic about the salvific effects of Rosamund's maternal experiences. "It is as if she possessed some new organ of perception that equipped her to understand as she has never understood before; and the new organ, of course, is Octavia. What she could not accept on the plane of the intellect or art, she accepts in the body" (106). Firchow emphasizes the image of the "machine" which he sees throughout the text: the machinery of the National Health system, the legal machinery surrounding abortion, the "machinery of social convention" (101). He concludes that the "Christian/Rousseauian/Marxian ethic underlying the welfare state" (107) is the millstone that threatens to drown Rosamund and her child, but that "beyond the machinery of man, there stands the superior machinery of the universe" (104) and Rosamund learns maturity by learning a "sense of self...as never before" (105) despite "the machine."

In my own view, although Rosamund has been baptized somewhat reluctantly into "life," into "nature," by her pregnancy and maternity, she has learned from this experience; in Hannay's terms, she has recognized the intertext of her fate and accommodated its demands. Yet she does not give up her hold on "culture." She insists that she can continue to support herself by writing. "I simply did not believe that the handicap of one small illegitimate baby would make a scrap of difference to my career" (125). And she is correct: she finishes up her thesis on schedule and "it was published and praised in the right quarters" (125). For while Rosamund learns, and the text asserts, that indeed women's lives are shaped by "nature," the intertextual presentation of the "moral fable" suggests that "art and life, fiction and truth, coexist in an ongoing dialectic of perception, interpretation, correction, and revision" (Bromberg 184). Drabble takes on the familiar dilemma between "art" and "life," the dilemma which destroyed both Avis and Edna Pontellier, and acknowledges that mothering requires an immersion in life but denies that art and life can be separated.

Rosamund insists that her life, improbable as it seems, imitates the didactic tales which “nowadays” people no longer believe:

One reads such comforting stories of women unable to conceive for years and years, but there are of course the other stories, which I have always wished to discount because of their overhanging grim tones of retribution...and Bunyanesque attention to the detail of offense.

Nowadays one tends to class these tales as fantasies of repressed imaginations, and it is extraordinarily hard to convince people that it is even possible to conceive at the first attempt.... Anyway, it is possible, because it happened to me, as in the best moral fable for young women....

(20)

This question of what is believable in realistic fiction recurs in a chat with Lydia over her own experience with unplanned pregnancy. Lydia had tried to get approval for an abortion on grounds that her mental health was too fragile for her to have a child. She was told to go to an office and tell her life story, and she spun a long and tragic tale, Scheherazade-like, in order to save herself. By the time she finished she was nearly in tears, and the doctor was sympathetic. But she had done her storytelling too well, and he was convinced that having an abortion would upset her even more than having the baby.

“There didn’t seem to be any way out of it: he would only recommend termination for people who were so insensitive that they wouldn’t break down because of it, yet presumably if they were so insensitive then they wouldn’t be going to see him in the first place.” (72)

Fate, however, intervened. The state would not allow her an abortion, but “providence” would: she was hit by a bus directly in front of the doctor’s office and miscarried, but was otherwise unhurt. Rosamund is fascinated. She suggests that Lydia, who is going through a dry spell, use the incident in a book. ““Oh, I couldn’t possibly.... It’s so unconvincing. Far too unrealistic for my kind of novel. It sounds like something

out of Hardy's *Life's Little Ironies*" (73). Rosamund, however, argues that life is full of "little ironies." "'I've always thought that *Life's Little Ironies* had rather a profound attitude to life,' I said truthfully" (73). She argues that such absurd coincidences *are* realistic: after all, it actually did happen to Lydia. Such naive reasoning will not wash with Lydia, who knows the rules of realistic fiction: "There's a difference between what happens to one in real life and what one can make real in art" (73). Obviously, Drabble agrees with Rosamund, since she has herself just represented such an accident in her own fiction. The skin between the writer and her narrative is paper thin here; the reader feels Drabble's presence, her freedom not only to break the rules but to draw attention to her own *faux pas*. Art and life are not so separate as Lydia would like to think.

Lydia learns this in a rather painful way later. She has moved into Rosamund's flat with her, to call the ambulance and be there to help when the baby comes home. The night before the birth Rosamund discovers that Lydia is writing a novel about an unwed mother. Seeing her life mined so overtly for art is a bit of a shock: naturally, she reads the entire (unfinished) manuscript at once. She discovers that Lydia has represented the "Rosamund character" as using scholarly work as an escape from her personal problems "and the realities of life in general.... She drew a very persuasive picture of the academic ivory tower" (104). Her foil is a friend "who presumably represented vitality, modernity, honesty and so on" (105). Rosamund doesn't think much of the "life" option, since this character is "busy frittering her life away in a vital pursuits like serving in a theater bar, working on a magazine, and having an affair with a television producer" (105).

Rosamund is offended: Lydia herself is using Rosamund's life for her art, while criticizing it for not being "vital" enough. "She had compared herself once to a spider, an image not wholly new, drawing material from its own entrails, but this seemed to me to be a somewhat more parasitic pursuit" (105). A few months later, Octavia somehow (another "accident?") gets into Lydia's room while Rosamund is busily writing a book review. Absorbed in her work, Rosamund does not question the long and helpful silence

from the other end of the flat. Finally, she thinks to check on Octavia and discovers that “her mouth was wedged full...of wads of Lydia’s new novel” (163). Lydia, who does not believe in the “realism” of “life’s little ironies” has fallen victim to one in spades: the real live illegitimate baby has destroyed the novel about the illegitimate baby; the child of Rosamund’s body has destroyed the child of Lydia’s brain. Rosamund is appalled. “It was clearly the most awful thing for which I had ever been responsible...and yet in comparison with Octavia being so sweet and so alive it did not seem so very terrible” (163). Furthermore, she can see the “poetic justice” in the situation, since Lydia has never admitted to Rosamund what her novel is about.

