

CREATING A TERMINISTIC SCREEN OF “MOTHERING” IN NELLA LARSEN’S  
*PASSING* AND FANNIE HURST’S *IMITATION OF LIFE*

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To the Dean of the Graduate School:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Paula Kent entitled "Creating a Terministic Screen of "Mothering" in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*." I have examined this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a major in Rhetoric.


  
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## DEDICATION

To my husband, Cody, and our children, Bruce and Harley,  
your love, understanding, and patience has helped me finally reach the end.

To my parents, Kevin and Pamela,  
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## ABSTRACT

PAULA KENT

### CREATING A TERMINISTIC SCREEN OF “MOTHERING” IN NELLA LARSEN’S *PASSING* AND FANNIE HURST’S *IMITATION OF LIFE*

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Though some attention has been paid to the topic of motherhood within the novels of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) and Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1932), critical attention mainly focuses on issues of race, class, or gender. Moreover, in regards to the novels, rhetorical consideration of the term “mothering” and the act of it within the novels garners even less attention. Using the Burkean concept of “terministic screens,” as well as Jane Tompkins’ notion that literature does “cultural work,” this dissertation seeks to create a terministic screen for “mothering” based on the mother characters found within the two novels. Consideration is paid to cultural concepts of the time, criticism of the novels, and the novels themselves in an attempt to analyze the “symbol systems” (to borrow from Burke) that intersect to create a terministic screen of “mothering.” The analysis here seeks to expose a new framework with which to view American women’s fiction and the discourse of maternal rhetoric.

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## CHAPTER I

### SITUATING DISCOURSES OF MATERNAL RHETORIC

*Now, the basic function of rhetoric, the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents, is certainly not “magical.” . . . You are using the primary resource of human speech in a thoroughly realistic way.*

*--Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives, 1969*

*When literary texts are conceived as agents of cultural formation rather than as objects of interpretation and appraisal, what counts as a “good” character or a logical sequence of events changes accordingly. When one sets aside modernist demands—for psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, epistemological sophistication, stylistic density, formal economy—and attends to the way a text offers a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social or religious conditions, an entirely new story begins to unfold, and one’s sense of the formal exigencies of narrative alters accordingly, producing a different conception of what constitutes successful characters and plots.*

*--Jane Tompkins, Sensational Designs, 1985*

A variety of discourses surrounding motherhood continue to merit scholarly attention. Feminist and literary theorists, as well as historians, analyze topics such as mothers within the academy, feminist motherhood, and even mother figures in literature. The rhetoric used by some women writers to create mother characters in American literature remains an underexplored discourse that I explore in this dissertation. Focusing on only women writers is not to suggest, of course, that

American male writers do not or could not create mother characters in their works of fiction. The choice to explore only American women writers is based on a curiosity of how women writers engage the discourses surrounding other women, particularly the rhetoric of mothering or *maternal rhetoric*.<sup>1</sup> Analyzing selected works of fiction written by American women that include mother figures uncovers the ways in which discourses of maternal rhetoric permeate our culture and impact our own rhetoric. Applying the theories of both Kenneth Burke and Jane Tompkins to the selected literature of this study provides more comprehensive insight into the intersections of maternal rhetoric and cultural discourses of motherhood. Specifically, this study relies on Burke's language as symbolic action and terministic screens and Tompkins' idea that literature does "cultural work."

In order to better understand discourses utilizing maternal rhetoric, this study asks the following questions: How/is maternal rhetoric relevant to the selected literature, and by extension society? And how do the selected novels *Passing* by Nella Larsen and *Imitation of Life* by Fannie Hurst engage, alter, or further the discourses of maternal rhetoric?

### **Establishing a Rhetoric of Mothering**

In the early decades of the twentieth century, women gained access to education (obtaining college degrees), to work outside the home (earning their own

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<sup>1</sup> When using the term *maternal rhetoric*, I refer to discourses related to maternal themes such as pregnancy, child rearing, breast feeding, and working parents.

wages), and even to decisions about whether to pursue family life. However, as some women rejected motherhood, the dominant culture increasingly scrutinized the institution of motherhood, an issue I turn to in Chapter Two of this study. Moreover, as social sciences gained popularity, the study of children, in part, led to a creation of scientific motherhood. Adopting a scientific motherhood meant “good” mothers sought out the advice of so-called experts as opposed to following the innate instincts a mother was thought by the dominant culture to possess prior to the twentieth century, another issue covered more in depth in Chapter Two. As a result of the new opportunities for women and the development of scientific motherhood, public perceptions of mothers began to change—and not necessarily for the better. Even the need to establish a science for observing child rearing suggests that mothers could seemingly be trusted less to rely on their own “instincts” regarding general day-to-day care for their child(ren) such as feeding, clothing or even educating. This trend continues even today. For instance, many expectant mothers still turn to the “experts” in the popular *What to Expect* or *On Becoming Babywise* book series. Additionally, many children attend daycare centers where parents pay for “expert” care, mainly due to a large presence of mothers in the workforce. However, even stay-at-home mothers often seek the “expert” care from those who run programs such as “Mother’s Day Out,” or even from television shows such as *Supernanny* or *Nanny 911*. This reliance on experts has led to a

specific type of language surrounding mothers who transgress hegemonic mothering norms.

Existing scholarship documents the prevalence of a discourse of motherhood in popular culture during the early twentieth century—a time when the family dynamic experienced a significant shift. As feminist and motherhood scholar Amber E. Kinser notes, “Women were sharply admonished for working outside the home if they had any option not to, both because of its supposed negative consequences for children and because it ‘robbed’ men of jobs” (63). During the time prior to the early twentieth century, the largest role the dominant culture expected women to play was the domestic role. As mothers, women were supposed to be “preternaturally attuned to [their] children’s needs” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 6). Despite the advances of feminists who paved the way for the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote, many women still chose to stay in the home and were “pursuing marriage as the primary ‘career’ choice” (Kinser 61). As such, these women were still expected to “mother” the country and help cultivate the next generation of citizens. However, not everyone agreed with the child rearing methods of mothers. As the twentieth century progressed, writers like Philip Wylie admonished mothers for weakening their sons because of what he called “megaloid momworship” (185). In the eyes of people like Wylie, “society [was] too much an institution built to appease the rapacity of loving mothers” (203). Such hostile,

inflammatory rhetoric demonstrates a shift regarding how the public arena viewed and discussed motherhood.

Studying maternal rhetoric within American women's fiction provides a better understanding of the normative discussions regarding motherhood. Women, especially mothers, were tasked with the responsibility of taking care of the family unit. Furthermore, analysis of the fictional mothers many have read provides additional insight regarding mothering discourses that intersected the lives of mothers. However, additional rhetorical theory must be applied to establish and analyze the discourses used within *Passing* and *Imitation of Life*.

### **Rhetorical Theories of Kenneth Burke**

Kenneth Burke (1897-1993) has been referred to as a literary critic, a writer, a philosopher, and a rhetorician. No matter what one chooses to label Burke, his impact cannot be denied. Burke remains of the most influential rhetorical scholars and literary critics of the twentieth century. Robert L. Heath asserts that even though Burke was "[b]est known as a writer and a literary critic, he has become much more" (vii). David Blakesley says Burke "has influenced the thinking of countless others interested in the study of speech, writing, and society" (5). Although Burke is not without his critics, his works such as *A Rhetoric of Motives* and *The Philosophy of the Literary Form* have endured, and they continue to be applied to

a number of disciplines such as literary criticism, rhetoric, and even sociology.<sup>2</sup>

Though he is widely discussed, the theories put forth by Kenneth Burke receive both praise and criticism. Just as Heath and Blakesley write in appreciation of Burke's contributions, Charles I. Glicksberg offered a negative prediction of Burke in 1937:

It is not likely that Kenneth Burke will be widely read or that he will receive generous public recognition. The reason is not far to seek. His books are too technical, packed too solidly with speculative material that requires careful analysis. He is too skeptical, too discriminating and iconoclastic a thinker. His preoccupation with the nature of meaning, his command of a style that is laboriously precise—these alone will cause him to remain the intellectual leader of a small minority. (71)

Though Glicksberg does offer Burke praise for his critical acumen further on in the essay, he suggests Burke's theories will not resonate in the future. Even those who felt Burke had a contribution to make to criticism still questioned the effectiveness of his works. Granville Hicks also criticizes Burke when he states, "... [Burke's] heart is not in it; his heart is where, if one may speak in parables, his treasure is..." (21). Wayne Booth, even though he refers to Burke as "the most important living critic,"

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<sup>2</sup> See Ann Branaman's "Reconsidering Kenneth Burke: His Contributions to the Identity Controversy" and Valerie Malhotra Bentz and Robert Wade Kenny's "'Body-As-World': Kenneth Burke's Answer to the Postmodernist Charges Against Sociology." For more extensive application of Burke within the Sociological field, see Robert Wade Kenny's "The Glamor of Motives: Applications of Kenneth Burke Within the Sociological Field."

goes on to sum up one of the more criticized aspects of Burke's theories: "In discussing Burke we never come to an end, as he himself never can draw a project to a full stop" (21). Though the open-ended nature of Burke's theories can lead to a myriad of applications, it is also frustrating to many that he never seems to reach a full conclusion in his theoretical works.

Burke first focused his work on literary criticism; however, the harsh reality he witnessed during the Great Depression caused him to change his focus. Heath asserts:

... the Depression of the 1930s forced [Burke] to reconsider what artists could contribute to society, beyond entertainment. He was moved by others to accept the proposition that artists must propagandize in behalf of some ideology. . . . To bring himself out of this quandary, Burke broadened his mission to produce a comprehensive analysis of how language influences human relations, which analysis is arguably the heart of his contribution. (1)

During the Great Depression, Burke began to notice the importance of language for a culture. Though his focus shifted away from the aesthetics of literature, such as in *Counter Statement*, Burke did not leave behind the idea that literature greatly impacts culture. This shift of Burke's focus allowed him to formulate the theories that underpin this study. In his essay, "Philosophy of the Literary Form" (1941), Burke states, "Critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the

situation in which they arose. They are not merely answers, they are *strategic* answers, *stylized* answers” (1). This sentiment likely refers to the answers Burke sought in attempting to understand the causes of the Great Depression. Burke no longer viewed literature as purely art, but he believed literature could play an important role in culturally understanding why things happen and how artists contribute or respond to cultural phenomena. Moreover, as Herbert W. Simons asserts of Burke, “Indeed, the breadth of his rhetorical perspective--his ability to read rhetoric into the larger historical currents of intellectual conversation and to infuse rhetorical theory with them may be his greatest rhetorical legacy” (4). This study, then, extends Burke’s theories to examine the “imaginative works” by two American women in order to better understand the role and function of maternal rhetoric in their work and in the larger period. The shift of Burke’s focus allowed him to formulate the basis for his theories that will be used in this study.

Key theories and concepts articulated by Burke aid in exploring maternal rhetoric. The concept of the symbolic action of language and the theory of terministic screens are particularly helpful. First, as demonstrated in *Language as Symbolic Action* and *The Philosophy of the Literary Form*, Burke sees the use of language as “symbolic action,” in which people use the symbols surrounding them to construct meaning through language. As indicated in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, Burke asserts the importance of language cannot be, and more importantly should not be, overlooked as one begins to construct his or her own



reality. For Burke, one's choice of language is what motivates his or her actions.

Such symbolic action can be seen in the writing of a book:

Mr. Q writes a novel. He has a score to settle with the world, and he settles it on paper, symbolically. Let us suppose that his novel is about a deserving individual in conflict with an undeserving society. He writes the work from the standpoint of his unique engrossments. However, . . . there is a whole *class* of such novels. And if we take them all together, in the lump, "statistically," they become about as unique as various objects all going downstream together in a flood. They are "all doing the same"—they become but different individuations of a common paradigm. As so considered, they become "symbolic" of something—they become "representative" of a social trend. (Burke, "Philosophy" 18-9)

Though several novels may be published on a similar topic, the grouping of the novels allows them to become symbolic on a cultural level. For example, if several novels explore the experiences of mothers, then they become "representative" of mothers. Thus, a mother who reads any such novel can begin to symbolically correlate the lives of the mother characters within said novels to her own life. In this way, the novels can affect the actions, thoughts, or discourses of citizens within a culture. Moreover, one may even symbolically act simply by reading a book. As Burke notes, "*The reading of a book on the attaining of success is in itself the symbolic*

*attaining of that success. It is while they read that these readers are 'succeeding'"* ("Literature" 299). In addition, a reader can be motivated through the author's language to act. The meaning behind a reader's action can then be analyzed in relation to the language used. The basis of the symbolic action within one's use of language allowed Burke to further his theories. He goes on to argue that language allows one to determine the motivation behind human behavior. The link between language used and the motivation for action serves as the basis for the analysis in this dissertation. Specifically, analysis of the language and action used by characters within selected works of American women's fiction will help to establish the presence of maternal rhetoric and the ways it impacts mothering discourses.

Though Burke explored many topics through his theories, the theory of "terministic screens" best articulates how various constructions of one's "realities" can affect the meaning of a word or concept, such as *mothering*. Burke states of terminology: "Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" ("Terministic" 45). In other words, when establishing the meaning of a term, one must consider how the term functions within one's reality in three separate ways. Moreover, "there are two kinds of terms: terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart. Otherwise put, A can feel himself identified with B [reflection], or he can think of himself as disassociated from B [deflection]" (Burke, "Terministic," 49). Overall, the terministic

screen is both indicative and opposite of one's constructed reality. Additionally, according to Burke, "'terministic screens' direct the attention . . . into some channels rather than others" ("Terministic" 45), meaning that the terms we use can direct others in various directions depending on how they construct their own realities.

Burke goes on to further explain terministic screens:

When I speak of "terministic screens," I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were *different* photographs of the *same* object, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so "factual" as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the documentary description of the even being recorded. ("Terministic 45)

Thus, depending on one's constructed reality, or different color filter, the same term, such as *mothering*, can have different terministic screens, depending on the reality in which one uses the term. This is where the constructed symbol systems of one's reality play an important role, as they serve as the filters with which to construct the terministic screen. However, these differing realities can become problematic, as Burke indicates: "In brief, much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms" ("Terministic" 46). The individualized nature of multiple realities can complicate the use of terms (hence the frustration with Burke); nevertheless, the significance of

constructing the meaning of our own use of terms remains productive. To offer a more simplified definition of terministic screens, Blakesley states they “consist of the words and conceptual strategies that comprise a point of view or perspective. They function as filters, simultaneously illuminating and obscuring the subject they are designed to explain” (46). Through the construction of a terministic screen, then, a reader can begin to critically analyze the motivation behind a literary character’s actions and the rhetoric he or she uses.

Since the language used is so important to Burke, the creation of a terministic screen functions rhetorically. According to Blakesley, “Burke believed that interpretation itself was a form of rhetoric, an attempt to reduce uncertainty and thus to motivate action” (9). Rhetorical acts are shaped by and help to shape how one views society and functions within it. The application of Burke’s terministic screens to fiction through established symbol systems related to mothering can assist greatly in situating maternal rhetoric by illuminating the function of language as a symbolic act engaged in directing, controlling, and correcting the behaviors of mothers.

### **Cultural Work of Literature**

In addition to the theories of Kenneth Burke, this study also considers the cultural impact the selected novels have on discourses of mothering, a sentiment seen in Tompkins’ epigraph at the beginning of the chapter. Specifically, this study ascertains how the maternal rhetoric used in *Passing* and *Imitation of Life* intersects

with cultural discourses of motherhood. Just as Burke posits that “imaginative works” are “*strategic*” and “*stylized* answers” to a cultural situation (“Philosophy” 1), Tompkins also asserts novels can do “a certain kind of cultural work within a specific historical situation” (200). Additionally, she sees “[novels] plots and characters as providing society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions” (200). Her thoughts align with those of Burke’s symbolic action and provide an effective combination with which to analyze the chosen novels of this study. Analyzing the symbolic action of the language used within novels and considering their cultural work effectively situates the impact of mothering discourses. Although Tompkins focuses on the value of non-canonized texts versus the canonized works, her position on novels affecting “the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment” (xi) demonstrates the impact works of fiction can have on a population of people. The rhetoric used in novels can affect the way readers think regarding a particular subject. In this case, motherhood is the subject to be explored.

Discourses, like works of fiction, are situated within particular cultural, social, and historical moments. In her study of motherhood in Depression era literature, Vivyan C. Adair claims the traditional familial hierarchy seen in some American fiction in the early twentieth century “highlights the degree to which

literary representation constructs, patrols, invigorates and reproduces categories of social reality” (49). Here, Adair builds on Tompkins’ thinking regarding the cultural impact of novels. As such, exploring the representation of mothers within *Passing* and *Imitation of Life* demonstrates the “social realities” that have been constructed and the discourses with which they intersect.

The reading of fiction intersects with our daily lives. The development of fiction, even though it is deemed fantasy or false, largely stems from lived experience. Therefore, one must assume that even though a novel may be fiction, it still represents some truth for a reader who absorbs the novel’s message. Tompkins asserts, literature “has the power to influence the way the country thinks across a broad range of issues” (201). Because the impact of literature on culture (and culture’s impact on literature) is so great, an application of Tompkins’ theory complements the theories of Burke in the analysis of maternal rhetoric within the selected novels.

### **Looking Forward**

Analysis of the discourse surrounding the rhetoric of mothering and the ways American women writers contributed to the discourse demonstrates just how important the topic of motherhood is to cultural moments. Chapter Two establishes the dominant discourses of motherhood leading up to and during the publication of the selected novels in order to establish the symbol systems that help to create a terministic screen of “mothering.” An analysis of the historical state of motherhood

helps articulate the discourses that surround motherhood and to establish a context in which the terministic screen is created. Chapters Three and Four apply the symbol systems to the mother characters in the selected novels in order to create a terministic screen of “mothering.” Chapter Three specifically examines Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), and Chapter Four focuses analysis on Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1933). These two novels were chosen largely because maternal rhetoric is underexplored by scholars in each, a topic addressed in Chapters Three and Four. Due to this underrepresentation, as well as the obvious link to motherhood found within each character, the two novels are worthy of attention when examining maternal rhetoric. Using the theories established in Chapter One, Chapter Three, and Chapter Four shift the analysis to an examination of the ways the two selected novels engage maternal rhetoric. Hence, the analysis furthers Burke’s concept of “language as symbolic action.” Chapter Five concludes the study by synthesizing the overall analysis of maternal rhetoric in the selected fiction and fusing the aspects of both a terministic screen of “mothering” and the ability of literature to do cultural work through symbolic language. Ultimately, analysis reveals the ways the two selected American women’s novels impact maternal rhetoric during this period.

## CHAPTER II

### BUILDING SYMBOL SYSTEMS FOR A TERMINISTIC SCREEN OF "MOTHERING"

*Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so "down to earth" as the relative position of seas and continents? What is our "reality" for today (beyond the paper-thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present? . . . And however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall "picture" is but a construct of our symbol systems.*

---Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man, 1966

As Kenneth Burke indicates in the above epigraph, we construct our own meaning of "reality" around symbols we encounter daily. More specifically, Burke declares, "*Man is the symbol-using animal*" ("Definition of Man" 3). These symbols help us determine what we know, or at least what we think we know, about every day events in our lives and our histories. However, the events of our lives are shaped on an individual basis. Burke asserts, ". . . there will be as many different world views in human history as there are people. . . . We can safely take it for granted that no one's 'personal equations' are quite identical with anyone else's" ("Terministic" 52). In other words, if a group of people experience the same event, it is possible that none of them will interpret it in the same way. Furthermore, as David Blakesley notes, "We do not . . . shape something as complex as history and



our place in it by an act of conscious purpose, rationality, or desire. Rather, history acts on the agent to shape consciousness, to set the course of a life, as an agency” (151). As such, history creates context, and understanding one’s context directly relates to the “reality” that people, including mothers, construct.

Evidence of mothers’ different experiences appears in the language surrounding motherhood, as discourses surrounding mothers, more specifically those found in novels, offer both praise and blame. Where some mothers receive exaltation from authors or the dominant, hegemonic society for how they raise their child(ren), others endure condemnation for the choices they make regarding mothering. For example, a white, middle-class mother may receive praise for deciding to stay at home with her child(ren), while a working-class woman of color may endure blame because she is forced to work in order to support her family.

Nevertheless, the need to construct a terministic screen for “mothering” must be built upon rhetorical trends and patterns (*symbol systems* in Burkean terms) that existed long before the characters explored in this study appear. At the time of publication of the two novels (1929 and 1933), women, and their roles as mothers, had begun to experience change. In the previous century, mothers had been held in the highest regard. According to Amber E. Kinser, “[The nineteenth century] was a time that exalted motherhood, especially among mid-class and wealthy whites, often employing kind of dripping sentimentality to discussions of women’s roles and ‘home sweet home’” (29). But as the century progressed, dominant culture removed

mothering women from their pedestals and put them into (metaphorically speaking) a courtroom of sorts, in which their attempts to feed, clothe, discipline, educate, and generally care for children were questioned and criticized. Kinser continues, “The building of a child’s—and future citizen’s—moral character, industriousness, and self-discipline was now the sole responsibility (and blame) of the mother” (29). Such “responsibility” for the mother must be put into context for the purpose of this study in order to best create a terministic screen of “mothering.” As a result, certain contextual “symbols” (as Burke might call them) must be considered. A better understanding of the historical context surrounding mothers of the time allows for stronger analysis of the discourses involving *Passing* and *Imitation of Life*. These symbols include: the New Woman, the New Negro Woman, the suffrage movement, a declining birthrate and the threat of “race suicide,” the rise of the eugenics movement, and scientific motherhood.

### **The New Woman**

The symbol of the New Woman gave women a new way to consider their choices in life, and it also represented one of the biggest threats to the hegemonic construct of motherhood. Novelist Sarah Grand, in *The North American Review*, first used the term *New Woman* in 1894 (Gamble 283). However, the qualities of the New Woman had been developing since the 1880s. Overall, the New Woman was “interested in gaining greater access to education, employment, and economic and civic rights, and in changing expectations concerning personal behavior” (Cruea

199). These “new women” continued the efforts of their mothers before them in seeking equality with men. Where motherhood was the most important job for middle and upper-class women in the early 1800s, both work and opportunities for women progressed to include participation in sports, such as archery, rowing, and horseback riding as well as outside domestic duties, such as pumping water and gardening (Cruea 192).<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to gain even more independence, the New Woman turned her attention to the social sphere and the traditions women were to follow in their domestic roles. As a result, the New Woman made visible clear attempts to challenge the traditional and accepted roles of women in public life and popular culture.

Perhaps the best symbol to represent the New Woman is the Gibson Girl. Named after Dana Gibson, who created the image in 1894 for publication in *Life* magazine, the Gibson Girl presented a specific look for the New Woman. This “uniform” consisted of “a high-collared, rather severe white shirtwaist blouse, tucked into a plain dark skirt. The skirt stopped at the ankles and was neither full and beruffled nor so narrow that it was difficult to walk” (Matthews 13-4). This look not only allowed a sort of freedom from confining clothes, but it also allowed women to engage in more athletic activities. Though several athletic activities were available to the New Woman, such tennis, golf, basketball, sailing, swimming,

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<sup>3</sup> The adoption of outside domestic duties reveals the class division found among new women as lower-class women were already responsible for such tasks.

skating, and bowling, the most popular one was bicycling. (Matthews 14). Bicycling helped to demonstrate an equality that women had with men. Specifically, it “was an activity that men and women not only engaged in together but did in much the same way” (Matthews 14). With only one way to ride a bicycle, there was no distinguishable difference between how men and women engaged in the activity. However, not everyone approved of the new equality found in such activities. Much of the disapproval of the New Woman related to the traditional roles women had assumed over the course of much of the nineteenth century. As Lorelee MacPike asserts, “These changes [dress and activities] altered the ways women appeared in public and forced a new visual, iconographic image that conflicted with the traditional married mother visually implied by the sedentary, corseted-and-crinolined woman” (371). The image of the New Woman proved difficult for many to accept. Additionally, the choices the New Woman made for her life created even more controversy, and these choices not only affected her life, but also created societal concern.

As a way to break free from the traditional, domestic role of women, the New Woman sought a career beyond the home. Choosing such a lifestyle typically meant that the New Woman did not marry and did not become a mother. Instead, “she turned to a career for emotional and intellectual fulfillment” (Cruea 200). Receiving a college education allowed the New Woman to support herself, and she did not have to stay in the home to bear or rear children to achieve satisfaction or

fulfillment. Such actions and decisions led to a clear rejection of the New Woman by much of the public. In her June 7, 1913 contribution to *Harper's Weekly*, Louise Connolly states, "The trouble is that just as the introduction of the elevator has been so rapid that many people's stomachs are not yet adjusted to the motion, so the changes in the social condition of women have been so sudden that many men's prejudices have not yet their 'sea legs'" (qtd. in Patterson 179). One such "prejudice" included women's work. Although some lower-and middle-class women had been working as teachers or store clerks before the arrival of the New Woman (Cruea 191), there were still expectations as to the kind of work that women could do:

... a woman's primary concern was still expected to be the well being of her family, physically and spiritually. Also, ... work was acceptable outside the home only when it fell within women's traditional sphere; occupations such as housekeeping or nursing fell within the domestic realm. Provided a woman was not married with her own family to care for, school teaching was accepted, despite its intellectual leanings, as in involved childrearing. (Cruea 200)

Being told the type of profession she could enter was exactly the type of constraint the New Woman wanted to escape. Additionally, the New Woman did not feel obligated to create a family. The idea that a woman could support herself, without the assistance of a man and without the need for a family, established opposition between the goal of the New Woman movement and the society in which she lived.

The New Woman did not want to participate in “acceptable” professions or retain her traditional roles. As a result, the actions of the New Woman “led many people to believe, or fear, that a woman who could choose how she would live would no longer choose men. And if she did not choose men, who would bear the babies?” (MacPike 372). Taking the initiative to choose whether or not to marry and become a mother, the New Woman was making decisions for which the public was not prepared. The idea of “New Women” not bearing babies may have led to other causes for concern, such as birth rate declines and accusations of race suicide, which are discussed later within this chapter. Nevertheless, the role of mother was certainly in the most danger when it came to the New Woman as society still expected women to become wives and mothers.

Despite the best efforts of the New Woman, the movement was all but over by the early twentieth century. The New Woman fell out of favor largely due to “the rise of the flapper in the late teens and twenties” (Patterson 178). Additionally, the demise of the New Woman was also likely due to a lack of conformity to social conventions such as marriage and motherhood. As MacPike argues, “[h]ad she been able to control the discourse about childbearing, the New Woman would have been in a position to take the next step and reconstruct woman” (396). The direct link between woman and motherhood was something the public was not prepared to sever. Additionally, the “glorification of motherhood that emerged after 1900” worked directly against the agenda of the New Woman (MacPike 392). The public

simply was not prepared for the educational, professional, and domestic equality the New Woman wanted. As a result, “[t]he New Woman was encouraged to assimilate back into mainstream culture through marriage or else be considered a lonely, old spinster. If she chose to resist, the New Woman faced a difficult struggle to persevere within a culture that was not ready for her radical vision” (Cruea 202). Such treatment of the New Woman demonstrates “how fantastically much of our ‘Reality’ could not exist for us, were it not for our profound and inveterate involvement in symbol systems” (Burke “Terministic” 48). Ultimately, within the culture, the symbol of the mother overpowered the symbol of the New Woman. The New Woman was rejected due to the importance of cultural norms such as childbearing and motherhood. Overall, dominant normative society did not wish to embrace the equality the New Woman sought within the domestic sphere or in public life. Nevertheless, her spirit of reinvention and resistance, and her symbol, remained. The New Woman would have a chance to re-emerge as new movements arose.

### **The New Negro Woman**

Where the New Woman mainly symbolized the white middle-class ideal community, the New Negro Woman represented the black middle-class ideal community. However, where the New Woman challenged women’s roles as mothers, the New Negro Woman celebrated the domestic duties of women. Margaret Murray Washington (wife of Booker T. Washington) is credited with the

coining of the phrase “New Negro Woman” in her paper “The New Negro Woman,” which she read at the First National Conference of Colored Women in Boston in August 1895. The speech was then published in Edward Everett Hale’s Boston monthly *Lend a Hand* (Washington 54). In the paper, Washington attempts to unite all women of color by focusing on the pride associated with women and their domestic role within the home. She states, “Thus it is with the struggle to uplift the negro woman there is a starting-point, and this I believe to be the home. The two words, home and woman, are so closely connected that I could not, even if I desired, separate one from the other” (Washington 56). Overall, her paper delivers the message that the educated upper and middle-class black women should help, even teach, the lower class of black women to succeed in the home and make it their own. Washington continues:

Lessons in making home neat and attractive; lessons in making family life stronger, sweeter, and purer by personal efforts of the woman; lessons in tidiness of appearance among women; lessons of clean and pure habits of everyday life in the home, and thus bringing to the women self-respect and getting from them the respect of others; how to keep the girls near the mother, and many other kindred subjects, need to be given to this [lower] class of women to-day. (57)

As a teacher herself, Washington sought to educate the poorer class of black women so that they could find “self-respect” and pride within themselves—and conform to



middle-class gender norms. Thus, the domestic sphere is where Washington sought to give rise to the New Negro Woman.

Based on the thoughts of Washington, the New Negro Woman represented the traditional Victorian (white) ideals of motherhood—that the home is the best, and rightful, place for a woman, especially if she is a mother. However, despite the notion that Washington derived her New Negro Woman from once-celebrated white gender constructs, the hope appeared to be that “they [New Negro Women] not only inspire their mates to embrace a bourgeois production ethic, but they inspire white Americans to recognize their fitness for inclusion in such national rhetorics of progress” (Patterson 51). In short, the overall goal of the New Negro Woman was the opposite of the white New Woman. Martha H. Patterson elaborates, “instead of the ‘selfish’ attributes of the white ‘New Woman’—sexual freedom and individualized accomplishment—the black expression of New Womanhood epitomized refinement, domestic accomplishment, and race progress” (59). Washington, as well as her husband, sought to separate the black community from its ties to slavery and rise above such extreme poverty, lack of education, and racism. Therefore, the New Negro Woman sought to take back the home that slavery took from her, and the black race would be uplifted because of it.

Many of the lessons of the home Washington referred to were offered via black women’s clubs. Though many clubs were criticized for perpetuating dominant, white ideologies, Kinser notes, “Grounded in the belief that, because of black

women's central position in their families and communities, to take care of the women is to take care of the race, clubwomen effected monumental change" (47). Because they claimed the domestic sphere as their own, black women resisted the views of the white, middle-and upper-class New Woman who sought independence outside of the home. More importantly, black women's clubs celebrated all facets of motherhood. Even working mothers were seen as "worthy mothers" within the clubs (Kinser 48). Where the white New Woman would seek to avoid motherhood in favor of independent work, the New Negro Woman was celebrated for her dedication to her family. However, not all black women's clubs had the same focus, and not all affluent black women agreed with Washington's position. For example, Fannie Barrier Williams "saw clubwomen's rightful focus to be broader and to include involvement in politics, law, and public policy" (Kinser 48-9). Williams sought to create new images of black women, much like the Gibson Girl, as seen in "teachers, a principal, nurse, dentist, [or] stenographer" (Patterson 59). Nevertheless, Williams still tied the success of these images to the home first. While some black women's clubs shifted their efforts outside of the home at times, "they believed that racial uplift was centrally grounded in the home and that race progress was dependent upon black women's initiative in helping black women and families" (Kinser 49). Thus, the most important aspect of a New Negro Woman was that of her domestic success.

Throughout the Harlem Renaissance, the New Negro Woman gained more ground. Through the medium of the black press, the ideals of Washington, Williams, and other black intellectuals persisted in lifting up the race by confirming the value of a well-maintained home, and thus confirming the importance of domesticity for black women. Additionally, Washington implored the upper-class to assist the lower-class in achieving the goals of the New Negro Woman. She makes a final call to women:

We only want women who will, everywhere that is needed, take up this cause of the large class of negro women who have not had the same opportunity which you and I have had. Are we not all of one race? Are not the interests of this class our interests? There is a hearty response in the efforts of the women to rise and shake off the terrible habits which, for two hundred and fifty years, were being fastened upon them. It is not rapid work, but I believe that it is sure work. I believe that in this kind of work is the salvation of the negro women, and all will agree with me that just in proportion as the women rise will the race rise. Work for these masses and you work for the race.

(58)

The call to strengthen women's role in the domestic sphere represents the essence of the New Negro Woman. No matter what other job or work she might do, the most

important aspect of a New Negro Woman was to “work for the race” in the home, and no one represented this ideal more so than Washington. Patterson asserts:

Married to accommodationism, industrial education, and personal “progress” while signifying “virtue,” “intelligence,” and devotion to racial uplift, Mrs. Booker T. Washington [became] the epitome of race progress. Her image [did] not suggest the painful legacy of slavery, Jim Crow legislation, disenfranchisement, and lynching but a “new” future seemingly divorced from the “hated past.” (56)

Thus, the New Negro Woman is inextricably linked to motherhood. The focus on the domestic, as well as the education of all black women, establishes the notion that the New Negro Women should “mother the race” in order to uplift it. Additionally, the New Negro Woman shows a direct divergence from the overtly white New Woman who sought to challenge the notion that all women must mother. As such, the New Negro Woman, especially when coupled with the New Woman, establishes a thought-provoking and contradictory intersection with the discourses of mothering.

### **The Suffrage Movement**

At the turn of the twentieth century, the suffrage movement continued to gain ground. Where the public could not support the New Woman in her quest for domestic equality, pursuit of women’s suffrage offered more hope: “What women looked to as they marched confidently into the next century was a new, improved womanhood and motherhood that would make its decisive imprint on a better

society” (Matthews 35). Where the New Woman movement failed, suffrage hoped to succeed. The suffrage movement then presented the best opportunity for women’s equality.

The suffrage movement, while greatly important to the rights of women, did not directly address motherhood in America. Although ideals related to suffrage first appear prior to the American Civil War— “By 1848 a loosely organized ‘Woman’s Rights’ movement had sprung into existence” (Matthews 6)— my focus here is on events post-1865 that contribute to an understanding of the state of motherhood prior to the publication of the selected novels. Though mothering was not the focus of the suffrage movement, some suffragists did use the act of mothering to help shape the discourse for the campaign of the vote. Additionally, the suffrage movement was not the only focus of women’s rights. Some activists “labored independently to advance racial and gender justice” while others “worked within broad religious, social, and political movements” (Hewitt 20). Although the suffrage movement pushed for the rights of women, and although some suffragists used maternal rhetoric surrounding motherhood to push their agenda in speeches and in public advertisements, the overall movement did not focus on rights directly related to motherhood. Moreover, ideas about how to advance the cause differed amongst its leaders.