“Life” seems to have won out. Baby eats book. But there is another twist coming. Before Lydia gets home from work, Joe, who is now dating Lydia, phones. Rosamund tells him what has happened and they speculate about how Lydia will react to the “tragedy.” Before he hangs up, Joe tells her,

“Remember exactly what she says for me, will you? I might use it some day.”

“So might I,” I said. “Or so might she. Let’s all write a book about it.” (167)

In the event, Lydia doesn’t say much. She is relieved that Rosamund has apparently not discovered what the novel is about, and admits that this will force her to revise, something she hates doing normally. Her art will be improved by this little bout with “life.” Drabble does not believe in the zero sum game of life and art. Art feeds parasitically off life; life destroys art; art recreates the story of life destroying art, providing money for lively, art-destroying babies.

Commenting on this passage, Ursula Le Guin sees the truth of it at a practical material level:

Babies eat manuscripts. They really do. The poem not written because the baby cried, the novel put aside because of a pregnancy, and so on. Babies

eat books. But they spit out wads of them that can be taped back together, and they are only babies for a couple of years, while writers live for decades; and it is terrible, but not very terrible. (230)

This playful exploration of the boundaries between art and life becomes more pronounced in Drabble's later novels. As Bromberg notes in her essay on Drabble's narrative technique, "the question of art's relation to life has remained central in all of Drabble's work. Her search for answers has led her to increasingly self-reflexive narrative forms ..." (183). In her later novels, Drabble begins to intrude upon her own narrative, reminding the reader that there is indeed an author behind the fiction. It occurs for the first time in *The Waterfall*, Drabble's fifth novel. The main character, Jane Gray, is a mother and a poet, though the central concern of the narrative is with heterosexual, genital love. At the end of the novel Jane, who is narrating her own story, tells us that she and her lover James go to see "a piece of scenery." "It is called Goredale Scar, the piece of scenery, it is part of the Pennines: it is real, unlike James and me, it exists" (286). Somewhat surprisingly, this technique serves not to destroy the illusion of art, but to reinforce it: to make fictional characters seem even more real. Because of this effect, Drabble calls it a

double-bluff. What she is saying is that Goredale scar exists.... You may well think that James and I do not exist because we are characters in fiction and this kind of thing happens in fiction all the time and isn't true. But if you think a little more, you will realize that we exist. It exists and this could only be a record of a true experience. (Hardin interview 292)

Drabble blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, between author and characters. She denies that "art" is a refined and exalted domain, separate from "real life." There is no Ivory Tower. Thus the submersion of the mother in life cannot separate her from art.

The trend back toward autobiography, begun by Woolf, is continued by Drabble, who writes about women her own age with dilemmas like her own. Indeed, one of the

problems critics have with *The Millstone*, as we have already seen, is that they are not clear how much to separate Drabble from her characters. As Rose writes, “it is hard to know when the protagonists are personae of Margaret Drabble and when they are simply intended to represent members of her own age group” (24). Though not so autobiographical as Fanny Fern, nevertheless Drabble clearly does not feel the need to depersonalize her narratives or create large distances between herself and her characters. She has blurred the distinction between art and life, and her description of her own creative life sounds much like that of her characters.

This insistence that art is part of life is reflected in Drabble’s rather courageous (in the sixties) allegiance to that “loose baggy monster,” the realistic novel, for which she took quite a bit of criticism at first. As a student at Cambridge in the fifties under F. R. Leavis, Drabble and the other students in English literature were steeped in the “highbrow” tradition, in which culture was eminently hierarchical. As Drabble herself recalls, this made it extremely difficult for a young aspiring writer:

I think that, in fact, the atmosphere Leavis created... was so destructive: the standards were so high.... If you’re a would-be writer at the age of eighteen, you’re not to know whether you’re a minor writer or major writer, you just know that’s what you want to do. And there you are with Leavis and everyone telling you that Arnold is beneath contempt, why should anyone ever dare to begin. (qtd. in Wojcik-Andrews 176)

Nevertheless, Drabble dared to write novels which returned to the nineteenth-century novelistic tradition of social commentary and realism. As Orr notes, “she values the popular accessibility of realistic novels” (233). Where Virginia Woolf used Arnold Bennett to stand for everything she rejected, Drabble wrote his biography and admires him for describing the people and places of the Midlands, where she herself grew up. Although she has come to value Woolf for her commitment to feminism and to depicting

the lives of women,⁵⁰ she is uninterested in the formal experiments of modernist fiction. She sees novelists like Bennett as more imaginative about the lives of others who are not like himself, a quality she admires: “he could imagine Virginia Woolf’s life but she couldn’t imagine his” (Cooper-Clark interview 72).

Drabble’s combining of popularity with seriousness puts her in good company. According to Lawrence Levine, the second half of the twentieth century has seen a shift away from the cultural hierarchies which developed over the second half of the nineteenth (243–).⁵¹ Instead, there is a movement in the arts toward reuniting “highbrow” culture with “low”; that is, eliminating this distinction entirely. Jazz in Lincoln Center, courses in “reading” television at most universities, the resurging popularity of opera, graffiti and comics on display at MOMA, Romeo as L.A. teen idol of the silver screen—the examples are legion. As Susan Sontag noted in 1987, “the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture seems less and less meaningful.... It reflects a new, more open way of looking at the world and at things in the world” (qtd. in Levine 244–5). Levine reminds us that E. D. Hirsch’s 1987 list of what cultured Americans should know included “Saint Thomas Aquinas and Fred Astaire, Beethoven and the Beatles, Chaucer and Ty Cobb...” (248).⁵²

With ideologies about the “artist” thus transformed, Drabble can represent the mother artist as a worker, much in the way that Fanny Fern did before the high/lowbrow

⁵⁰Indeed, a discussion between Rosamund and Joe almost seems to be an *homage* to Woolf: When she tries to explain to Joe, the prolific novelist, about the rapture she felt on seeing her child for the first time, he has nothing but contempt for this little bit of life: “‘What you’re talking about is one of the most boring commonplaces of the female experience. All women feel exactly that, it’s nothing to be proud of, it isn’t even worth thinking about’” (115). An argument ensues, but “it was no good arguing, Joe was just not interested” (115). However, she thinks of her own boredom at the “lengthy descriptions of the sexual ecstasies of [Joe’s] heroes” and is comforted. After this discussion of the competing claims of maternal rapture or male sexual ecstasy as proper subject of the novel, Drabble proceeds with several pages about the maternity ward, where Rosamund spends ten days mostly listening to the other mothers talk about kippers, the family wash, and soap flakes.

One hears echoes of “A Room of One’s Own”: “All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded, I said” (89).

⁵¹While Levine is talking about the United States, it seems safe to suggest that a similar phenomenon exists in the U.K.

⁵²To mention Hirsch is, undoubtedly, to imply Bloom and his “plaint.” Levine acknowledges that this notion of highbrow and low dies hard.

distinction had become dominant. When Rosamund finds that Lydia's novel portrays her literary scholarship as escapist, she protests, "It was work, and I did it, and reasons did not come into it; *il faut cultiver notre jardin*, as Voltaire admirably said" (105). *The Millstone* demonstrates quite clearly that it's all simply work: doing research about sixteenth-century poets, changing diapers, writing novels. Rosamund has no pretensions about her work: "Lydia was the only one who would have considered herself a creative artist. I myself was wholly uncreative, and spent my life on thorough and tedious collating of certain sixteenth-century poetic data" (15). And like Ruth Hall, Rosamund admits that she is now writing to support herself and her child. "'I have to write now,' I said, 'for the money. I used to try not to, I don't really approve of that kind of thing, but money is money. It keeps her in zinc and castor oil ointment. They make one do a lot of things, babies, that one doesn't really approve of'" (185).

Rosamund recognizes, however, that the particular type of work she does has made it easier for her. Just as Ruth Hall found that writing was something she could do to the rhythm of the breath of a sleeping child, so Rosamund notes that her profession allows her a great deal of flexibility. Indeed, her education as a scholar makes her life as a single mother possible. "I was equipped to earn my own living, forever, and in a trade that could be employed as well in a hospital bed as anywhere, or almost as well" (125). Rosamund recognizes that she is privileged, and that her background and education (and, the reader knows, her race) have made being a single mother without suffering any social stigma a possibility. Indeed, this moral fable does have aspects of the cautionary tale, for Rosamund warns her readers, in essence, "don't try this at home," unless your home has a very "good" address:

I only thought I could get away with it, to put it briefly, because those ambulance men collected me from a good address, and not from a bed-sitter in Tottenham.... So, in a way, I was cashing in on the foibles of a society which I have distrusted; by pretending to be above its strictures, I

was merely turning its anomalies to my own use. I would not recommend my course of action to anyone with a shade less advantage in the world than myself. (124)

While Rosamund has avoided the obstacles of ideology, both about “art” and about “fallen womanhood,” the material obstacles remain, and for her this mostly means getting someone in to watch the baby while she is at the library. However, this poses another ideological problem: why should someone else care for her baby? While Avis, Edna, and even Mrs. Ramsay never see this as a question to be asked (and Ruth didn’t have the option), for Rosamund with her socialist upbringing, it is indeed a dilemma. Up till now, she has always avoided hiring domestic help. “I could not pay anyone to do dirty work which I could do myself” (80). She does not see this attitude as a virtue, however, or even “technically good socialism,” since she has been denying work to someone who needed it. It is simply a “scruple,” a scruple which she will have to give up once the baby comes. Eventually, Lydia finds “an amiable fat lady named Mrs. Jennings, [who] came in two days a week while I dashed off to the library between feeds” (127).

Some women will write books about sixteenth-century love poets; other women will take care of babies. While neither Drabble nor Rosamund sees one type of work as “better” or “more worthy”—all is work, all is life—they do recognize that some work pays better, and that women privileged by background and upbringing often have more choices about what kind of work they will do. This is a problem which Drabble does not try to solve in *The Millstone*,⁵³ though she certainly does not avoid it. She clearly depicts the unfairness of life, and the frustration of conscientious, upper-middle-class liberals who don’t know what to do about it.

This problem is presented most starkly when Rosamund is in the hospital with Octavia, who has been diagnosed with a defective heart. The baby must have an

⁵³The problem of inequality, suffering, “good time” and “bad” becomes more and more urgent in Drabble’s novels, especially her most recent trilogy.

operation, immediately, a high risk affair with no guarantees. Suddenly Rosamund is thrown back on the vagaries of National Health, but this time she is not alone. She has learned to empathize with the poor, with other mothers, and now with a tiny infant. She is appalled to think that Octavia will awaken in a strange place, in pain, and alone.