By 1869, two organized groups had formed based on their founders’ opinions as to how the suffrage movement should take shape. On one side, Elizabeth Cady

Stanton and Susan B. Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in New York, and on the other, Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry Blackwell, founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in Boston. Stanton and Anthony sought to “pursue vigorously both suffrage and other women’s issues,” which included “persistent championing of easier divorce laws” while Stone and her husband “champion[ed] new opportunities for women but carefully avoided anything that might impugn [the AWSA’s] respectability” (Matthews 6-7). Clearly, one organization was willing to challenge more aspects of a “woman’s role” than the other. However, not all of the roles women played were debated for long. Interestingly enough, the one thing the two organizations eventually agreed upon was the confines of marriage:

By the 1880s, . . . both organizations were steering clear of any attempt to examine marriage as an institution that confined women, or anything that might be constructed as an attack on religion, the churches, or conventional sexual morality. As the titles of the two organizations indicate, the vote, which had been but one of the many goals of the prewar movement, now assumed the central role.

(Matthews 7)

Still, the two organizations remained separate and continued on their own paths. Despite the difference in approaches, both organizations gained large followings. As time moved forward, and as membership began to grow, the “younger members on

both sides . . . did not feel so strongly the bitterness of the original split,” resulting in a combining to the two organizations to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), and “[a]t its first meeting in February 1890, Stanton was narrowly elected president and Anthony vice president of the new association” (Matthews 31). The joining of the two organizations demonstrated a sense of unity the suffrage movement needed.

The connection between suffrage and motherhood paints an interesting picture of how some women viewed their roles and reveals the ways they helped shape discourses on motherhood. Where the New Woman often rejected marriage and child rearing, this new generation of activists embraced marriage and mothering, and in doing so, they advanced the cause of women’s suffrage *and* valorized motherhood. Kinser asserts, “[e]arly suffragists argued that women were naturally predisposed to make sound voting decisions because they would make them from their inherently maternal perspective” (41). If women could be charged with caring for and raising the next generation of (male) Americans, why should those women be removed from the process of electing the next man to lead the new generation? To some suffragists, even those in the NAWSA, appealing to the maternal instincts of women (even if they did not have children) was the most effective argument for the right to vote since the dominant, hegemonic culture placed motherhood in such high esteem. As the campaign for the vote continued, “messages featured the language of ‘social housekeeping,’ ‘cleaning up politics’ and

taking care of the nation as their larger ‘home,’ in addition to more general statements about needing political voice to effectively perform their duty to home and children” (Kinser 43). Rather than trying to demonstrate an independent, educated, freethinking “new” woman, these suffragists used maternal discourse as well as maternal symbols for political gain. In doing so, suffragists took a regressive approach in that they advanced their agenda on one side (the right to vote) while remaining anchored to the stereotypical role of motherhood. However, not everyone involved in the suffrage movement appreciated the adoption of maternal discourse for the sake of campaigning.

Women who were once a part of the NAWSA formed a group that sought to avoid using maternal discourse in campaigning for suffrage. The women of The National Women’s Party, created with the help of former British suffragette Alice Paul, grew restless with the cautious nature of the NAWSA (Matthews 148). Much of Paul’s impatience grew out of the experience she had with the British suffragettes. Although The National Women’s Party originally was an “affiliate” of the NAWSA known as the “Congressional Union” (Matthews 148), the women who agreed with Paul sought a more active and aggressive campaign strategy. Rather than focus on a more “domestic” type of strategy, The National Women’s Party sought suffrage largely based on individuality and equality with men (Kinser 44). Specifically, Paul wanted to break away from “the NAWSA’s long standing nonpartisan policy and adopt the British policy of holding the party in power responsible for not taking



action on women's suffrage," and her aggressive tactics included "encourage[ing] her followers to heckle candidates unmercifully," which the NAWSA found to be "unladylike," and the clear differences between the groups of women created an obvious rift, which resulted in the affiliation between the two officially ending in 1913 when the Congressional Union was removed (Matthews 148-9). The importance the NAWSA placed on being "ladylike" and nonpartisan proved unacceptable for some women. Likewise, molding discourses to promote the maternal side of women by claiming they were the mothers of the country proved too constraining for some.

Another organization recognized the importance of motherhood for women, but chose to focus on educating women. The National League for the Civic Education of Women, and specifically its founder Mrs. Gilbert F. Jones, wanted "to give women of the country the best possible means of obtaining information bearing on their rights, responsibilities and economic position in the community" (168). By 1909, the suffrage movement had experienced many defeats, and suffrage had not yet been nationally achieved. Jones felt that much of the failure was due to the lack of information women acquired from other women's organizations as they fought for suffrage. Specifically, what Jones thought the movement needed was a clearer understanding: "When men come to feel that they are no longer the protectors of their wives, daughters, mothers and sisters, and when the women look to the ballot for their protection rather than to their husbands sons and fathers, then Woman

Suffrage will be a necessity and public opinion will be clamoring for it" (196). Here, Jones insists that both men and women need to reconsider their "traditional" roles. Men do not need to "protect" women, and in turn women should stop relying on men to "protect" them. Men and women could gain equality when both looked to the law for protection. Interestingly enough, though, Jones still maintained the "traditional" acceptance of women as mothers, especially in regards to the service mothers provide the State:

Motherhood is unquestionably the greatest service to the human race that can possibly be conceived of. The State benefits by it. But Motherhood is neither a State duty nor a State service. The State gives the franchise when it demands service; Motherhood it can neither demand nor deny. Motherhood will still be Motherhood whether the State is a democracy or a despotism, and Motherhood would still continue were all Government abolished. The State depends on it, as it depends on the rain that falls and the sun that shines in the heavens. (162)

Though she praises the act of mothering, Jones's words still inscribe women in the maternal roles that some sought to break free of with rights such as suffrage. In the article, Jones neither supports nor opposes the use of motherhood for suffrage, but her declaration regarding the importance of motherhood align her with the position of the NAWSA as opposed to The National Women's Party. Despite the number of

positions women or women's groups took to approaching suffrage, the topic of motherhood clearly played a role in a significant number of suffrage discourses. Although the overall goal for suffrage was earning women the right to vote, the symbol some suffragists created when using maternal discourses to appeal demonstrates two things. First, it shows the importance the country placed on the roles of mothers as producers and rearers of children, and second, in what could be considered a less threatening version of feminism, it also shows how some were willing to exploit such a symbol in order to earn the right to vote.

The presence of motherhood in discourses surrounding women's suffrage assists in understanding the cultural perception of mothers leading up to that point. Linking the mothering of children to the mothering of a country establishes the importance of mothering on a much larger cultural and discursive scale—mothering can no longer be viewed as an individual endeavor but one of community and national importance. As a result, mothering was no longer confined to the home; it directly impacted the good of the country and moved stealthily into the public sphere and public discourse. If some suffragists were willing to make such strong claims for motherhood in order to gain the right to vote, then becoming a mother could still be viewed as one of the more important roles for women. In retrospect, such a message appears counterproductive to the equality sought by both movements. Since the symbol for motherhood was now connected to the good of the country, she could then be blamed for any downturn the country or its citizens

might take. Nevertheless, the rhetoric involved in both movements helps to situate the ways society symbolized women as mothers prior to passage of the nineteenth amendment. Mothers, and women, were no longer the keepers of their own homes and children; they now worked for the good of the country.

The suffrage movement achieved its goal with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.<sup>4</sup> The victory for the vote gave women a right they had fought long and hard for; however, it also demonstrated there was still a long way to go, especially with regards to motherhood. Rather than trying to challenge the role of women in the home, women complied. According to Kinser, “Instead of working to extend their influence and status beyond the domestic sphere, many women were pursuing marriage as the primary “career” choice” (61). Although some women were seeking so-called “careers,” many were content to stay home. As a result, it seemed as if women were taking one step back with regards to their domestic roles. Women were not bothered by the continued expectations placed on them within the home. They were simply content with the right to vote. After all, it was acceptable to use maternal instincts to show women needed the vote. So, why should they leave those instincts behind now that they had the vote? For some, it was fulfilling to be a wife, mother, or homemaker, but not every woman was content with a domestic life.

Along with the right to vote, women also gained access to contraception. As both

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<sup>4</sup> The discussion of suffrage involves much more than is covered here. The focus of this section is to make the connection between suffrage and motherhood in order to help establish historical discourses of motherhood.

topics gained popularity, although it is difficult to know which topic is the more significant factor, a noticeable shift away from domesticity can be seen in a declining birth rate.

### **A Declining Birth Rate and Race Suicide**

Perhaps the most interesting discourses of motherhood in the years prior to the publication of the selected novels come in the form of public conversations about declining birth rates and accusations of race suicide. Declining birth rates at the turn of the twentieth century helped symbolize the need women felt to control their own bodies. What better way to assert control than through limiting reproduction or choosing not to become a mother? From the beginning of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, “white marital fertility rates dropped from an average of 7.04 births per woman [...] to 3.56 births” (Katz qtd. in Capo 15). Additionally, “from the latter years of the nineteenth century until about 1940” African American fertility dropped as well (McFalls and Masnick qtd. in Capo 15). The maternal role that made women seem so important was the role that some women wanted to challenge or at least limit. At the very least, limiting the number of children a woman had could alleviate health concerns, in particular the potential for complications during childbirth. The need for such control was a cause for concern for some, including President Theodore Roosevelt.

In his 1905 address to the National Congress of Mothers,<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt charges both men and women in the responsibility of childbearing. He even lists potential reasons they might “forego these blessings” of having children as “viciousness, coldness, shallow-heartedness, self-indulgence, or mere failure to appreciate aright the difference between the all-important and the unimportant . . .” His rhetoric avoids national topics such as health and poverty in relation to the family dynamic and his words vilify men and women who do know wish to have children, or at least have “enough” children. As head of the congress’s advisory council, Roosevelt was no stranger to this gathering of women and men who concerned themselves with the well being of children.<sup>6</sup> Although Roosevelt spoke about the roles of both mothers and fathers within his speech, mothers were the clear targets of Roosevelt’s words. Even his closing remarks focus on women alone:

The woman’s task [being a mother] is not easy—no task worth doing is easy—but in doing it, and when she has done it, there shall come to her the highest and holiest joy known to mankind; and having done it, she shall have the reward prophesied in Scripture; for her husband and her children, yes, and all people who realize that her work lies at

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<sup>5</sup> The name was changed to the National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations in 1908. In 1924, the name was changed to the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. It is most commonly known now as the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA).

<sup>6</sup> Though the National Congress of Mothers meetings focused on the well being of children, the mothers were still largely discussed as the responsible party for child care. As Roosevelt’s speech shows, a father’s contribution to the well being of his child(ren) was largely to earn enough money to support the family.

the foundation of all national happiness and greatness, shall rise up  
and call her blessed.

Roosevelt's words seem to demonstrate that the only way a mother matters is in how she serves her child(ren). His call to a higher, holier power placed heavy expectations on women and their roles as mothers. His phrase "the woman's task" also seems to suggest that the role of being a mother is the *only* important role a woman can play. The positive notion of such a divine "reward prophesied in Scripture" suggests that a woman should want to achieve nothing more than to be a good mother. Moreover, the reward for mothers comes not in this life but the next. Such strong, faith-based rhetoric demonstrates how "[l]anguage is a species of action, symbolic action—and its nature is such that it can be used as a tool" (Burke "Definition" 15). Roosevelt's language, here, becomes a tool for insisting that women complete their "task" of mothering. As Roosevelt continues, the overall message of his speech to women is that they should mother well and mother many:

No piled-up wealth, no splendor of material growth, no brilliance of artistic development, will permanently avail any people unless its home life is healthy, . . . and unless the average woman is a good wife, a good mother, able and willing to perform the first and greatest duty of womanhood, able and willing to bear, and to bring up as they should be brought up, healthy children, sound in body, mind, and

character, and numerous enough so that the race shall increase and not decrease.

Here, not only does Roosevelt use powerful language with words such as “splendor” and “brilliance” and phrases like “the first and greatest duty of womanhood” to valorize mothering, he also suggests that the continued growth of the (human) race, and the value of the (white) race, is up to mothers. The rhetoric used by Roosevelt places a heavy, and most likely unnecessary, burden on the shoulders of women to become mothers and to mother well. Though there are still expectations of men to provide for their family in a monetary and moral sense, the clear focus of Roosevelt’s speech is the child bearing and rearing of the mother.

The significance of Roosevelt’s speech cannot be ignored. His rhetoric represents the dominant position on mothering, and his statements demonstrate the pressure placed on mothers to raise positive, productive citizens for the future of America. Roosevelt even went so far as to warn of “race suicide.” Specifically, he states that “a race that practised [sic] race suicide—would thereby conclusively show that it was unfit to exist” (Roosevelt). Such a term puts strong onus on American citizens to reproduce. However, as he continues, the clear responsibility of avoiding race suicide soon shifts to women. He continues, “The existence of women of this type forms one of the most unpleasant and unwholesome features of modern life” (Roosevelt). Though men and women should want to have children, according to President Roosevelt, it is the sole responsibility of women to *want* to become



mothers. The choice of whether to become a mother (or contribute to the declining birth rate) was symbolized best by the increased availability of contraceptives. The issue of contraception first gained national attention with the passing of The Comstock Act, another “species of action” in which language is used as a tool to deny women access to birth control.

The Comstock Act built upon the 1865 bill created by Senator Jacob Collamer to prevent the “spreading of social menace” through United States mail (Tone 5). The amended act, named for New York reformer Anthony Comstock, who “was part of the Progressive Era’s attempt to wipe out vice” (Capo 13), added the regulation of contraceptives to “an extraordinarily long list of ‘obscenities’” that included “any ‘obscene book, pamphlet, picture, print, or other publication . . . [of] vulgar and indecent character,’” which largely included pornographic items (Tone 4-5). The focus of the act continued societal monitoring of morality only on a national scale. Much of the moral focus of the Act related to birth control and abortions. The Act specifically states:

That no obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character, or any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of contraception or procuring of abortion, no any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature, nor any written or printed card, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement or notice of any kind

giving information, directly or indirectly, where, or how, or of whom, or by what means either of the things before mentioned may be obtained or made, nor any letter upon the envelope of which, or postal-card upon which indecent or scurrilous epithets may be written or printed, shall be carried in the mail, . . . (“CHAP. CCLVIII”)

The attempt to control women’s reproduction builds on the dominance of patriarchal practice. Comstock continues the negative discourse surrounding the ability for women to take control of their own lives. The mention of “preventing contraception or procuring of abortion” clearly targets decisions that women make about their bodies and those who try to help women with those decisions. At this point, then, the act of choice in relation to motherhood is best symbolized by contraceptives because it allows women the ability to choose if or when to have a child and even how many children to have. In this instance, the symbol of contraceptives helps shape the reality of women, and potential mothers, in a more complex way. In the Burkean sense, the term *contraceptive* is first a *reflection* of reality in that it reflects the reproductive rights women seek. It is then a *selection* of reality because the dominant culture has selected the term. Finally, it is a *deflection* of reality in that the Comstock laws attempt to vilify its use. A simple term such as *contraception* greatly impacts dominant society. The meaning of the term depends upon how one constructs his or her own symbols regarding it. If one approves of the use of contraceptives, then the term might take on a more positive meaning as

opposed to someone who finds contraceptives to be lewd, possibly due to the idea that sex could be recreational, such as those who supported or enforced the Comstock laws.

Though Comstock seemingly sought to maintain a moral society by limiting the distribution of pornographic and other corruptive materials through the mail, there were some obvious problems with the law. These problems included the subjectivity involved in deciding what qualifies as “obscene, lewd, or lascivious” as well as who would make such a decision. Since Comstock was appointed United States Postal Inspector, for a number of years he made the decisions, which only furthered problems regarding the subjectivity of the act (Tone 5). Due to the questionable constitutionality, Comstock often found himself defending the legality of the act. The ability to designate a form of contraception as “unnatural” birth control rested solely with Comstock. As a result, citizens began to challenge their arrests for breaking the law. As historian Andrea Tone notes, “Even U.S. presidents rejected Comstock’s rigidity” citing that Ulysses S. Grant and Rutherford B. Hayes both pardoned citizens who had been arrested by Comstock (39). Nevertheless, Comstock continued his crusade against birth control and abortions despite the objections by others.

Twentieth century feminist Margaret Sanger in particular took exception to the laws that openly targeted a woman’s right to make a choice regarding her reproductive system. Sanger began a “public crusade for ‘birth control’—a term she

coined” (Matthews 120). Sanger’s decision to improve women’s lives though their choices regarding motherhood stemmed from her own experiences from interacting with women who attempted to receive abortions. After watching one woman die from a cheap abortion, Sanger declared that something must be done:

... There was only one thing to be done: call out, start the alarm, set the heather on fire! Awaken the womanhood of America to free the motherhood of the world! I released from my almost paralyzed hand the nursing bag which unconsciously I had clutched, threw it across the room, tore the uniform from my body, flung it into a corner, and renounced all palliative work forever.

As she began her crusade, the Comstock laws were a constant impediment. Anywhere she sought help, the Comstock laws were the reason for negative responses she received (M. Sanger). Still, Sanger would not give up on her crusade to improve the lives of women and the state of motherhood.