Lord knows what incommunicable small terrors infants go through, unknown to all. We disregard them, we say they forget, because they have not the words to make us remember.... Like Job's comforters, we cannot believe that the innocent suffer. (143)

She finds that the only way she will be allowed to see her baby is by throwing a monumental screaming fit. She has spent her life being polite, trying not to cause a fuss, asking for nothing that will cause anyone problems. But now she must give this up: "I have never been good at getting what I want; every impulse in me tells me to give up at the first breath of opposition. And yet this time I felt that I would not be the only one to lose.... Life would never be a simple question of self-denial again" (147). She screams until they change their minds. No longer a helpless victim of anatomy and bureaucracy, she has instead become a hero: "We went along various devious passages, through swing doors and up and down half-flights of stairs, while I tried in vain to memorize the route, like Theseus in the labyrinth..." (150).

Later, she wonders about the other mothers, those who didn't dare to scream. She discusses it with another mother who figured out how to get in. What about "the others...those that don't even get in. Those without money. Those without influence. Those who would not dare to have hysterics" (155). The other mother is in for the same operation with a second child. This woman cares about the others, but "I can't see that I can do anything about them.... I haven't the energy to go worrying about other people's children... . If I didn't put myself and mine first, they wouldn't survive" (155-6). Rosamund is shocked, but recognizes the simple brutal truth of her statement. As Drabble stated in her 1973 interview with Nancy Hardin, "It's like saying some people are

privileged from birth. And why? Just give me an answer, anybody, I'm waiting for it.... Why should I be able to conceive a life much more fair and just than God had?" (286). This is the unanswerable question she asks again and again in her fiction.

Drabble believes that having children often teaches people endurance and courage. "I know people who have gone through unbelievable torments and have still got up in the morning and got their children to school whereas unmarried women or men tend to have a lower breaking point" (Hardin interview 282). She also says that caring for children has helped her get her writing done by providing "external rhythms": "The lives of children I find very reassuring. Although they're exhausting, they give me regularity" (Hardin interview 276). As Showalter notes,

for a Drabble heroine, a room of one's own is usually a place to have a baby, but it is also a testing ground for resilience and charity and wisdom. Thus Drabble finds a female resolution to the feminine conflict between biological and artistic creativity. Pregnancy [and mothering] is a way of knowing, a process of education that not only helps Rosamund work 'with great concentration and clarity' on her thesis, but also makes real to her the abstractions of the human condition" (*Literature* 306)

While Drabble has created a female protagonist who does both cultural and maternal work, she has not tried to theorize maternal creativity; she has not created an "artist" but rather dispensed with the idea of the artist altogether. This is not a *Künstlerroman*, just as *Ruth Hall* is not. Certainly, some work is more creative than other, but any separation of the artist into a separate, exalted category, with specialized needs, it seems, is just what cannot go with mothering. Woolf comes as close to this as possible—Mrs. Ramsay "almost" creates art; Lily imitates her in her "real" art. But the Western ideology of the artist demands silence, isolation, privilege—the Ivory Tower and someone to clean it, to bring coffee and sandwiches, if not tea and scones. This is what is incompatible with mothering, for children above all require involvement, connection, time.

However, Drabble is not, I think, trying to suggest that only a heroic “superwoman” can both care for children and write for a living; she rejects the ideology of “intensive mothering” studied by sociologist Sharon Hays. Instead, she is representing this life as doable, despite accidents and distractions. Commenting on the episode in *The Millstone* where Octavia eats Lydia’s manuscript, Drabble says, “in those years on a simple prosaic level I spent my life trying to snatch manuscripts out of the hands of toddlers, so it was a subject so much in my mind...” (Creighton interview 24). But Drabble does not suggest that a mother can actually do all her writing with a baby in her lap and a toddler playing at her feet. Rosamund takes time away from her child to go to the library and do her work. It is simply that with the ideologies about the sensitive artistic soul gone, there is “permission”—both for Drabble and for her characters—to write as a practicing mother must: in the midst of life.

Explaining how she herself writes, Drabble said in 1973,

I used to write during the evening when the children were little, but now I work during the day.... I write during the mornings I suppose, mostly. I can’t do more than three or four hours at a stretch. I’ve got an office where I work... There are always some interruptions. I actually compose very easily. I don’t sweat over the sentences at all; they just pour out. (Hardin interview 275).

This description of the writing mother whose words simply pour out, finding a few hours at a time to work between interruptions, recalls the mother in *Jerusalem the Golden*, Drabble’s fourth novel. Candida Gray is a forty-nine-year-old mother of five who has written a “whole row” of books. When the protagonist, Clara, meets her, she is holding a friend’s baby, since her own are now adults. She admits that the “maternal impulse...tends to run riot” (100) in the family; she simply likes babies. The novels pour out, and so do the children, the mothering. Drabble’s mothers almost all work at one

thing or another: acting, archeology, poetry. There are no ideological barriers about “true womanhood” to stop them: they simply take both work and babies in stride.

This passage may seem to lend credence to the accusations of some critics that Drabble idealizes mothering. On the contrary, many of her mothers are neurotic, if not insane. Clara’s mother, for example, in *Jerusalem the Golden*, is a cold, anti-Mrs. Ramsay, her dinner table covered with ugly, useless things.

There was not an object on that table that was without its history of contention; every implement lay there in the pride of hideous superiority. And everything was ugly.... Clara calculated that at least a third of the objects laid on the table, by regulation, were not used during the course of any single meal, and yet their function was certainly not one of gracious adornment. (44–45)

And one thinks of other neurotic, failed mothers in many of Drabble’s books. The difference, apparently, is whether Drabble is looking at her character from the point of view of a daughter, or looking through her character’s eyes, as a mother. Drabble admits that “I think, paradoxically, being a daughter’s not much fun. But being a mother is wonderful” (Cooper-Clark interview 74). Drabble seems to represent some women based on memories of her own mother, who was “very depressed” (Hardin interview 278) during most of Drabble’s childhood and adolescence. But the women who are close to her own age when she is writing are usually successful mothers working at interesting professions at the same time.

It is these mothers, with their creative careers, whom Susan Sulieman sees depicted in terms that are “surprisingly simple.” At the end of her essay, “Writing and Motherhood,” Suleiman compares Drabble to Rosellen Brown, who has fictionally explored the “violence and guilt” involved in maternal creativity, and finds Drabble wanting on the subject:

In Drabble's novels, the mothers who write or pursue a creative career... all have an unproblematic, quasi-idealized relationship to their children. In *Jerusalem the Golden*, where the novelist's children are already grown, we see her mothering a stranger's baby. In *The Millstone*, the heroine writes better after her child is born. In *The Waterfall*, the narrator-heroine speaks of her feelings of ambivalence during pregnancy, but these feelings miraculously evaporate once the child arrives.... Drabble seems to me to be more the novelist of adult love than anything else.... The question that I think underlies Drabble's novels is this: Can a creative woman with children have a satisfying, permanent relationship with a man? (377)

I agree that Drabble is interested in lots of subjects besides maternal creativity, though summing her up as the "novelist of adult love" seems far too simple as well: clearly Drabble is interested in what it means to be fully human and socially responsible in a treacherous, unpredictable world. For her, that includes mothering, and work, and romantic love, and many other things. However, in the case of *The Millstone*, I have tried to show that Drabble does explore some of the complexities of maternal creativity, though not always at the level of plot and character; much of the really interesting work occurs at the intertextual level. Suleiman's conclusion, from her study of Brown, is that "the writing mother's most nightmarish fantasy [is]: 'I had not known we were to share but one life between us, so that the fuller mine is, the more empty hers'" (377). This is simply another version of the zero sum game which Drabble rejects.⁵⁴

Ursula Le Guin, a real live mother/artist, also rejects this claustrophobic nightmare of maternal creation as a destructive corollary of ideologies about the "Great Artist." The real point of *The Millstone*, she argues, is the

⁵⁴In chapter seven of her 1990 *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Harvard UP), Suleiman leaves behind her interest in the violent guilt of the writing mother and focuses on playfulness as the essence of maternal subjectivity. Interestingly, she chooses as her central text the surreal novel, *The Hearing Trumpet*, in which the extremely aged mother has not practiced mothering for years and is not doing any serious writing. It seems that the practicing mother who also writes is a rare creature indeed.

absence of the Hero-Artist.... Nobody lives in a great isolation, nobody sacrifices human claims.... Nobody is going to put their head...into the oven: not the mother, not the writer, not the daughter—these three and one who, being women, do not separate creation and destruction into *I create/You are destroyed*, or vice versa. (231)

Thus Le Guin unites mother and daughter into the writer, one person, like Margaret Drabble, who can sweep away such ideologies. The maternal creativity theorized by Woolf, by the daughter, belongs again to the mother. “Again,” because the similarities with Ruth Hall, written 110 years earlier, are remarkable. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. Almost. Although both Ruth and Rosamund have learned from their experiences, they have arrived at a similar place by following opposite paths: Ruth has learned how to be independent; Rosamund has had to give up her dream of autonomy to embrace interdependence and connection. We have at last, again, simply a mother writing—someone who can, in Le Guin’s words, “take responsibility, for both the baby and the book” (231).

CONCLUSION

AN AESTHETIC OF “EVERYDAY USE”

The pattern that has emerged from my study of maternal creativity in these five novels seems to me remarkably neat, though it was not the pattern I expected or wanted. I had expected a fairly clear trajectory of growth from silence and self-effacement in the mid-nineteenth century toward self-expression in the second half of the twentieth. What I wanted was to end with a strong model of creativity based in maternal practice, with a woman who embodied the name of both “mother” and “artist.” Instead these books form a pyramid, with the novels on each end—*Ruth Hall* and *The Millstone*—making a sort of base and presenting more similarities to each other than to the novels in the middle—*The Story of Avis*, *The Awakening*, and *To the Lighthouse*. The pyramid is inverted, however, and its nadir is Edna Pontellier’s turn-of-the-century death by drowning.

Ruth and Rosamund, separated by over a century, are both successful writers who find that their children actually provide an impetus for their work: they need to write in order to earn money to support them. While child care does present some practical dilemmas that must be solved, these women are not inhibited by ideologies about “artists” and what they “need” in order to create, because they have no artistic pretensions—they are simply workers, earning their living. Because of this emphasis on work, both novels represent their protagonists as learning to feel a certain amount of solidarity with the working classes. They come to see the human connections which their privileged social positions had kept them from experiencing in the past. The fact that they are writers, and can therefore do much of their work at home, is convenient because it allows them more

flexibility to take care of their children. Admittedly, Ruth must write anonymously in order to continue to think of herself as thoroughly domestic and feminine, and she feels a need to mask ambition behind mourning for her dead husband. In contrast, Rosamund is free to flaunt her unwed motherhood and is frankly proud of her accomplishments. Ruth must learn independence, Rosamund dependence, but they arrive at very similar places: happy endings which combine babies and books.

Avis, Edna, and Lily are painters. This choice of medium correlates both with a clear declaration of intent to be an “artist” and a movement away from autobiography. While Avis and Edna have made some money from their art, none of these women is trying to support herself with her art. Indeed, when Avis tries to do so, her art is ruined—she becomes a “hack.” All three of these women are struggling with ideologies about the Ivory Tower and the zero-sum game of art and life. Both Avis and Edna are destroyed by this ideology: Avis’ art is gone, Edna drowns. Lily, in contrast, actually has her vision. But Lily is not a mother. She has solved the dilemma faced by Avis and Edna by taking her creative model from the maternal “art” of Mrs. Ramsay, but not her actual role as a mother. She rejects the ideologies of the artist as unconnected and exiled, but embraces the material conditions of art—solitude, the room of one’s own.