Furthermore, Sanger had reason to take on the Comstock laws as they prevented her own voice from being heard. Specifically, the Post Office stopped the circulation of *The Call*, a socialist newspaper Sanger published articles in under the title “What Every Girl Should Know” (Matthews 120). Sanger took a practical approach to advocating for birth control, even though her methods were quite

radical to most.<sup>7</sup> In her efforts, she “situated birth control firmly in the context both of alleviating the often desperate economic and personal plight of poor women and of liberating women’s sexuality” (Matthews 121). Sanger, along with other birth control activists, directly challenged the idea that the government could regulate items such as birth control thorough the mail based on such subjective legislation like the Comstock laws. For instance, manufacturers of birth control devices had to change their marketing strategies. Examples include placing classified ads that were “published in the medical, rubber, and toilet goods sections of dailies and weeklies,” and one particular ad in an 1889 edition of the *National Police Gazette* states, ““rubber goods . . . [for] gents. 25 cents each”” (qtd. in Tone 30). Discrete advertising allowed for purveyors of birth control to sell their product and (hopefully) avoid prosecution. However, Sanger was less discrete, and she eventually “opened the first birth control clinic in 1916” and “founded the American Birth Control League in 1921” (Kinser 58-9). Feats such as these by Sanger and other birth control activists show how important it became for women to have control over their own bodies. One aspect of such control is a woman’s decision regarding becoming a mother.

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<sup>7</sup> I do not wish to elevate Sanger and her methods. As she drew upon some ideologies of eugenics, Sanger’s methods often privileged the needs of white women over women of color. This creates some diverging interpretations of Sanger’s acts with regards to race and birth control. Though this study does not include the arguments of Sanger’s impact, it only seeks to establish her dissent with the Comstock Act, discussions of Sanger and race can be found in Alexander Sanger’s “Eugenics, Race, and Margaret Sanger Revisited: Reproductive Freedom for All?” and Charles Valenza’s “Was Margaret Sanger a Racist?”.

Though the Comstock laws were put in place to monitor obscenities, they directly affected a woman's ability to learn about and even obtain birth control devices. Because the mail was monitored, the messages women could receive via mail were limited and in some cases encoded. Moreover, the idea of a woman actively seeking birth control methods led to questions regarding the sexual impulses of women. The consideration that sex could become a recreational act, especially for women, was considered immoral by some, and confirmation of such sexual impulses began to weaken the idea of maternal instinct. Historian Linda Gordon asserts:

In the fearful imaginations of self-appointed protectors of the family and of womanly innocence, the possibility that women might desire sexual contact not for the sake of pregnancy—that they might even desire it at a time when they positively did not want pregnancy—was a wedge in the door to denying that women had any special maternal instinct at all. (8)

Birth control provided women with the opportunity to choose whether or not they wanted to mother. However, at the same time, the need for birth control called into question the one thing that most agreed women could rely on—a maternal instinct. If women could choose not to have children, then Roosevelt's cautions against "directly forego[ing]" having children and committing "race suicide" seemed to have little effect. The symbol of birth control appeared to hold more power than the

warnings of the president, possibly because he represented the dominant, white, male view of society. Despite his position as president, it is hard to imagine he could establish a connection with women concerning control over their own bodies. Contraception gave women a choice regarding motherhood, and no man, not even the president, could understand the agency associated with such a choice.

Where the New Woman and the suffrage movement seemed to have little impact on the traditional meaning of “mother” (what I establish to be an essential duty of women to raise their children to become positive, promising citizens), the accusation of race suicide and declining birthrates suggests that the equality and independence sought in both previous movements was beginning to take effect. Declining birth rates demonstrate that women began to view their roles as mothers as a choice. Moreover, contraceptives allowed for decisions regarding family size. In this way, a woman could be more empowered within her own family because she could choose, along with her husband, to have a smaller family. Not only did limiting family size control the burden of domestic duties, but it also alleviated financial obligations, thus creating a more amicable situation for the entire family. Where caring for children was once an unavoidable and natural duty for a married woman, it became something a woman could control or limit. Such changes altered the discourses involving mothers. Though declining birthrates might only help support the notion that women were willing to make choices regarding motherhood, the accusations of race suicide clearly placed blame on women who chose not to mother

or chose to have fewer children. Even as contraceptives gave women a choice regarding motherhood, a rising movement put even more moral pressure on specific women from the educated, upper and middle classes to mother.

### **The Rise of the Eugenics Movement**

The link between birth control and eugenics<sup>8</sup> began in 1883, when Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, began experimenting on livestock for genetic improvement. His experimentations later began to include improving the human race. According to Galton, who first coined the term, there are certain elements that go into the science of eugenics:

We greatly want a brief word to express the science of improving stock . . . which, especially in the case of man, takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have. The word eugenics would sufficiently express the idea. (qtd. in Tone 140).

Generally speaking, eugenics is the practice of attempting to improve the human race through specific breeding measures. In particular, “[f]rom the 1880s through the 1920s a pervasive strain of eugenic thinking developed, emphasizing the

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<sup>8</sup> Eugenics is a far-reaching concept that extends much further beyond the scope of this discussion. Here, a simple foundation is established to connect the eugenics movement to the women/mothers of the time in an attempt to help establish discourses of motherhood. For additional information on the larger movement, see Paul A. Lombardo’s edited collection, *A Century of Eugenics in America*, Edwin Black’s *War Against the Weak*, and The Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement Web site at <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/>.



importance of genetic endowment—rather than environment, training, or education—in producing superior or inferior individuals” (Matthews 77). Much of eugenic thought comes down to pairing the right male and female together to produce a superior offspring. As a result, the act of mothering does not matter as much as choosing the right parents for the child(ren). In this way, eugenics removes the agency of a mother (and a father) because the only consideration is the creation of superior children. Moreover, the essential human element of love between a man and a woman, or even the love between a parent and a child becomes obsolete.

In the beginning, “Galton suggested that bountiful breeding of the best people would evolve mankind into a superlative species of grace and quality,” and his ideas regarding improving the human race came to be known as “positive eugenics,” which involved “suggesting, facilitating, predicting and even legally mandating biologically conducive marriage;” moreover, these ideas, at least in Galton’s own mind, and “within his utopian context, [were] deemed noninvasive and nondestructive” (Black 18). Despite the fundamental racism of his ideas, Galton had hoped he would truly improve the future of the human race. However, upon Galton’s death in 1911, others made sure that eugenics practices persisted, and those who continued to promote eugenics did not do so according to Galton’s ideas. Journalist Edwin Black asserts, “What Galton hoped to inspire in society, others were determined to force upon their fellow man” (19). This new form of eugenics turned Galton’s idea of utopia into a hellish excuse for domination of those deemed “other”

or imperfect such as people of color, immigrants, the disabled and those living in poverty.

While the main focus for Galton seemed to be on producing “superior individuals” for the genuine improvement of humanity, the new focus of “negative” eugenics was on the protection and continued procreation of the white race. Thus, a more negative side to eugenics, one that Galton did not envision, emerged.

Additionally, the eugenics movement can be viewed as a negative Burkean symbol for some women when constructing their reality of motherhood because, in some cases, following eugenic thought meant removing a woman’s options regarding motherhood. Where “unfit” women were not allowed to reproduce, whether through forced birth control or sterilization, those women who were deemed “fit” were seen as mere breeders for the success of the human race. While “[e]ugenic thinking certainly exalted the importance of the mother in the breeding of superior children” it only did so “at the expense of precluding women from functioning as much else” (Matthews 77). Not only did eugenics place the white race and upper class above all others, but it also suggested that the only role for women, particularly “superior” white women, was in the form of a breeder. These women were to produce a superior race and, at the insistence of President Roosevelt, prevent the dreaded race suicide.

Because of the shift to improve the dominant, white, upper-class race, two different “methods” surrounded “negative eugenics”: “(a) the requirement of a clean

bill of health before a marriage license is issued, and (b) the sterilization of the unfit” (Jeffries and Nichols 12). As the adoption of such methods surrounding eugenics gained popularity, the government enacted laws and decided who was fit to wed, and by extension, fit to breed, since a married woman would most likely become a mother. Because cultural practices and prejudices became encoded in law, racial lines were clearly drawn within society. More specifically, racial mixing was prohibited. Simply stated: “race mixing was considered race suicide” (Black 31). Moreover, decisions had to be made to indicate those who were “fit” to help continue to build the human race. In this way, those who supported “negative eugenics” could use it “as a touchstone for their fears that ‘inferior’ racial groups were growing and must be interrupted lest they overrun a less fertile but ‘superior’ race” (Lombardo 7). Eugenics was the perfect tool to ensure the white race remain the dominant majority in America. Some individuals involved with eugenics “were obsessed with the idea of ‘race suicide’ and assumed that the progress of the ‘race’—in this case a quite narrow meaning of white, Nordic/Anglo-Saxon—depended on the ‘best’ women having as many children as possible” (Matthews 77-8). Echoing the sentiments of President Roosevelt, the “science” of eugenics presented the perfect opportunity to prevent the act of race suicide, and focusing on continuing the pregnancies of (white middle-class) women who bore “superior” children offered one way to prevent race suicide. By encouraging forced sterilizations of “unfit” women (or men) such as immigrants or women of color, and decrying the uses of

birth control for the “superior” upper-or middle-class white women (and men), the eugenics movement far outreached Galton’s original intentions.

The rise of the eugenic movement created a shift in the discourses of motherhood. Although the acts of mothering, such as caring for a child’s well being and survival, were viewed no differently, the assumption that there were women who could be “good” mothers and women who were not worthy of mothering (“bad” mothers) established a more negative discourse than the three previous symbol systems. There now existed a clear divide between those deemed good mothers and those deemed bad, typically in relation to one’s race, ethnicity, and/or class. As a result, within the eugenics movement, the “unfit” mother is symbolized as the “scapegoat” who is worthy of such negative treatment. According to Burke, the “scapegoat” is “the ‘representative’ or ‘vessel’ of certain unwanted evils, the sacrificial animal upon whose back the burden of these evils is ritualistically loaded” (“Philosophy” 39-40). So, since “bad” mothers could do no right by their children, they easily became societal scapegoats. Moreover, because “good” mothers could offer children more of what society deemed acceptable, and because doing so would create a better human race, there was no need for the “unfit” woman to become a mother. But if she did become a mother, the “unfit” woman could be blamed for any resulting negative occurrences. When considering the symbol of eugenics, the ideas of mothering equality and the choice of mothering become overshadowed by the idea that some women should not become mothers, even if they wanted to do so.

The eugenics movement in America began its downturn after World War II.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in part due to recognition of Hitler's acts in Germany based on eugenics, the negative effect of eugenics continues to be far reaching. According to Black, "All told, an estimated 70,000 were eugenically sterilized in the first seven decades of the twentieth century; the majority were women" (398). The forced sterilization on potential mothers (and fathers) leaves a stain on American history, especially with regards to motherhood.<sup>10</sup> The number of women who had the option of mothering stripped from them demonstrates the importance of mothers in American society, but it does so in a horrifying manner. Moreover, such a large number of forced sterilizations clearly demonstrates the negative impact of eugenic thought. However, even ensuring the "right" partners reproduce was not enough. More specifically, if the "right" women were becoming mothers, they would have to mother the "right" way.

### **Scientific Motherhood and Child Rearing Advice Books**

Society's changing ideas regarding mothering are most obvious when considering the role science played. This consideration significantly aids in the

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<sup>9</sup> That is not to say that eugenics was wiped out as a science. Today, eugenics is known as "genetics." Specifically, as the transition was made after World War II, "the labels *human genetics* and *genetic counseling*" were used (Black 411). Many questions arise when considering the overall effects of eugenics, especially in regards to the lives that might have been. America would have undoubtedly looked much different had the reproduction of some not been prevented.

<sup>10</sup> For further information regarding forced sterilization and how it affected people differently based on race, class, disability, or the definition of an imbecile see Jonas Robitscher's *Eugenic Sterilization, Eugenic News* at [https://library.missouri.edu/exhibits/eugenics/eugenical\\_news.htm](https://library.missouri.edu/exhibits/eugenics/eugenical_news.htm), Edwin Black's *War Against the Weak*, and Adam Cohen's *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck*.

understanding of discourses surrounding motherhood, especially since so many of the concepts introduced by scientific motherhood remain in practice today.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the “term ‘scientific motherhood’ captured the new mood” concerning motherhood (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 9). No doubt as a result of social occurrences such as suffrage, eugenics, and a fear of race suicide, the reliance on science began to influence the act of mothering. Historians Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky assert: “While earlier generations viewed mothering principally through a religious lens, middle-class families increasingly saw child nature as a matter to be investigated, quantified, and studied by psychologists, doctors, and others. Every aspect of children’s care and development came under scrutiny” (9). The acceptable actions of mothers were now a part of public discourse. Even the government aided in the growing popularity of scientific motherhood with the creation of “[p]ublic health programs, compulsory schooling, and the growing influence of the social work profession . . .” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 11). With the rise of scientific mothering, the natural instincts of mothers were called into question. What was once seen as a “divine right” (as indicated by President Roosevelt himself) was now something to be left to the (male) experts. Journalist Ann Hulbert notes:

The expert emerged as the missing link: the modern parent’s modern parent. He would do more than discover a new model of childhood. He would himself serve as a new model of parenthood for mothers who,

like the children they were in charge of, were demanding and receiving more serious attention and stirring more concern than ever before. (36)

With the help of the so-called experts from either the scientific community or public health programs, mothers no longer had to rely on their own knowledge and instincts. More to the point, mothers should not *want* to rely on their own instincts. Instead they were encouraged to seek instruction from expert handbooks, government pamphlets, or social workers. The increasing popularity of expert advice only questioned mothers further:

Women increasingly encountered doctrines that—far from emphasizing female superiority in the domestic sphere—represented them as sadly inadequate to the task of reforming the home. As a result, mothering came under increasing scrutiny from experts in psychology, medicine, and education, and organized women themselves, which culminated in a national movement for child study and parent education. (Grant 40)

Groups such as The National Congress of Mothers (NCM) and the Child Study Association of America (CSAA) aligned themselves with the practices of scientific mothering (Grant 46). As these groups began to practice a maternalist politics, the rhetoric of mothering discourses shifted. Julia Grant asserts, “Maternalist politics derived from the conception that women had unique personal *and* civic

responsibilities to children and families that were based on their reproductive capacities” (46). Overall, maternalism sought to empower mothers because of their capabilities. Nevertheless, the exaltation of scientific motherhood still denigrated the maternal instincts that had long been held in such high regard.

On the surface, discourses surrounding maternalism celebrated motherhood and the achievements of mothering. Maternalist feminists began to use motherhood as a means of calling attention to women’s issues. In particular, these “middle-class women” attempted to increase women’s status and carve out a space in public life by using the rhetoric of good motherhood” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 11). Moreover, these feminists “claimed that motherhood (or potential motherhood) united all women, regardless of class, race or nationality, and that women were uniquely suited to nurturance and care” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 11). However, regardless of the attempt by maternalists to unite women, not all women, more specifically not all feminists, saw the role of mother as the way to bring women together in a united cause. Where “maternalists emphasized women’s duties to their families, . . . feminists advocated women’s individual self-fulfillment” (Grant 46). Not only did the establishment of expert advice for mothers further separate the “good” mothers from the “bad,” it also created divisions among feminists. Although maternalists supported feminism and feminism supported some aspects of maternalism, the two were not always amenable. For example, “The American Association of University Women [AAUW], by contrast, was an organization whose



purpose was to promote higher education and professional employment opportunities for women” (Grant 47). Even though the AAUW eventually joined forces with the NCM and the CSAA, their original goal of education for women equal to men differed greatly from the education for motherhood both the NCM and the CSAA sought. Mothering practices such as breast feeding, immunizations, and even homosexual mothering continue to be a topic of contention among feminists.

Another side effect of the attempt to unite women through motherhood came in the form of a good mother/bad mother dualism. As a result of scientific motherhood’s prominence and popularity, society began to distinguish between a “good” mother and a “bad” mother.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the good/bad dualism created regarding mothers often resulted from and in class and race discrimination largely related to the availability of financial resources which forced some mothers to work outside of the home. More often than not, “social workers frequently engaged in disputes over childrearing with immigrant and working-class mothers” because their child rearing practices were not “American” enough (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 11). Many of the disputes over acts of mothering stemmed from whether or not mothers chose to rely on available “expert” advice or depended on holistic, cultural practices. By establishing what “good” mothers should do, experts, such as social workers, also determined the type of behavior in which “bad” mothers

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<sup>11</sup> Discussion of the good/bad mother dualism here establishes a basis for the state of motherhood up to the point of publication for the novels explored in order to aid in the establishment of discourses of motherhood. Further discussion regarding the rhetoric of the good/bad mother dualism and its impact on mothering continues in Chapters Three and Four in relation to the selected novels.

engaged. The “good” mother relied on expert advice and put all her focus on her child(ren):

A good American mother, [social workers] insisted, did not swaddle her infant or give her a pacifier, she did not feed her baby garlic or sausage or tortillas (or anything other than milk for the first nine months). When her children were sick, she turned to a doctor. A good mother would not place a talisman around her child’s neck to ward off the evil eye. (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 11)

Where “good” mothers took the advice of experts, “bad” mothers continued to depend on their own instincts and possibly even natural remedies for their child(ren) that medical doctors would not use. For immigrant mothers, following expert advice meant abandoning the only culture they knew. They were told to ignore all the things they had likely learned from the mothers in their own culture and not to pass down any of those customs to their own child or child(ren). In doing so, American “experts” likely created even greater conflict within immigrant mothers regarding how to “properly” raise their child(ren) in the American way. Other examples of “bad” mothers included those who “[had] a child out of wedlock, [were] on welfare, [or lived] in poverty” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 12). Despite the well intentioned attempt to unify women, maternalism merely helped scientific motherhood to establish a classist dynamic that defined what it meant to be a “good” mother in twentieth-century America.