It is at this point that one wishes for a novel in which Lily and Mrs. Ramsay become one, where a practicing mother is able to formulate and embody an aesthetic based in connection with life and actually think of herself as an artist. This is what I was hoping to find in Margaret Drabble. Instead, I found that while she certainly deconstructs the art/life binary, she draws back from using any kind of “artist” label for her protagonist. “Mother” and “artist” appear to repel each other like opposite magnetic poles. I suspect that the reason for this is because Western concepts of art are still so heavily Kantian, so insistent on art’s “uselessness.” But any conceptualizing of creativity based on the practice of mothering must by definition be based in what, with a deep bow to Alice Walker, can best be called “everyday use.”

Precisely such an aesthetic is theorized by Josephine Donovan in her essay, “Everyday Use and Moments of Being: Toward a Nondominative Aesthetic.” Donovan links Woolf and Walker (as many critics do) in her formulation of an aesthetic based in “the nondominative process art of women’s domestic aesthetic praxis, their use-value production” (53). Using *A Room of One’s Own* as her basic text, she sees Woolf rejecting the Kantian aesthetics of both Clive Bell and Roger Fry. The latter, for example, argued that “the aesthetic emotion [is] as remote from actual life and its practical utilities as the most useless mathematical theory” (qtd. in Donovan 58). In contrast, Woolf’s aesthetic was “holistic...not disconnected from material reality.... [Art] expresses the ontic illuminations that inhere in everyday life” (56).

Perhaps most interesting in terms of my own study, Donovan also sees both Willa Cather and Sarah Orne Jewett as practitioners of this aesthetic of everyday use. Donovan reads Cather as moving from a “dominative” aesthetic to its opposite, thanks to the influence of Jewett. She cites evidence that Cather was inspired by the stories in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and their “closeness to everyday reality” as she developed an aesthetic that was less ego-centric (60). She quotes Cather—“The German housewife who sets before her family on Thanksgiving Day a perfectly roasted goose, is an artist” (60)—and reminds the reader of the Indian women’s pottery in *The Song of the Lark*, which is “a use-value product [which] remains with its environment and yet captures what Woolf called life’s ‘moments of being’” (61). “Like Woolf,” she argues, “Cather stresses fidelity to the random incidentals of the quotidian in her theory of aesthetic praxis” (60).

These two authors stand in contrast to Chopin, their approximate contemporary, in their ability to represent female creativity in the person of preindustrial mother figures who could provide a solid basis for the daughter-artist. But Chopin, a Southerner, was unable to cross the racial divide between Edna and her Black nursemaid, the pre-industrial mother figure whose real maternal praxis might have been the basis of a creativity that would have allowed Edna to escape the ideologies of “mothering” and “art” which finally

kill her. Yet this could not happen, for the Black woman's maternity is compulsory and must not be romanticized as a pre-Oedipal space for the "poor little rich girl," Edna. Perhaps to her credit, Chopin did not reach across this divide because it could not be done so long as one "mother" dominates the other.⁵⁵

It remained for the Black mother/daughter herself, in freer days, to find and celebrate her mother's art—as though Edna's Black nursemaid had come to life, this time equipped with a typewriter. Alice Walker, in search of her literary mother's gravestone in the tall grasses of neglect, "in search of [her] mothers' gardens," seems to be that woman. Just as Woolf saw that "Anon was a woman," so Walker went in search of the missing creativity of her own grandmothers and mothers. Where Woolf had to deal with the "Angel in the House" as part of her maternal heritage, Walker acknowledges that her ancestors were "the *mule* of the world" (Gardens 232). These women, carrying all "the burdens that everyone else—*everyone* else—refused to carry" (237), had apparently no outlet whatsoever for their creativity. "What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time?.... Was her body broken and forced to bear children...when her one joy was the thought of modeling heroic figures of rebellion, in stone or clay?" (33).

Yet these women *were* creative, and Walker recalls their singing, which they could do while working, the quilt by "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama" which hangs in the Smithsonian, and finally her own mother's garden, which "adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in...a garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia...and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art" (241). To acknowledge as "art" the singing of the slave in the fields, the quilt made of scraps to

⁵⁵In *Of Woman Born* Adrienne Rich pays tribute to her own "Black mother": "For years, she had drifted out of reach, in my searches backward through time, exactly as the double silence of sexism and racism intended her to do. She was meant to be utterly annihilated" (254-5).

warm a child's bed, the garden surrounding a share cropper's cabin, is to move the traditional barrier between culture and Culture, private and public.

Alice Walker provides a path away from the dead end where I found myself after following my five novels, which had brought me back, in some senses, where I had started. Walker is unafraid to call her mother's gardens art, to take quilts from the bed and hang them on the museum wall. "Mother" and "artist" are compatible for her precisely because she and her Black mothers have been invisible for so long. While this invisibility silenced them and brought tremendous suffering, it also exempted them from the disabling ideologies about who mothers are and what artists do which dogged White, middle-class women. From her position as double Outsider, the Black woman, when she finally was free to speak and write, ignored the silliness about being an Angel in the House (she who had been the mule of the world) and about the Ivory Tower (she who had shared a tiny cabin with so many children). Instead she continued to do what she had always done: create beauty for herself and for her family, wherever and however she could.

This revised aesthetic is at the heart of Walker's classic short story, "Everyday Use," which moves a step beyond *To the Lighthouse* in that it not only celebrates the dead mother's art but also *passes it on through a mother to another (potential) mother*. The art in question is the "folk art/craft" of the narrator's family, notably the quilts "pieced by Grandma Dee [her mother] and then Big Dee [her sister] and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them" (56). The narrator has been saving the quilts for her daughter Maggie, when she marries. "Wangero," the educated daughter, returned from the city with an Afro-centric consciousness, believes that the quilts should be hers because she can "appreciate" them.

"Wangero" has returned to the maternal shack, which she used to despise, to plunder her rural past, like an archeologist sending "primitive" art back to the British Museum. Her aesthetic is firmly based in "authenticity" and uselessness. She values the benches on which they sit for their "rump prints" and the butter churn top and dasher

because they are hand carved and “you could see where thumbs and fingers had sunk into the wood” (56). These marks of use are valued because they are the marks of “authenticity,” but the objects only become “art” when they are no longer useful. “I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table...and I’ll think of something artistic to do with the dasher” (56).

This aesthetic is most clearly displayed in the confrontation surrounding the quilts. “Wangero” argues that “Maggie can’t appreciate these quilts.... She’d probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use” (57). She herself will hang the quilts on the wall, because she knows they are “priceless,” with their pieces of old dresses and even “one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the Civil War.” When the narrator offers “Wangero” other quilts, she rejects them because they are machine-made. She values the hand labor that went into the butter churn and the quilts, not as an expression of the love and labor of her ancestors, but as marks of the primitive past. Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker note that “Wangero” “is revealed as a perpetrator of institutional theories of aesthetics” who “has always sought a fashionably ‘aesthetic’ distance from southern expediences” (161). Her detachment from the life of her family is expressed by her use of the Polaroid camera to “instantly process and record experience as ‘framed’ photograph” (161). She will sterilize the trophies of her Southern past by turning them into “art.”

In contrast, the narrator values these objects both for their inherent beauty and for their link to her own familial past. It is she who actually looks at the dasher handle. “I took it for a moment in my hands.... It was beautiful light yellow wood, from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and Stash had lived” (56). The objects actually retain their value by being used, even used up. She hopes that Maggie will indeed put the quilts to “everyday use,” although “Wangero” points out that “in five years they’d be in rags” (57). Most important, Maggie’s “appreciation” of the quilts is of an entirely different

order than “Wangero’s.” She remembers her maternal heritage because “it was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her how to quilt” (58). Maggie herself will make more quilts, for her own children and grandchildren’s beds. As Elaine Showalter notes in her 1991 essay on quilting as a metaphor for American women’s writing, “Common Threads,”

Maggie cannot speak glibly about her ‘heritage’ or about ‘priceless’ artifacts, but unlike Dee, she understands the quilt as a process rather than as a commodity; she can read its meaning in a way Dee never will, because she knows the contexts of its pieces, and loves the women who have made it. (212)

She does not simply remember her “heritage,” but continues to live and “reproduce” it, while “Wangero,” who has changed her name to represent an impersonal African past, has actually rejected her known, personal heritage in the name of “Dee,” the name of women in her family “beyond the Civil War” (54). It is she, with her Kantian, colonized aesthetic who does not “appreciate” the quilts.

Yet as I sit here “appreciating” this short story for its valorizing of maternal work, I cannot help but think that if I—or my readers—had those quilts, we would hang them on the wall. And so, apparently, would Alice Walker. For it was by seeing the quilt in the Smithsonian that she came to recognize her own creative maternal heritage. And it is through the “higher art” of the poem, the short story, the essay, and the novel that Walker, herself a mother, has celebrated her own mother’s (and *her* mothers’) art. If everything is “used up,” then no one remembers except those who can actually still quilt, still weed and water the garden. The wider culture remains untouched. This is surely the frustration of Simone de Beauvoir, with whom we began: “[Woman’s] misfortune is to have been biologically destined for the repetition of Life, when even in her own view Life does not carry within itself its reasons for being, reasons that are more important than the life itself” (59). Inevitably, the desire that one’s ideas and labor should be remembered, should last, means that the aesthetic of domestic labor and everyday use will be applied to arts outside

the family, to “Culture,” in Ortner’s terms. This is the paradox which the mother/artist must negotiate: to find a way to value her maternal work, yet to acknowledge that it also slips away—like Mrs. Ramsay closing the dining room door. It is the problem of “transcendence.”

Sarah Sherman explores this relationship between the domestic arts and the writer who represents them at the end of her study of Jewett. When the narrator leaves Dunnet Landing, to return to the city and record the story of her summer, is she simply turning “raw”—the perishable memories of the maternal, healing women she has met—into “cooked”—the published stories of their lives, culture into Culture? Is she simply fighting her own mortality by producing “fine art... a triumph of self-expression, of Existence over the everlasting round of birth, death, and decay” (267)? Sherman argues that

in works such as *Pointed Firs* the repetition of biological life is not death to the individual, but solace; not a negation of meaning, but a source.

Identity is not achieved through monumental assertion of will but through reconciliation of self and other... (268)

An aesthetic of everyday use does not merely memorialize ephemeral maternal labor but mimics it, bringing the values both of the quotidian, the fleeting, and of the community, into the work of art itself. What endures is not the individual, but the life that is passed on through the generations, shared among all the living and the dead. As Sherman says of the scene in *Pointed Firs* at the family reunion where the narrator and “death-signifying” Mrs. Todd quite literally consume the Bowden family and the reunion itself, by eating cakes inscribed with the words “Bowden” and “Reunion”: “Since *this* memorial aims at mimesis of immanent life, death is its ultimate realization” (268).