Within the four well-known advice books of the time that I discuss below, mothers could read about many options, which varied depending on the research and advice of a particular expert. No matter what advice a mother followed, discourses of motherhood of the time help to shape the idea that mothers must take advantage of the new technologies and developing philosophies of the time.

Psychologist Shari L. Thurer asserts:

Motherhood underwent a technological face-lift. Borrowing techniques from recently developed and improved industrial production, as well as from the new fields of psychology and child study, which proclaimed themselves to be scientific disciplines, mothers sought to reorganize child rearing along rational, standardized lines. All of a sudden mothers employed thermometers, formulas, milestone charts, and schedules, and they consulted numerous treatises on appropriate courses of action in their endeavors. They bandied about new, impressive-sounding terminology—vitamins, proteins, bacteria—intimidating the uninitiated. The Victorian mother would have been lost. (226)

As the new ideas regarding motherhood introduced new techniques for raising children, mothers had no choice but to turn to the experts. Victorian mothers who mainly depended on their instincts had raised the new mothers of the time, so mothers of this new time could not turn to their own mothers for help anymore.

Available technologies, such as thermometers and formulas, to help with raising children were not the only advances to affect the actions of mothers. The rising of child studies as a field of scientific study had an even greater effect on mothering, as it changed the discourses surrounding a mother's actions.

Most likely, based on the research of Julia Grant and Ann Hulbert, four main advice books on child rearing were read before and up to the publication of *Passing and Imitation of Life*. The earliest book, *The Care and Feeding of Children* (1894) by Dr. Luther Emmett Holt, "was a bible among well-off mothers," and it "curtly prescribed milk formulas, schedules, and no play with baby" (Hulbert 11). Within the introduction to the ninth edition (1918), Holt notes the publication of the newer edition because there is a "need of fuller treatment of several subject than was given in the earlier editions" (7). Here, Holt establishes that mothers and nurses still need his advice, as they cannot be trusted to complete some tasks regarding their child(ren). Within the book, Holt covers topics such as the conditions of the nursery (25-27) and common mistakes in feeding (93-94). The book mostly follows a question and answer format, but some sections do directly address the topics. Though the question and answer format seems to guide the mother, the rhetoric within the answers suggests the questions only need to be asked because the mother has done something wrong in the first place. One example is in relation to a question of vomiting too quickly after a bottle in which Holt's response is, "Usually the child is fed too often, or is given too much at a time . . . It may be because the

child is jounced or rocked or handled after feeding” (95-96). Though the question is one mothers may ask, the answer clearly places blame on the mother for something she is doing. Even when dealing with teething issues, Holt suggests teething symptoms “come from indigestion due to bad feeding” (39). Despite the practical, formulaic approach Holt takes to raising children, the advice he gives to mothers stems solely from “mistakes” they are making. Therefore, the rhetoric present within the “help” Holt offers only serves to make mothers question their actions even further.

In addition to Holt’s book was Dr. Granville Stanley Hall’s (1904) *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*. With his book, Hall shifted the focus from infant care to the complicated topic of adolescence. His advice “propped for the inner currents of growth, especially during puberty” (11) which resulted in requesting that “mothers track their babies’ character traits, habits, speech, and so forth and mail their data to experts for them to use in developing his new science” (Thurer 235). Ultimately, Hall sought more to impress his scientific counterparts. Unfortunately, the scientific community he wanted to impress did not care for the overly psychological work (Hulbert 78). However, within the general public, his advice was not ignored. In fact, most mothers appreciated that Hall’s work looked to the future of motherhood and child rearing (Thurer 235). Moreover, Hall’s focus allowed for mothers to continue to seek advice as their children got older. According

to Ann Hulbert, “In focusing obsessively on pubescent youth, Hall encouraged a shift in adult attitudes, making adolescents and their dramas a prime responsibility of parenthood, of adulthood in general” (79). Even though his advice extended to older children, Hall still sought to assign responsibility of the children to the parents, and mothers still sought out Hall’s advice despite the older age group he addressed. A protégée of Hall’s, Lorine Pruette, states of the books “that ‘anxious mothers . . . hugged its two big volumes to their breasts . . . [finding] . . . within its thousand pages a light to ease their steps and to guide them through the perilous paths of child-rearing’” (qtd. in Hulbert 60). The cultural popularity of Hall’s book even extended to the National Congress of Mothers who felt that adolescence was too large and too important of a topic to ignore (Hulbert 78). It seemed no matter what the age of the child, mothers felt the need to seek out advice regarding multiple stages of child rearing.

Another option for advice on mothering was Dr. Arnold Gesell’s (1925) *The Mental Growth of the Pre-school Child*. Gesell focused largely on “recording the timetable of normal child development” (Thurer 234), and he made “claims about the measurability of growing minds” (Hulbert 120). The first three parts of the study present the findings of Gesell’s study while the fourth part covers the practical application of the findings. From the outset of the fourth part, Gesell establishes a negative tone towards “untutored mothers,” saying that they “will anticipate a diagnosis with some shrewd remark in which they say of a defective child: ‘He is still

only a baby' or 'He is no more than my two-year-old baby' or 'she acts like a five-year-old child'" (355). Clearly, Gesell seeks to establish that mothers, especially those with a "defective" child, should seek only professional opinions. Though Gesell offers insight into typical development of children, his book proves difficult to comprehend, let alone put into practice, largely due to the first three parts of the study. They are essentially useless to the typical mother, as they are intended more for Gesell's professional counterparts. However, his timetables of development do show mothers how and when their child(ren) should develop certain skills (378-384). The problem with such timetables, though, is they can establish feelings of failure within mothers whose children do not reach such milestones when they should. Thus, the mother is blamed for the "failure" of the child to develop "normally."

When Dr. John B. Watson published *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928), he presented a completely different approach to child rearing. Dr. Watson does credit Holt as a source of inspiration, but Watson certainly takes Holt's approach to child rearing in a different direction. Hulbert explains:

What had begun as a cool invitation to mothers to handle their babies' feedings systematically [in Holt] became in Watson a fierce denunciation of mothers' proclivity to warp their babies' feelings. The stolidly independent character that Holt had elevated as the ideal for an urbanizing era had become a more alienated figure in Watson's pages, and in his person. (92)

Where Holt offered a schedule for mothers to follow in an attempt to structure a child's upbringing, Watson's suggestions deviated from the core of Holt's advice. Hulbert's criticisms are validated in reviewing Holt's text. One of his more quoted excerpts states, "Since the behaviorists find little that corresponds to instincts in children, since children are made not born, failure to bring up a happy child, a well adjusted child—assuming bodily health—falls up on the parents' shoulders" (Watson 7). The suggestion that children are "made" and not "born" assigns the possibility of either praise or blame for how a child is raised to the parents alone. Thus, Watson removes the nature versus nurture debate and swings the pendulum entirely to nurture. This child itself, in this instance, seems to have no responsibility for his or her own actions once he or she is capable of decision making. So, the majority of responsibility for raising a child still depends on the mother. However, Watson even goes so far as to question "whether there should be individual homes for children—or even whether children should know their own parents" (5-6). Continuing his sentiment of separation of parent and child, Watson also addresses mothers who smother their child(ren) with too much affection. His suggestion regarding kissing a child is to "[n]ever hug and kiss them, never let them sit in your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning" (81-2). Such advice might sound ridiculous to a contemporary mother. The idea of shaking the hand of one's child is devoid of any affection that many modern mothers embrace. Watson's behaviorist advice certainly



strayed from the more psychological suggestions of Holt and Hall, but it was not completely dismissed as a whole. Most critics commented on an overall success of the work, while condemning Watson's views of love and affection.<sup>12</sup> Whether a mother chose to follow the advice of Watson or not, according to Grant and Hulbert, it remained a popular publication.

The four books mentioned here do not represent the entirety of available advice manuals for mothers during the selected time. The inclusion of the four publications serves to provide a sampling of what publications would have been popular and available to mothers prior to and up to the point of publication of *Passing and Imitation of Life*. Holt and Hall focused on different times in a child's life, but both were popular among mothers seeking advice. Taken together, Holt and Hall established a foundation for the scientific motherhood upon which mothers would depend. Although they had opposite approaches, and separate focuses, the formulaic approach to motherhood is present in both philosophies, and both would have caused mothers to question themselves. Gesell's contribution to "normal" growth and development allowed for mothers to establish a baseline for the care they offered to children. Though the majority of his work targeted the scientific community, the timetables were well received and deemed helpful by mothers of the general public. Even further from established forms of child rearing advice,

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<sup>12</sup> More criticisms are offered in Kathryn M. Bigelow and Edward K. Morris's "John B. Watson's Advice on Child Rearing: Some Historical Context."

Watson offered mothers a more rigorous and emotionless approach to raising their child(ren). In so doing, Watson showed a clear distinction between a psychological approach and a behavioral approach. Regardless of the method, the publication (and popularity) of such advice books demonstrates that the discourses of motherhood largely depended less on a mother's instincts and more on an expert's suggestions.

The rise and increasing acceptance of scientific motherhood had a lasting impact on American mothers. Even today expectant mothers read advice books in preparation for motherhood and continue to seek out expert advice after their child(ren) are born. Mothers are still defined as "good" or "bad," and women who choose not to become mothers are questioned and scrutinized. The lasting impact of the science of motherhood further demonstrates the function of language as a symbolic act. The dissemination of mothering advice demonstrates how language "[can] conceal or reveal, magnify or minimize, simplify or complexify, elevate or degrade, link or divide" (Simons 4). In the case of mothering advice books, the symbolic nature of the language seems to "minimize" the natural instincts of women as mothers, "degrade" women's abilities as mothers, and "divide" mothers using the good/bad dualism. Moreover, the advice has not disappeared, and neither have the questions surrounding the choices mothers make in raising their child(ren).

As the instincts of mothers gave way to the advice of experts, public discourses of mothering shaped the idea that the role of a mother is to listen to and follow what others accepted as expert help. Such a widely accepted approach to

mothering alters the discourses of motherhood by discouraging mothers from following their instincts. With the popularity of scientific mothering, mothers had more responsibility than ever to make sure they mothered in the “right” way to avoid negative stigma.

### **Mothering Discourses and a Terministic Screen for “Mothering”**

The way a mother is viewed has evolved over time. From the New Woman and New Negro Woman, to the suffrage movement, to a declining birthrate and the threat of “race suicide,” to the rise of the eugenics movement, and finally, to scientific motherhood, each movement can be symbolically constructed to understand how it contributed to and laid the foundation for a terministic screen for “mothering.” All intersect to shape maternal rhetoric and what it meant to be a mother prior to the publication of the novels explored in the next two chapters. Furthermore, considering the historical context as constructed symbols systems reveals the way women shaped their own realities concerning the discourses of motherhood. Moreover, the intersection of the symbol systems within each mother character demonstrates the cultural work of the novels in that each character can represent mothers of the general public. As such, the mother characters explored here establish lenses with which mothers can construct their own meaning of “mothering.”

As the arrival of *Passing* and *Imitation of Life* approached, discourses surrounding motherhood were divided—at best. Although women possessed the

right to vote and had access to higher education and birth control, the act of mothering remained a subject of contentious public debate. As the following chapters will demonstrate, the good/bad mother dualism saturated discussions of motherhood in both *Passing* and *Imitation of Life*. Leading up to the publication of each novel, the emergence of public discourses led by hetero-normative, white, upper-to middle-class men and women established a cultural norm for how mothers should (or should not) raise their child(ren). As such, mothers both *reflected* and *deflected* the established symbol systems. In further addressing the reflection and deflection of the mother characters and the symbol systems, I wish to establish a more fluid, active nature of the terministic screen as represented within each literary character.<sup>13</sup> As a result, I alter Burke's terms in Chapters Three and Four. Rather than the original reflect/deflect combination used by Burke, I use the combination of select/reject to establish a sense of agency for both the terministic screen of "mothering" and the characters used to create the screen.

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<sup>13</sup> I must express my gratitude to Dr. Brian Fehler for addressing the changes applied to Burke's terms.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE PASSING MOTHER:

##### MOTHERING IN NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING*

*What an enormity, blackness! From the demons and ogres and ravens of fairy tales on; storm clouds, eclipses, night, the valley of the shadow, gloom, hell. White, the standard of goodness and perfection. Christ himself, white. All the angels. Imagine a black angel! A black angel with a flat nose and thick lips, laughing loudly. The devil! Standards, of course; but beneath the standards, what? An instinctive shrinking from the dark? He'd seen a little white child run in terror from his father once, the first black man the child had ever seen. Instinctive? He looked about. All this balcony full of fellow creatures instinctively shrinking from him. No help for it? Awful idea. Unbearable.*

---Rudolph Fisher, "High Yaller," 1925

Fisher's short story, excerpted in the above epigraph, explores a popular topic found in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance: the act of passing. The act of passing established divisive rhetoric within the American black community with regard to heritage and race. To some, passing meant turning one's back on black heritage, but for others, passing presented an opportunity for a better life in a country clearly divided by race. Fisher, through his literature, provided a voice albeit one filled with negative rhetoric, for what it meant for some to be black in America during the Harlem Renaissance. Nella Larsen also took on the issue of passing in her fiction. Larsen's work has garnered much attention with regard to

race issues and the color line, as well as other prominent topics during the Harlem Renaissance in America. More specifically, her second novel, *Passing* (1929), directly addresses the topic of passing. Racial passing largely relates to ideologies of race, but an analysis of mothering in the novel reveals the extent to which the act of passing impacts maternal rhetoric. Larsen clearly addresses the impact of passing on mothers in her novel, and this intersection of passing (race) and mothering is overlooked by most scholars. Overall, *Passing* establishes an avenue for rich rhetorical discussion of mothering based on the characters within in the novel. In the pages that follow, I argue Nella Larsen's *Passing* demonstrates the selection and rejection necessary to establish a terministic screen for "mothering" based on the symbol systems established in Chapter Two with regard to maternal rhetoric.

The main plot of the novel focuses on the relationship between Irene Redfield and Clare Bellew (who uses her maiden name Kendry) who are both mothers. The story is told from the limited point of view of Irene, a black woman who could "pass" but does not feel the need to do so, largely because of her strong, positive feelings related to her heritage. Irene tells of past and present interactions with a childhood acquaintance, Clare, who is passing for a white woman and has for most of her life. Despite the years that separate their meetings, Irene and Clare find their way back to one another during a chance encounter, and both women confront issues bound up in the act of passing, including motherhood. After spending time catching up with Irene and another friend, Gertrude, also a mother, Clare decides

she wants to leave her life as a white woman and become part of black Harlem society. She may not be welcomed, however. Irene resents the lack of pride Clare has for her true heritage as well as the careless attitude Clare demonstrates in moving back and forth between the white and black communities so easily. As a result, their relationship begins to fracture, at least in the eyes of Irene. Although Irene wishes to distance herself, and her family, from Clare, she continues to come around in an attempt to rejoin the black upper-class community. Furthermore, the situation becomes dangerous as Clare introduces her racist husband into the story, especially when considering the well being of the daughter they share. As the novel unfolds, Irene must confront her own thoughts on the act of passing, as well as personal issues, such as how and where to raise her two sons and a possible affair between her husband, Brian, and Clare. Ultimately, hazardous choices lead to a finale that costs Clare her life in an ending that can be described as ambiguous at best, depending on which version of the novel one reads.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In the original publication of the novel, the final paragraph reads: "Centuries after, she [Irene] heard the strange man saying: 'Death by misadventure, I'm inclined to believe. Let's go up and have another look at the window'" (Larsen 94). This final paragraph was removed after the second printing. According to Larsen biographer, George Hutchinson, "no one knows why" (310). Though publishers now include the initial final paragraph in reprinting, the final paragraph after the second printing read: "Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark" (Larsen 94). With either ending, the question of whether Clare fell or was pushed by Irene, the novel is never clearly resolved. Critics widely debate this question. See Andrew W. Davis's "Constructing Identity: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*," H. Jordan Landry's "Seeing Black Women Anew through Lesbian Desire in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," and Mark J. Madigan's "Then everything was dark?": The Two Endings of Nella Larsen's 'Passing'."

## Literature Review

Current analysis of Larsen's novel covers a wide range of topics. One common thread addresses the issue of mixed race characters, their identities, and the tragic mulatto stereotype. Some scholars posit that Clare is not a tragic mulatto character as others have previously argued (Tate 142; Hutchinson 299; Wall 110). Candice M. Jenkins also explores the issue of mixed-race identity within the novel. She suggests that both of Larsen's novels "point out how ambiguously raced figures are simultaneously necessary and unsettling to notions of black identity" (132). Overall, Jenkins establishes that mixed-race characters are a threat to the black race. She focuses more on the ways blackness is challenged rather than whiteness. Lori Harrison-Kahan focuses her article on the identity issues surrounding Clare and Irene. Her specific focus is on the women's racial and sexual identities. The act of "passing," according to Harrison-Kahan, allows the women to "perform as white" but also to act as spectators of the white race (111). She also argues the two women's identities are linked because Clare wants to be with her race, and Irene, again, but Irene wants to deny all aspects of Clare's existence (116). Cheryl A. Wall's scholarship also explores identity within *Passing*. She focuses on the identity of the black woman and the "psychological costs of racism and sexism" (97). Based on the topics these scholars explore, the discussion of passing and mixed-race characters and their identity further demonstrates the need to include race in the creation of a terministic screen for motherhood.