Such an art rejects the Oedipal imperative to surpass one’s literary progenitors, to replace them in the communal memory. Instead, connection becomes the goal. Concluding her essay on the “common threads” linking American women writers, Showalter argues: “the patricidal struggle defined by Bloom and exemplified in the

careers of male American writers has no matricidal equivalent, no echo of denial, parody, exile. Instead, Alice Walker proclaims, 'each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story.' (219) Showalter goes on to quote Joyce Carol Oates: "The living are no more in competition with the dead than they are with the living... All of us who write work out of a conviction that we are participating in some sort of communal activity" (qtd. in Showalter 219).

Art based in the two values of dailiness and community may be "domestic" and ephemeral, like Mrs. Ramsay's dinner and the quilts put to everyday use by Maggie and her mother, or it may be the "high" art of Lily's canvas and the quilt hung in the Smithsonian. What separates them is indeed "transcendence," the intention to resist time, to be remembered. But what unites them is the "essence" that Lily extracts from Mrs. Ramsay's art: the ability to "make time stand still here." Both types of art can create the epiphanic moment, when the individual feels momentarily lifted out of time into an eternal split second of meaning. "Domestic" art does it in life itself, in the very moment that meaning is occurring; "high" art does it by looking back in remembrance, turning the attention of the reader or viewer or listener toward reflection on life's immanence. Both celebrate the life of the community even as the life of the individual is slipping away.

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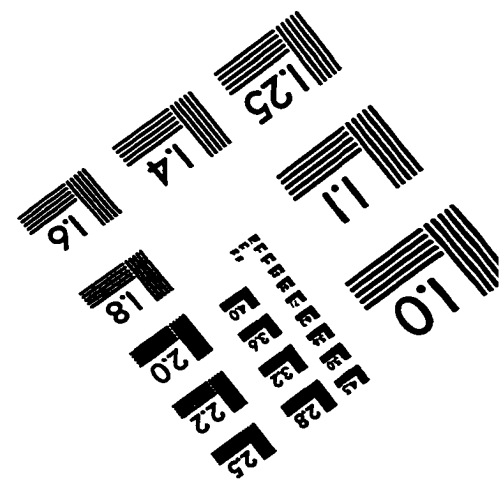
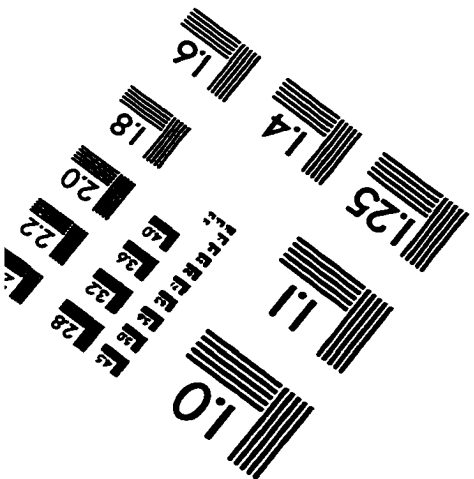
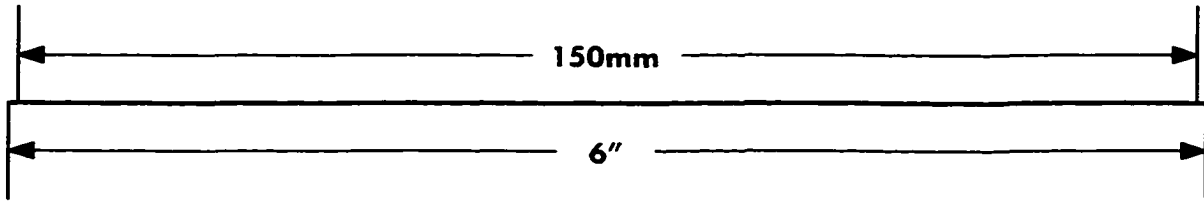
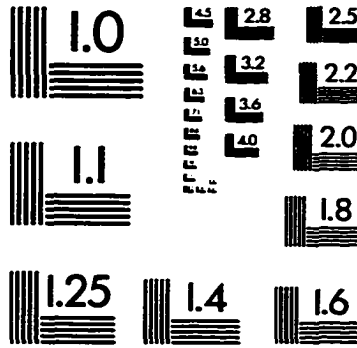
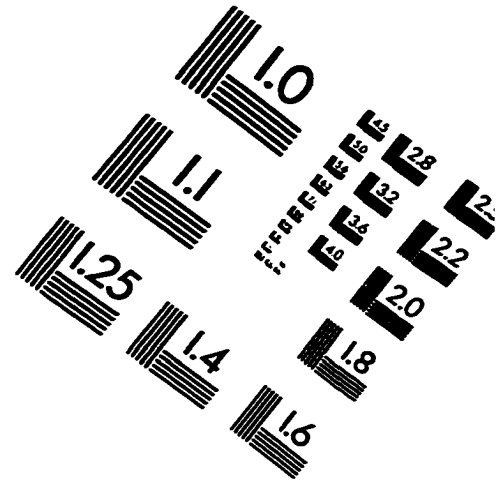
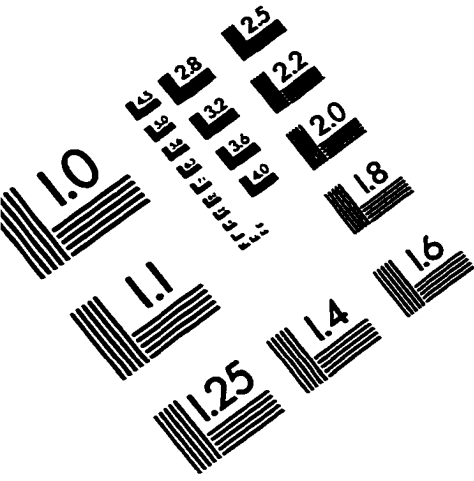
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