Another topic explored in current scholarship focuses on homosexuality within *Passing*. Although this study does not explore the role of homosexuality in mothering, the acknowledgement of scholarship related to this topic further highlights the complicated understanding of rhetoric regarding what it means to mother. Some scholarship focuses on the physiological aspects of the homosexual undertones of the novel (Carr 26), where others focus on lesbian desire (Landry 26-8). Additionally, some discussions regarding homosexuality even extend to Irene's husband, Brian (Blackmore 475, 484). Clearly, scholars have found a myriad of subjects to address within such a short novel. Additionally, the topics of scholarship seem to evolve along with social matters based on the time of the scholarship's publication—the topic of race permeates earlier scholarship, while modern scholarship introduces the possibility of homosexual relationships.

While the scope of Larsen scholarship has grown, neither Larsen's contemporaries nor more recent scholars have fully explored motherhood as a main theme of *Passing* even though scholarship regarding Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, does include analysis of motherhood.<sup>15</sup> A few current pieces of scholarship address the mother figure, such as the articles by Wall and Blackmore. Both indicate a major characteristic of Irene is her role as a mother. Interestingly, however, contemporary reviews largely ignore this aspect of her identity. Admittedly, such an omission is

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<sup>15</sup> Examples include Kimberly Monda's "Self-Delusion and Self-Sacrifice in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," Licia Morrow Calloway's *Black Family (Dys)function in Novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Fannie Hurst*, and Allison Berg's *Mothering the Race: Women's Narratives of Reproduction, 1890-1930*.

most likely due to the overarching themes of passing and the color line established within the novel. However, blanket acceptance of past analysis of the novel has created a gap in fully understanding the women characters by omitting any rhetorical consideration of motherhood. My project aims to fill this gap. The three main women of the novel each face issues related to race and passing, but they are also all mothers. Because of this intersectionality (between race, passing, and motherhood), examining the rhetorical treatment of motherhood within the novel supports Burke's assertion regarding the symbolic action of fictional work and leads to a more comprehensive terministic screen of "mothering."

#### **A Terministic Screen for "Mothering" in *Passing***

Three mother figures appear in the novel: Gertrude Martin, Clare Kendry, and Irene Redfield. These women openly discuss passing in the novel, and significantly the majority of the discussion related to passing for the three women is motherhood. Although past critics have repeatedly defaulted to terministic screens that focus on race and passing, in doing so, they have missed the issues related to mothering within the novel. In fact, *Passing* offers valuable insight into the rhetorical treatment of mothers. Moreover, each woman demonstrates different characteristics of mothering that help to establish their terministic screens. The

different characteristics demonstrate Burke's assertion that terministic screens constitute another kind of screen. Specifically, Burke states:

We *must* use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. All terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity" ("Terministic" 50).

In other words, one person's terministic screen can vary from another's, and some screens will lead one way while others will go another way; so all terministic screens can work together to form a cumulative understanding of the term depending on the direction one wishes to direct attention. Such is the case for the three mother characters in *Passing*. Each character both selects and rejects ideals of mothering off of one another as well as the symbol systems established in Chapter Two.

Still, it is necessary to establish singular god-terms for each mother character to demonstrate the particular lens with which she operates. I am choosing as the god-term *conflicted* for Gertrude's mothering because it selects and rejects the god-

terms of Clare and Irene. For Clare, I am choosing the god-term for her mothering *selfish* because she demonstrates a direct contrast with Irene, for which I assign the god-term of *selfless* for her mothering. Each of these terms, as well as their relationships, is explored in detail later in the chapter. Each woman, through her own maternal rhetoric, provides insight into a “closed” moment of particular isolation to help build a terministic screen for “mothering.” Despite the particular time in which the mother characters exist in the novel, analysis of them remains important. As Burke notes, “The situations are real, the strategies for handling them have public content; and in so far as situations overlap from individual to individual, or from one historical period to another, the strategies possess universal relevance” (“Philosophy” 1). As such, the maternal rhetoric used within the novel is worthy of exploration in order to gain a better understanding of the practice. In order to do so, better understanding of the term must come first.

### ***Gertrude***

Gertrude Martin appears in only one chapter of the novel. Her limited appearance serves to support the idea that mothering warrants exploration within the novel. In her appearance, Gertrude attends an afternoon tea with Clare and Irene, and her conflict becomes apparent. Although not a main character within the novel, Gertrude is a mother. She marries a white man, but “it couldn’t be truthfully said that she was ‘passing’” (Larsen 23). Gertrude’s husband, Fred, is aware of Gertrude’s race, and as far as Irene remembers, it poses no problems for Fred, his

family, or his friends (Larsen 23). Nevertheless, even though she receives no pressure to do so, in public, Gertrude does pass for a white woman. At tea, Clare reveals that Gertrude has two twin boys, and Gertrude adds that she and Fred wanted a girl (Larsen 25). Once Clare turns their conversation to the fear of having children, the rhetoric shifts to motherhood, and Gertrude expounds upon the fear that passing mothers experience, as well as her own *conflicted* attitude towards motherhood. In response to Clare, Gertrude states:

“You don’t have to tell me!” . . . “I know what it is all right. Maybe you don’t think I wasn’t scared to death too. Fred said I was silly, and so did his mother. But, of course, they thought it was just a notion I’d gotten into my head and they blamed it on my condition. They don’t know like we do, how it might go way back, and turn out dark no matter what colour [sic] the father and mother are.” . . . “No, . . . no more for me either. Not even a girl. It’s awful the way it skips generations and then pops out. Why, he actually said he didn’t care what colour [sic] it turned out, if I would only stop worrying about it. But, of course, nobody wants a dark child.” (Larsen 26)

Here, Gertrude notes the uncertainty of one’s heritage and the possibility of producing a dark-skinned child, even though her skin is light. Additionally, Gertrude calls negative attention to having dark skin. Despite the fact that Gertrude seemingly does not have to worry about the color of her children’s skin in terms of her family’s

social position, or her position within the family, the concerns Gertrude exudes suggest there is still some profound fear for the color of her children's skin regardless of what her family tells her. More specifically, Gertrude's rhetoric suggests her worry stems mainly from public perception. If the family is able to pass as white, the sudden presence of a dark-skinned child can create a negative public perception and eliminate the privileges found within white society. Despite the enlightened characteristics of Fred's family, according to Gertrude, she understands society as a whole is not as accepting of inter-racial marriage—or children. Therefore, Gertrude still experiences profound fear of having dark-skinned children. Even if other black women, such as Irene, do not fear the color of their child(ren)'s skin, in her rejection of Irene, Gertrude acknowledges a fear, and a *conflict*, that many passing black women may have shared. The fear is so great that Gertrude refuses to have any more children. Gertrude even denies the opportunity to have a girl, which she and her husband both wanted, due to the fear of having a dark-skinned child while attempting to pass as white.

Gertrude's fearful rhetoric also demonstrates that mothers might have passed simply so their children might not feel the same sting of racism as they would if they were dark-skinned. Just as passing could bring different, possibly even impossible, opportunities for those in the black community, women who wanted to become mothers could consider the same opportunities for their children, if they too could pass. Ergo, at least based on Gertrude's rhetoric, the act of mothering involves

*conflicts* between fear (from not knowing if children would be born dark-skinned), bravery (from taking the chance that children might be born dark-skinned), and maybe even sacrifice (from denying one's own heritage) when attempting to pass. This further leads to *conflicting* feelings of wanting a child but not having one.

These *conflicting* feelings, as well as the established symbol systems of Chapter Two, allow for a rhetorical construction of a terministic screen of "mothering." To begin, Gertrude does address some ideals of the suffragists in terms of mothering the country. In a more selective manner, Gertrude seems to want her sons to have the best opportunities to live productive lives as American citizens. However, she rejects suffragist concepts regarding the ways mothers can affect their children, as she denies her children's true (mixed) heritage, which could affect the contribution they could make in society. Rather than participate as sole members of the African American community, they will likely continue to participate fully in the white community with the rest of their family, and more importantly, their mother. Similarly, Gertrude also goes against the ideals of the New Negro Woman. Although it is possible for her boys to grow up and know their true (mixed) heritage, and be proud of it, Gertrude does not care to "lift the race," as seen in her acts of passing and her rhetoric concerning the elimination of the option for future pregnancies. Not only does Gertrude's act of passing favor an existence in the white community, but her decision to avoid any future pregnancies elicits notions of the eugenics movement, both of which diminish the growth of the African American community.

Because so little attention is paid to Gertrude in the novel, ultimately, it remains to be seen how Gertrude's actions as a mother will affect the lives of her children. Thus, the conflict apparent in her mothering could have adverse consequences for her children.

At the same time, however, Gertrude's position means the avoidance of multiple pregnancies. Her rhetoric concerning her version of birth control<sup>16</sup> could be viewed as a positive or negative choice for mothers, which extends the notion of *conflicted* mothering. Within the black community, some leaders vocalized support for the use of birth control. For example, W.E.B. DuBois viewed the use of birth control as a measure to better the black race. In a 1922 editorial in *The Crisis*, the monthly magazine of the NAACP, he states, "birth control is science and sense applied to the bringing of children into the world, and of all who need it, we Negroes are the first" (qtd. in Capo 141). DuBois' vision of eugenics (seen in the form of birth control) presented a positive way to mother in the black community. Even though it meant the possibility of fewer black children being born, DuBois sought to better the black community with educated and productive members of society. Thus, he builds on his idea of "The Talented Tenth," first presented in 1903, which is the notion that it is "the educated and intelligent of the Negro people that have led and elevated the mass." Because DuBois sought to better the black community through the use of

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that Gertrude does have a choice for birth control, as established in Chapter Two, via abortion or contraception; but it is never revealed in the novel how she prevents further pregnancies based on her declaration to never have any more children.



birth control, even though his main focus is on bettering men, he nevertheless establishes a positive rhetoric related to birth control. In the novel, regardless of how Gertrude prevents future births, the announcement of her choice is a form of birth control. However, it is hard to assert that DuBois would praise Gertrude's decision since her children will never fully represent the black community, especially considering she has boys who could represent the talented tenth. Presumably, once again, they will follow in their mother's footsteps to live as white, which will never allow them to "elevate the mass." In opposition to DuBois, Marcus Garvey "believed birth control was being used to eradicate the black race" (qtd. in Capo 140). Based on Garvey's position, one might argue Gertrude's decision to no longer have children makes her a negative participant in the race suicide<sup>17</sup> that both black and white leaders feared. Because she marries and has children with a white man, her children are of mixed race; therefore, they cannot fully participate in the segregated worlds of either black or white. Along the same vein, Gertrude represents the eugenics movement in that she chooses not to have any more children—specifically because of her conflict regarding the child's complexion. She is, in effect, participating in eugenics by avoiding the production of another, potentially dark, child, and her privileging of light skin over dark certainly promotes

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<sup>17</sup> When discussing the term "race suicide" in this study, I use it in the context established in Chapter Two. I assert that the actions of the black characters that have children with white men could have been deemed as committing race suicide because their mixed race children would not fully belong to either the white or the black race. In a sense, the children "abandon" one race and "contaminate" the other, but either way, neither race is solely represented.

the notion that some physical characteristics are more desirable than others—again a value system exploited in eugenic philosophies.

Moreover, although she does not have to pass, Gertrude chooses to, and her choice presents *conflicting* ideals regarding various aspects of motherhood. On one hand, in her act of passing, Gertrude's rhetoric suggests she is offering her children the best possibility to live free from racism and ridicule and to provide access to opportunities. On the other hand, in doing so, she is also denying her own heritage as well as the heritage of her children. It is the second act that Irene finds most troubling. Nevertheless, despite Irene's unwillingness to accept Gertrude's denial of her race, Gertrude's mothering choices do show that she cares about the lives of her children.

Consideration of the selection and rejection of the symbol systems of suffrage, the New Negro Woman, race suicide, and eugenics allows for construction of a terministic screen of "mothering" based on the character of Gertrude. Overall, her actions, as evidenced by her rhetoric, represent one intersection of the discourse necessary to help build a terministic screen for "mothering." In this way, Gertrude's rhetoric "works to explain the role of symbols in directing attention in certain directions rather than others" (Stob 137). In her section, because she garners so little attention, Gertrude helps to illuminate the *conflict* that many mothers no doubt face from day to day. In doing so, she also calls attention to the modern good/bad dichotomy so often rhetorically assigned to mothers. On the

“bad” side, many of Gertrude’s choices, particularly her rejections of Irene and the established symbol systems, deny her children (and potential children) the opportunity to know who they really are based on their true heritage because of her own possible feelings of shame in where her children come from. Overall, though, on the “good” side, Gertrude does not seem to want any harm to come to her children. In this way, more specifically in her selection of Irene and the established symbol systems, Gertrude contributes to the positive aspects of women who mother because her rhetoric does show concern for how the lives of her children might be affected if they cannot pass in society along with the rest of her family. Nevertheless, the *conflict* seen in Gertrude directs readers to a better understanding of the complexities and intersectionality surrounding maternal rhetoric.

### ***Clare***

Clare Bellew plays a much more prominent role in the novel, and her words have a much larger rhetorical impact on the intersecting symbol systems that help establish a terministic screen for “mothering” based on the god-term of *selfish*. Clare, like Gertrude, passes for a white woman. However, where Gertrude’s family does not require her to pass, Clare completely immerses herself in her white role. Because white aunts raise her after her father’s death, Clare is able to easily pass as white. Clare tells Irene, “I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even the daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn’t bad-looking and that I could ‘pass’” (Larsen 17). The

opportunity to realize her dream of “wanting things” comes true when she meets Jack Bellew who “turn[s] up from South America with untold gold,” and they are married when Clare turns eighteen (Larsen 18). Their marriage allows Clare to leave the home of her aunts, although they never know why Clare leaves (Larsen 18). In this instance, Clare demonstrates how “[t]he selective nature of our language and cognitions allows us to forge instruments capable of coping with the diverse pulses of experience always at hand” (Stob 140). In establishing the plans she has for her life, Clare demonstrates that she clearly makes her own choices, and constructs her own reality. Her choice to establish a new life via marriage might seem as if it selects aspects of the New Woman. However, the choice of marriage for the purpose of an affluent lifestyle actually rejects the characteristics established in the symbol system of the New Woman. For example, due to her successful passing act, Clare is able to choose (or fool, depending on the perspective) a white mate (who can give her the “things” she wants from life) into marrying her. So, rather than choosing to establish an independent life of her own within the black community, she depends on a racist, white man to provide for her. For the New Woman, the decision to marry “would not be for economic security or because she had no other choice in life, but for real intimacy and companionship” (Matthews 98). Therefore, even though Clare exhibits independent thought in terms of her wants and needs, her actions of *selfishly* depending on a (white) man to deliver those things violates the tenants of the New Woman.

In terms of her mothering, Clare does share the same fear as Gertrude when it comes to having children who can pass within the family. Clare begins the conversation regarding her fears:

No, I have no boys and I don't think I'll ever have any. I'm afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too—too hellish! (Larsen 25)

Again, much like the fear Gertrude laments, Clare also endures the fear of whether her child would be born with dark skin. However, based on her rhetoric, Clare's feeling stems not from *conflict*, but of her own *selfishness*. Moreover, the fear of a dark-skinned child is greater for Clare due to the nature of her husband's thoughts on African Americans. When Clare suggests it would not make a difference if she were "one or two per cent coloured [sic]," John Bellew replies, "I know you're no nigger, so it's all right. . . . I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" (Larsen 29). Here, John asserts that he would certainly know a "nigger" when he saw one. The irony, of course, is that he is married to a mixed-race woman, defined by his dominant culture as black, who is passing as white. Though he never identifies what "telltale" signs would identify a black person, John establishes his racism in his rhetoric. Where Clare uses the term "coloured" to identify her possible black blood, John identifies the black community

with the pejorative term “nigger.” Clearly, based on John’s rhetoric, Clare should be concerned for the well being of herself as well as her child if her parentage were discovered. However, her rhetoric demonstrates a more *selfish* stance on the topic—where she should be worried about her husband learning the truth, Clare’s rhetoric simply acknowledges how “hellish” her pregnancy was for her because of her mixed heritage.

The presence of John’s racism calls attention to the symbol systems of race suicide and eugenics with regard to Clare’s mothering and the ways those contribute to the growing terministic screen of “mothering.” Both John and Clare’s rhetoric regarding his racism furthers the importance of consideration of language that Burke stresses. According to Herbert W. Simons, “For Burke language was a repository of possibilities for thinking about and expressing an idea. By one’s choice of language one could conceal or reveal, magnify or minimize, simplify or complexify, elevate or degrade, link or divide” (4). Here, Simons calls attention to both positive and negative choices for language, and John certainly favors the negative when discussing African American people. However, by appeasing John, Clare also presents a danger to the black community with her rhetoric as well as her actions. With regard to the idea of race suicide, much like Gertrude, Clare is certainly “guilty” of the act because she marries and has a child with a white man. Her contribution also would be selective of race suicide because a child of mixed race would not be able to participate fully in either the white or black communities.

Additionally, Clare, like Gertrude, takes part in eugenics when decides she will have no more children due to the “terror” the pregnancy put her through. Thus, due to her privileging of the white race, Clare effectively “sterilizes” herself by declaring she will no longer have children with John. Though it is never established if Clare uses any type of birth control,<sup>18</sup> her declaration symbolizes her willingness and ability to deny her reproductive abilities in order to continue passing as white. These two symbol systems intersect to establish a *selfish* approach to motherhood. The selfish considerations intensify when considering the racism of John Bellew and Clare’s choice to ignore the economic and psychological impact his racism could have on both her and her daughter.

Characteristics of John Bellew also echo those of Jessie Redmon Fauset’s Stuart James Wynne in her frequently anthologized short story “The Sleeper Wakes.” When Wynne’s wife admits to him she is a black woman passing as white, he divorces her and sends her to live in another home only to soon invite her to assume the degraded role of his mistress (Fauset 20). Her race makes her appropriate as a concubine but not good enough to be a wife. Based on his rhetoric, it would not be a stretch to assume that John also would resort to violence upon learning the truth of Clare’s heritage. In this sense, divorce would be the least of Clare’s concerns. Moreover, John’s racism could also extend to his daughter,

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<sup>18</sup> Clare, like Gertrude, has a choice for birth control, as established in Chapter Two, via abortion or contraception; but once again, it is never revealed in the novel how she prevents further pregnancies based on her declaration to never have any more children.

Margery. So, Clare's choices, as announced in her rhetoric, not only affect her own life, but that of her daughter's as well. Consideration of the rhetoric used by Clare that extends to her actions makes her *selfish* approach to mothering all the more dangerous, not only because she would lose her economic standing, but also because of the possible psychological threat to Margery if her father rejects her.

Due to the choices that Clare makes throughout the novel, a sense of *selfishness* can be seen when considering Clare's role as a mother. Even though she discusses a feeling of "terror" in having another baby, Clare's actions and words regarding her daughter demonstrate a more *selfish* view on mothering. Where Gertrude's rhetoric expresses worry for the darkness of her children, Clare's words focus on how the fear affects only her. She even notes her daughter turned out "all right," but all of the emotion in the statement focuses only on Clare. Absent is any consideration of what dark skin might mean for the child conceived in such a marriage. In comparison to Gertrude's worry, which demonstrates her *conflict*, Claire's rhetoric only focuses on her needs, which demonstrates more *selfish* actions. Such actions raise questions regarding Clare's morality in how she approaches both passing and motherhood, which represents the good/bad dualism of mothering. In terms of passing, Clare is careless in her choice of husband, for his blatant racism presents a danger if her true heritage is found out. As a result, in terms of mothering, the life of her daughter could also be in jeopardy based on Clare's choices. When considering the intersecting symbol systems, Clare, like Gertrude,



selects some ideals of the suffragists in terms of mothering the country in that she produces a daughter who has the potential to positively impact the future of America, especially since she will be identified as an affluent white woman. However, Clare ultimately establishes a rejection of how mothers can affect their children, as she continuously ignores the safety of Margery.

Another instance of Clare's *selfish* rhetoric regarding mothering relates to her possible affairs. To begin, when the three mother characters meet up, Clare has returned from a weekend lake visit with "some of Jack's [John's] people," and when speaking of coming home Clare states, "Margery wanted to stay with the children. It seemed a shame not to let her" (Larsen 23). Here, Clare leaves her child behind to come back to the city and states that she does so for the good of the child. On the surface, Clare's act seems to demonstrate that she is the "good" mother who let her daughter stay with family. However, when one learns of Clare's actions upon her return home, the act of letting Margery stay behind appears to have less admirable intentions. Irene's thoughts show readers that she had just seen Clare meeting with another man (who is not her husband) before being introduced to John during tea (Larsen 28). This observation suggests Clare is engaged in an affair. The knowledge of a possible affair suggests that Clare would not care to bring her daughter home from a family visit if she were able to meet, selfishly, with another man. Secondly,

Irene also suspects that Clare and her husband, Brian, of having an affair. Upon consideration and initial dismissal of the affair, Irene thinks:

With this self-assurance that she had no real knowledge, she redoubled her efforts to drive out of her mind the distressing thought of faiths broken and trusts betrayed which every mental vision of Clare, of Brian, brought with them. She could not, she would not, go again through the tearing agony that lay just behind her. (Larsen 76)

Though she has no tangible proof, the idea that Clare and Brian could be in the initial stages of an affair goes to support the *selfish* nature of Clare's mothering. The possibility of Clare's affairs adds to the danger of her marriage given the attitude of her husband if he were to discover an affair. Moreover, Clare's possible affairs not only affect her life, but the life of her daughter as well.

Furthermore, where Gertrude's words illuminate the *conflict* related to the fears and risks for her and her children in terms of their complexion, Clare ultimately does not consider Margery or what could happen to her if John were to discover African American heritage in his wife and daughter, which demonstrates a rejection of the New Negro Woman. When asked by Irene about disliking Negroes, John replies, "I don't dislike them, I hate them. . . . They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils" (Larsen 30). John's words reek of racism, and he, albeit unknowingly due to his ignorance of his wife's race and that of her two friends, creates a very unnerving situation. Even though Clare knows how John feels about the black race,

she marries him and they have a child together. Despite the “terror” Clare mentions feeling while pregnant, Clare stays with John because he can provide Clare with a wealthy life filled with traveling and shopping. However, when Clare decides that she longs for the company of those in the black community, she fails to recognize how her decision can affect her daughter. Her desire to no longer pass for a white woman is arguably the most *selfish* act for Clare in terms of her mothering, especially when considering what might happen if John were to find out about Clare and Margery’s true heritage. Thus, she rejects the maternal preferences of the New Negro Woman.

Irene is the one to recognize Clare’s inability to mother well, which demonstrates the “consubstantiality” between the mothers within the novel. Burke uses this term to demonstrate the identification between objects. More specifically, “In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, and individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (Burke, *Rhetoric*, 21). As such, the relationship between Clare and Irene is consubstantial in that they relate to one another as black women who can pass and mothers. When Clare wishes to ignore the severity of her risks, Irene states, “There’s your little girl, Clare. Think of the consequences to her” (Larsen 52). Once Clare considers the “new weapon with which Irene had assailed her,” she replies, “being a mother is the cruellest [sic] thing in the world” (Larsen 52). Here Clare seems to

suggest that having Margery was a mistake. Moreover, she indicates that having a child has trapped her into a life that she may not want anymore. Clare has not considered the consequences of John learning of Margery's true heritage. To begin, Clare sees the mention of her daughter by Irene a "weapon" to use against her. Clare does not even recognize her daughter as a person at this point. Additionally, her response is that mothering is "cruel," in that she probably would not have had a child if she had to do it over again, proving once again that Clare *selfishly* considers herself and her need to suddenly embrace a heritage she abandoned long ago in order to establish a "better" life. If she truly cared for Margery and her well being, Clare would not view her daughter as a weapon to use against her and create a cruel existence. However, it is unclear if the absence of a child would lead Clare to make more thoughtful choices in regards to her "passing." Clare's *selfish* tendencies seem to suggest her choices would be just as dangerous without a child.

As the novel progresses, Clare takes more risks in her attempts to throw herself into Harlem. Irene again questions the needs of Margery, to which Clare responds, "Children aren't everything . . . There are other things in the world, though I admit some people don't seem to suspect it" (Larsen 64). With these words, Clare admits she has her own needs, and they are important to her, apparently even more important than the well being of her daughter. Once again, Clare selects aspects of the New Woman who questions whether or not women *must* become mothers. Clare challenges the notions of Victorian motherhood as seen in the New Negro Woman,

which placed mothering at the top of a woman's duties. At this point, Clare has completely absolved herself of any mothering responsibilities, as Margery has been sent to school in Switzerland (Larsen 64). We are not told who decides to send Margery to school out of the country; nevertheless, the decision to send Margery away to school allows for Clare to pursue *selfishly* other interests outside mothering. Because Margery is gone to school, she is no longer present for Clare to consider (not that her presence ever causes concern for Clare) and the parenting duties for Margery shift to those at her school.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Clare's mothering duties are over, and she can concentrate on becoming part of the black community once more.

In a final confirmation of her *selfishness* related to a lack of mothering responsibilities, Irene asks Clare to once again consider how her actions of socializing in Harlem can affect Margery. Clare ultimately denies her responsibility of mothering by stating, "If it wasn't for [Margery], I'd do it [live in Harlem] anyway. She's all that holds me back. But if Jack finds out, if our marriage is broken, then that lets me out. Doesn't it?" (Larsen 85). Clare's words suggest she would like a way out of her marriage but does not want to relinquish the financial advantages afforded her by her husband. Moreover, the phrase "lets me out" suggests that Clare would be free of all that Margery holds her back from, such as a carefree life in Harlem. Clare suggests that leaving her white life behind to become a part of black Harlem society

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<sup>19</sup> Though the rearing of Margery at the school is not explored, the idea of an "othermother" is given further attention in Chapter Four.

is more important than being a mother or a wife, a clear rejection of the New Negro Woman. For Clare, Margery is a burden that prevents her from leaving her husband to become a full member of the black community in Harlem. Even when considering her husband finding out about her heritage, Clare's comments focus only on getting out of the marriage and her mothering duties (which have already been delegated to Margery's school). She has no thoughts regarding how John might possibly treat Margery if he learns she has "Negro" blood. It is possible that Margery is safe at the end of the novel, but her safety now depends on others not divulging Clare's heritage. However, if Clare's mothering actions had been less careless, and more importantly less *selfish*, it is possible that Margery's safety would never have to be considered.

Rhetorically exploring the symbol systems of the New Woman, the New Negro Woman, suffrage, race suicide, and eugenics in relation to Clare allows for the continuation of the intersecting and building of a terministic screen for "mothering." Much like Gertrude, Clare brings both positive and negative attention to the symbol systems. In almost every sense of the term, Clare fails in her acts of mothering and falls into the "bad" category of the good/bad dualism often associated with motherhood. She is content to leave her daughter's fate in the hands of a racist monster so that she might "scratch an itch" to become a part of the black community once more. In this way, Clare mainly rejects the notions of motherhood Irene embodies, but she selects and rejects different aspects of mothering seen in

Gertrude. Her attitude and actions reveal that just because a woman becomes a mother, it does not mean that she will positively impact the life of her child. Ultimately, Clare certainly complicates consideration of maternal rhetoric.

### ***Irene***

Irene Redfield represents the only “traditional” middle-class black mother within the novel and both selects and rejects tendencies in relation to Gertrude and Clare with her god-term of *selfless*. To begin on the selective side, Irene demonstrates some aspects of the New Woman in that one can assume she is educated, as she is involved with “uplift” as she works with the Negro Welfare League. However, she is more selective of the New Negro Woman because she makes the choice to enter into marriage and have children. On the surface, Irene falls into the “traditional” role of women in terms of her marriage to a doctor and the volunteer work she does as a mother, which allows her to participate in “mothering the race,” a term used in Allison Berg’s *Mothering the Race* and Erin Chapman’s *Prove it on Me*. Irene does not attempt to pass in society, even though she could. She marries a black man, Brian, and notes during tea with Gertrude and Clare, “One of my boys is dark” (Larsen 26). Her words demonstrate Irene’s pride in her black heritage, as well as her unwillingness to participate in race suicide, and several times throughout the novel she feels disgust in response to Clare’s need to come back to the black community after abandoning it for so long in order to pass.

In doing so, she mostly represents the hegemonic black motherhood idealized in the New Negro Woman.

When it comes to passing, Irene shows similarities to the character of Evelyn Brown in Rudolph Fisher's "High Yaller." Both characters can clearly pass as white women, but neither of them wants to do so. Evelyn asks in Fisher's short story, "A washerwoman can make half a million dollars turning dark skins light. Why doesn't someone learn how to turn light skins dark?" (Fisher 113). Evelyn appears to want to be visually identifiable as black in the eyes of society. She has ties to the black community in the ones she loves. Her ability to pass seems to be a burden that Evelyn does not want even though others, such as Clare, exploit the privileges to be had from passing. In the end, though, Evelyn cannot escape the way others read her fair complexion, and she is pushed out of her black community, causing her to lose any hope of a relationship with Jay, a black man, whom she genuinely seems to love (Fisher 123-6). Where Evelyn cannot avoid the act of passing, Irene is able to remain true to her heritage and reject the act of passing.

*Selfless* rhetorical aspects of Irene's mothering occur in the beginning of the story. Irene is seen mothering almost immediately. For example, readers are told Irene thinks about gifts to bring back to her sons from the trip to Chicago, and she struggles to consider what to do if she cannot locate a book for her youngest (Larsen 4-5). Furthermore, when she first runs into Clare in Chicago, Irene tells her all about her family (Larsen 13). Even as the book comes to a close, consideration of



her sons dictates all of her actions. Where Clare wishes to be free of the burden of her daughter, Irene embraces her mothering responsibilities. Moreover, Irene's role as a mother takes center stage, as she must confront Clare and her *selfish* rhetoric and actions. When Gertrude and Clare confess their fears of having "dark" children, Irene remains steadfast in her feelings that neither she nor anyone else in her family feels the need to pass (Larsen 26). Additionally, in her first confrontation with Clare regarding the safety of Margery and the cruelty of motherhood, Irene delivers a proclamation regarding mothering that echoes the sentiments of President Roosevelt's 1905 address to the National Congress of Mothers as well as Margaret Murray Washington's "New Negro Woman":

We mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children. Think what it would mean to your Margery if Mr. Bellew should find out. You'd probably lose her. And even if you didn't, nothing that concerned her would ever be the same again. He'd never forget that she had Negro blood. And if she should learn—Well, I believe that after twelve it is too late to learn a thing like that. She'd never forgive you. You may be used to risks, but this is one you mustn't take, Clare. It's a selfish whim, and unnecessary and— (Larsen 53)

Irene draws parallels that reflect Roosevelt's idea that through motherhood, a woman's "work lies at the foundation of all national happiness and greatness." Here,

Irene also selects attributes of how suffragists used motherhood to gain the right to vote, demonstrating how the symbol system positively intersects with others to form a terministic screen of “mothering.” As Irene mothers her sons, and as she attempts to persuade Clare to mother Margery, Irene positively impacts the future of the country. Irene also begins her statement by unifying all mothers. She echoes the idea of a “‘universal’ motherhood” that Kinser notes, “assumed that white, middle-class perspectives and practices were applicable to all families and in the best interests of all children” (52). Perhaps, in her own way, Irene attempts to show Clare that they are connected, even consubstantial, in some way, if not by their heritage. Still, Irene understands the *selfless* importance of protecting one’s child(ren), and she also points out the *selfishness* present in Clare’s thoughts and actions. Where Clare suggests a willingness to give up her role as a mother, much as in the way of the New Woman, it seems mothering defines a large part of Irene’s identity, which selects from ideals found in Victorian Motherhood that were adopted to describe the New Negro Woman. Just as she declares a sense of pride in her race, Irene also establishes that being a mother holds just as much importance for her.

In Irene’s second attempt to impress upon Clare that her *selfish* choices can impact Margery in a detrimental way, Irene *selflessly* pleads with Clare to care about her daughter. When Clare announces there are other things in the world to consider, Irene states, “You know you don’t mean that Clare. You’re only trying to tease me. I know very well that I take being a mother rather seriously. I *am* wrapped up in my

boys and the running of my house. I can't help it. And, really, I don't think it's anything to laugh at" (Larsen 64). Irene further declares how important mothering is to her as she selects ideals of domesticity associated with the New Negro Woman. Irene personifies the New Negro Woman because her boys affect every decision she makes, and Irene wants Clare to feel the same about Margery. For Irene, the act of mothering seems to come naturally, which demonstrates the "innate" feeling attributed to white, middle-class motherhood that Victorian motherhood celebrated and attempted to impress upon all women, and which middle-class African American women adopted as their own ideal in the New Negro Woman.

However, once Clare finally declares she would not mind being released from her wifely and motherly duties, Irene realizes Clare does not take mothering seriously and, at least from the reader's perspective, she may never do so. For Irene, mothering establishes a defining characteristic of her identity. Though Gertrude demonstrates caring and concern for her children, her character does not receive the development to fully reflect what mothering looks like for a woman who embraces her role. Because Irene's role is more developed, she is able to show a *selfless* element to a terministic screen of "mothering" in *Passing*.

Even as Irene demonstrates some *selfless* mothering characteristics, her motives could come into question as the novel progresses. Despite her confrontations with Clare that position the "good" mother (Irene) in opposition to

the “bad” mother (Clare), Irene does have an overarching dark cloud hanging over her family that she ultimately feels the need to confront. As Cheryl A. Wall asserts:

Irene craves stability and abhors the risks Clare thrives on; she is a devoted mother, whereas Clare professes little interest in the welfare of her daughter, and she prides herself on her loyalty to the race. However, Irene's world is barely more secure than that of her friend, and when it is threatened, she is every bit as dangerous. (107)

Throughout “Part Two” of the novel, Irene begins to worry about her husband, Brian, and his happiness with their family. Irene wants the family to live in New York for “security of place and substance which she insisted upon for her sons” (Larsen 47). However, Brian has a need to “[go] off to Brazil” (Larsen 43) that Irene fears. She worries about keeping her family together in an American home.

Furthermore, Irene and Brian have discussions of their children, and Brian feels as if Irene worries too much over the boys: “I do wish . . . you wouldn’t be forever fretting about those kids. They’re all right. Perfectly all right. Good, strong, healthy boys . . .” (Larsen 45). Even Brian acknowledges how Irene has a *selfless* interest in mothering her boys. However, Irene’s worry lingers when it comes to protecting her children. In this instance, Irene’s *selflessness* verges on reaching unhealthy levels because, even though it indicates that Irene loves her children, it also shows that she has very little sense of self apart from them. Although the idea of selflessness is often viewed as a positive trait, Irene shows how complex the identity of a mother can be, thus

complicating the rhetoric used to establish meaning for the term *mothering*.

As the story moves to “Part Three,” Irene’s worry over her boys becomes even greater as she comes to suspect Brian and Clare of having an affair. As she considers the affair, Irene ponders:

Her mental and physical languor receded. Brian. What did it mean? How would it affect her and the boys? The boys! She had a surge of relief. It ebbed, vanished. A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she didn’t count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle. (Larsen 74)

Here, Irene begins to reduce her entire being to her role as a mother. She sees her children as the connection to Brian that she must depend on to save herself and her family. Her thoughts echo sentiments she relays to Gertrude regarding Clare’s daughter. After leaving tea with Clare, Gertrude shows concern for the situation Clare has put herself in by marrying a racist white man. In response, Irene attempts to reassure Gertrude of Clare’s actions, and she states, “and there’s a child. That’s a certain security” (Larsen 33). With her rhetoric in these two statements, Irene seems to see children as sort of safety nets rather than precious lives to care for. Her mothering seems to suffer, as she must confront the painful knowledge of an affair. Nevertheless, Irene’s thoughts do indicate concern for her own children, and the same cannot be said for Clare. With her pleas to Clare in regards for Margery’s well being, Irene further falls under the symbol system of the New Negro Woman. Not

only does Irene prioritize the well being of her sons, but she also continuously pleads with Clare to protect Margery. Her declarations of the importance of motherhood show that Irene takes the raising of her children seriously, and she wants Clare to do the same.

When attempting to build a terministic screen for “mothering” based on the god-term of *selfless* related to the character of Irene, there are both selections and rejections to consider based on the symbol systems of the New Woman/New Negro Woman, suffrage, and race suicide. The selective aspects come through in the fact that Irene embraces her race. Because of her choice not to pass, Irene rejects both race suicide and eugenics. Additionally, she personifies the characteristics of the New Negro Woman in that motherhood is important to her. She also mothers the country in the way the suffragists called for in that her sons will grow up knowing they fully represent the black community. In this way, Irene falls on the “good” side of the good/bad dichotomy related to motherhood. On the “bad” side, Irene’s obsessive desire to keep her family intact could be a detriment to her mothering. In keeping the focus on whether or not her family is together, she could, like Clare, *selfishly* alienate the specific needs of her children. Nevertheless, as long as her family remains intact, Irene seems content, and as such, she contributes a majority of *selfless* characteristics for a terministic screen of “mothering” found within *Passing*.

### **How *Passing* Contributes to a Terministic Screen of “Mothering”**

Clearly, *mothering* is a complex term that holds multiple meanings for mothers. In a positive sense, women can choose to grow their countries and communities and become mothers by their own accord. Despite the availability of educations and jobs, some middle-class women still chose to remain in the home, even though volunteer work allows them a private space of existence, albeit a gendered space devoted to the care of others (Matthews 98). Certainly, Irene’s rhetoric would represent the majority of the positive, or “good,” side of mothering. Not only does she embrace her race, she allows her sons to do so as well. Additionally, she continually pleads with Clare to put her needs behind those of her daughter. The positive rhetoric used by Irene to discuss her children far exceeds any positive mention of children by Clare, and even Gertrude. Where Clare and Gertrude’s rhetoric focuses on the “fear” of having children who might be dark, both through either *selfishness* or *conflict*, Irene *selflessly* shows no concern for the looks of her children, which demonstrates the pride Irene feels for her race. Beyond the “good” side of the motherhood dualism, though, the way Irene personifies the intersection of the symbol systems that make up a terministic screen of “mothering” demonstrates the complicated nature of the term. Even Irene can become *selfish* when considering the possibility of her marriage ending.

More negative aspects of mothering can be seen in the *selfish* rhetoric of Clare, and even the *conflict* of Gertrude’s rhetoric to an extent, in terms of

abandoning their black community to marry white men and pass in society as white. In this way, neither woman helps either race to avoid race suicide and each participates in voluntary eugenics in deciding not to have any more children with their husbands. Though the women's choices can be tied to the "bad" side of the motherhood dualism, the intersecting nature of the women's actions further the complications Burke acknowledges in creating terministic screens. Gertrude's actions are not simply "bad." In fact, the rhetoric of her inner conflict suggests she ultimately wants what is best for her children, and on some level, she knows their best opportunities will come from living white lives due to the everyday limitations imposed on African Americans by the dominant culture. On the other hand, Clare's frivolous and *selfish* treatment of motherhood puts her daughter in possible danger if her husband discovers Margery's true heritage. For most mothers to be seen as "good," they would have to put their child(ren)'s welfare above their own, and even though Gertrude's motives are difficult to discern, Clare clearly does not do so.

Within *Passing*, both negative and positive types of mothering exist. More importantly, the characters' rhetoric illustrate how the creation of a terministic screen for "mothering" becomes much more complex than the "good" and "bad" dualisms that most in hegemonic culture seek to assign mothers. The characters both select and reject the god-terms that describe the maternal rhetoric of each woman. For Gertrude, the intersection of her symbol systems establishes a sense of *conflict* related to mothering. For Clare, the intersection of her symbol systems



highlights the potential dangers for black women who *selfishly* pass as white and become mothers. For Irene, the intersection of her symbol systems reveals the *selflessness* of a mother placing the needs of her child(ren) above her own. The intersection of all three mothers' god-terms shows the complicated nature of a terministic screen for "mothering" because their maternal rhetoric, as well as their actions, extends much farther beyond the good/bad dualism. The symbol systems that intersect with mothering are clearly selected and rejected by each mother character within the novel. As a result, their choices establish a way of life, both for them and their children, and provide a better understanding of the maternal rhetoric within the novel that allows for the creation of a more comprehensive terministic screen, which is synthesized further in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE WORKING MOTHER:

#### MOTHERING AND RACE IN FANNIE HURST'S *IMITATION OF LIFE*

*"I like power. . . . I do! I do not want to spend my life  
paying grocery bills! . . ." [her former lover responded,]  
"You're a little too big for me. I have a career of my own.  
And if I married you, I'd simply become your valet."  
--Sinclair Lewis, Ann Vickers, 1933*

In the excerpt above, Lewis calls attention to a growing topic of discussion in the 1930s, the working woman. As women began to earn educations in the 1920s, they also began to enter the workforce. Much like the topic of passing, women at work created yet another rift in American society, and the issue of class was a main factor. While some accepted the earning of "pin-money," such as from clerical work in upper-class families, others believed women should remain in the home to attend to their domestic duties. However, functioning as a domestic provider was not always possible for some mothers. Many lower-income families needed mothers to earn wages in order to survive, such as by putting food on the table. Just as the topic permeated American culture, so too it appeared in the fiction of the time. In Lewis's work, he provides his protagonist with power over the men in her life because she is able to function as a breadwinner due to her earnings from employment. Although the book gained popularity with a public readership, others felt it contributed

negatively to the growing conversation regarding women at work (Hapke 209-213). Author Fannie Hurst also addresses the topic of working women, more specifically working mothers, in her novel, *Imitation of Life* (1933). Despite her reputation for producing “popular” fiction, Hurst participated in feminist activism, and her books often reflected such topics. Much attention paid to *Imitation of Life* revolves around the success of the main protagonist’s business. Little attention is paid to her role as a mother and how her work affects her relationship with her daughter. Overall, *Imitation of Life* establishes an avenue for fruitful rhetorical discussion in terms of what it meant to be a mother, both in relation to work as well as race. In the pages that follow, I argue that Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* demonstrates the selection and deflection necessary to establish a terministic screen for “mothering” based on the symbol systems established in Chapter Two with regard to maternal rhetoric.

The overall plot of the novel focuses on the life of Bea Pullman, a white woman, and Delilah Johnston, a black woman, and their two daughters, Jessie and Peola.<sup>20</sup> The book begins with a young Bea Chipley living at home and dealing with the death of her mother. She eventually marries a live-in tenant, Mr. Pullman, at age eighteen, and she becomes pregnant, only to lose Mr. Pullman to a fatal train accident. Out of necessity for survival, and by the stroke of luck of having the same first initial as her late husband, Bea takes over the sales work of Mr. Pullman. Due to

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<sup>20</sup> Because Bea and Jessie are white and Delilah and Peola are black, issues related to race and mothering also play a role within the novel. Though this chapter mainly focuses on working mothers, issues of race cannot be overlooked.

the need for live in help with Bea's infant daughter, Jessie, and Bea's ailing father, she soon hires Delilah, who brings along her infant daughter, Peola. Soon, based on the cooking of Delilah, Bea is able to open a chain of waffle and maple syrup restaurants in the style of Pullman cars. The book follows Bea's success that leads to great comfort and wealth for both her and Delilah. However, because of this business success, Delilah is left to mother the two daughters, which causes a strain on both mother/daughter relationships. Just as Bea is rarely around to care for Jessie, Delilah gives the majority of her attention to Jessie over her own child. Despite the success Bea enjoys from working, her ability to mother suffers, even to the point of Jessie stealing a potential lover from Bea at the end of the novel. Even Peola returns home to deliver shocking news to Bea and Delilah. Peola's news, along with what can be assumed is a cancerous tumor, lead to Delilah's death, demonstrating that success in working may not translate to success in mothering. This same sentiment is seen in the relationship between Bea and Jessie, as Jessie eventually marries the man Bea comes to love. Thus, despite her business success and her wealth, Bea is ultimately alone as the novel concludes. Bea's story ultimately seems to warn women that they cannot "have it all" in terms of a balance between a professional life (work outside of the home) and a domestic life (including romantic love and a family).

## Literature Review

Because of the “popular” nature of Hurst’s fiction, little attention has been paid to the author, especially when compared to authors such as Larsen. Nevertheless, scholars have more recently recognized the literary value of Hurst’s contribution to American fiction, even with regard to *Imitation of Life*. Although the novel explores multiple themes, the dominant theme addressed is female sexuality and how Bea forgoes her own sexual pleasure for economic success. Scholars Traci Abbott and Elizabeth DaGue agree. Specifically, Abbott argues, “*Imitation of Life* . . . exposes sexual desirability as an inadequate and misleading substitute for actual sexual desire and its gratification through a conscientious sexual autonomy” (636). Additionally, DaGue notes in her discussion of the novel that a working woman only lives an “imitation” of a life because she will never experience love while work is the focus of her life (55). Lauren Berlant hints at homoerotic relationships between Bea and Virginia Eden (120), although little attention is paid to a homoerotic connection between female characters, especially when compared to the scholarship of *Passing*. Because Bea’s work, as well as her success, is recognized by scholars, it is clearly important to consider women’s work (outside of the home) in relation to creating a terministic screen for “mothering.”

Another topic scholars discuss is the use of stereotypes, particularly in relation to Delilah. Berlant additionally explores the bodies of women as “trademarks” in the novel. The most obvious connection she discusses is that of

Delilah to the stereotype of the popular culture figure Aunt Jemima. Licia Morrow Calloway focuses on Delilah's relation to the mammy figure. Overall, Calloway's book analyzes black motherhood, so the main topic of discussion regarding *Imitation of Life* stems from Delilah's mothering, specifically in relation to the mammy, a term Delilah uses to describe herself at times in the novel. Berlant also addresses the topic of black motherhood, in that she seems to suggest that Delilah could be viewed as the only mother character in the book. Though the role of stereotypes is not central to this study, the mammy stereotype does contribute to the need for creating a terministic screen for "mothering" based on Delilah's rhetoric, a topic that is discussed further in the chapter.

Discussions of culture also appear in criticism related to *Imitation of Life*. Carol Batker places Hurst in relation to other Jewish women writers of the 1920s. She focuses on multiple topics, including the exchange of rhetorical strategies as well as conflicting ideas between authors such as Hurst, Edna Ferber, Mary Antin, and Rose Cohen; Hurst's activism regarding immigrant issues in America; and criticism related to Hurst's work regarding Jewish authenticity and the issue of racism (94). Jane Caputi continues the theme of possible racism in *Imitation of Life* in her article. Specifically, she establishes works by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison as direct responses to racism found both within Hurst's novel and its subsequent films. Despite the friendships Hurst had with Hughes and Hurston, Caputi argues their selected works challenge Hurst's novel (713).

Issues of passing in relation to race and gender also arise in scholarly attention paid to the novel. Peola's passing receives attention in Abbott's article, while Berlant asserts Bea "passes" as well, in that she must "pass" as her deceased husband in order to keep earning wages from his sales position. As in the last chapter, I continue to address these examples of passing as they contribute to a terministic screen for "mothering" in relation to Hurst's novel.

Current scholars clearly see a variety of topics worth discussing in relation to *Imitation of Life*. Much like *Passing*, the race of the two main women in the novel plays a significant role in understanding the work. Moreover, Bea's need to work outside the home also affects how she lives her life. However, little attention is paid to how Bea's role as a mother is affected by her successful career, and the majority of attention focuses on the lack of a love life as a result of her career. And although scholars call attention to Delilah's role as a mother to various characters within the novel, a comparison of Bea and Delilah's motherhood simultaneously remains absent. This is yet another gap this project aims to close. In order to gain a fuller understanding of a terministic screen for "mothering," all rhetorical aspects of motherhood within the novel garner attention, including work and race. Once again, the intersectionality (between work, race, and motherhood), seen within the novel supports Burke's assertion regarding the symbolic action of fictional work and leads to a more comprehensive terministic screen of "mothering."

### **A Terministic Screen for “Mothering” in *Imitation of Life***

Three mother characters (or potential mother characters) appear in the novel: Bea, Delilah, and Peola. Each woman does her own work within the novel, and each woman represents a different race, both of which directly relate to mothering practices and choices. As a result, the novel offers valuable insight into the rhetorical treatment of mothers. Moreover, each woman demonstrates different characteristics of mothering that help to establish a terministic screen. Just as in *Passing*, the characters in *Imitation of Life* both select and reject ideals of mothering off of one another as well as the symbol systems established in Chapter Two.

Even though the characters work together to establish an overall terministic screen for “mothering,” it is once again necessary to establish singular god-terms for each mother character to demonstrate the particular lens through which she operates. I am choosing as the god-term for Bea’s mothering *absent* due to the lack of a relationship she has with her daughter, Jessie. For Delilah, I am choosing the god-term for her mothering *attentive* because it shows a direct contrast of Bea’s mothering when it comes to both daughters, at times, in the novel. Finally, I am choosing as the god-term for Peola as a mother *non-mothering* because she demonstrates a selection of passing, as well as the symbol system of eugenics and birth control as discussed in Chapter Two. Each woman, through her own maternal rhetoric, provides insight into another “closed” moment of particular isolation to help build a terministic screen for “mothering.”



## **Bea**

The main protagonist, Bea Pullman, serves as the principle example of how working and mothering intersect, in this case creating an *absent* mother. Bea's interaction with motherhood throughout the novel takes her down different paths. In the beginning of the novel, Bea establishes a clear, traditional sense of what it means to marry and become a mother:

Marriage freed you from the nervous concerns of girlhood, eased your sense of being an outsider to life, even where your very dear parents were concerned, once they closed the door of their room behind them. Marriage established you. Gave you a sense of security and being cared for in a special private way that meant everything. That is, if the dear close snug things mattered a lot. They did to Bea. The inside of a married woman's pretty house. The sight of a baby under a coverlet with a pink bow, in a perambulator. A husband unlocking the front door to his home. The silhouette of a housewife moving about her very own kitchen. Husbands and wives pairing off and going home together after a prayer-meeting or a convert or a euchre, or gazing together into a show window, were something over which to feel wistful and somehow a little chilled. (Hurst 35)

Here, Bea echoes the traditional sentiments of her mother, and she genuinely wants her life to turn out this way. However, once she becomes a mother, the

circumstances of her family drastically change due to the death of her husband and the illness of her father. As a result, Bea must go to work in order to provide for the family, and her mothering suffers because of her work. When considering how much Bea looks forward to being a mother in the beginning of the novel, a sense of guilt becomes apparent in her as her work, possibly because of her success, becomes a central part of her identity. As Robert S. McElvain notes:

... at a time when their traditional nurturing role seemed especially needed in the home, women who were obliged to work for wages carried a particularly heavy burden of guilt. One study placed the blame for "truancy, incorrigibility, robbery, teenage tantrums, and difficulty in managing children" on the "mother's absence at her job."  
(183)

The use of the phrase "her job" can be interpreted different ways. Since McElvain first references the need for women to work for wages, most likely outside of the home, the phrasing referring to the absence of a mother at "her job" mostly likely refers to the dominant societal need for a woman to be a mother in the home first and foremost. Unfortunately, for Bea, her job must actually earn wages for the family, and her job of mothering is deferred to her live-in domestic worker, Delilah. In this way, Bea selects the ideals of the New Woman, even though she is a mother. Because Bea must enter the workforce, more importantly because she decides to remain there, she abandons her mothering duties in favor of a career. Because of the

dedication she gives to her business, mothering is pushed to the back of Bea's mind, where she always looks to the future. Thus, Bea transitions from a traditional wife/mother into a New Woman.

Because Bea has to leave the home to provide for the family as a saleswoman, it means very little time spent with Jessie. Even in Jessie's infancy, Bea's experience of mothering does not live up to the expectations established by her mother, and she already projects an acknowledgment of her absence:

Motherhood had turned out not to be a matter of nursery prettiness, adorable pastimes over a layette, hours beside a perambulator on a sunlit beach, or retailing baby anecdotes to Mr. Pullman. There had been so little time for anything more than a hurried realization that here was a mouth whose first quiver and howl had shaken the world with imperious demand to be fed. The fact that it had mattered, that call, more than anything else had ever mattered before, must, in some ways, she felt sure, be part of the compensations of motherhood which she had been taught to expect would be hers. (Hurst 92)

Though Bea feels the "compensations of motherhood," such as the joy of feeding her hungry daughter, there is still little time to focus on her relationship with Jessie because Bea must also focus on working for the survival of all five members of her household. Even though Bea has to work and provide for the family's survival, her mothering suffers because of it. Her *absenteeism* becomes even more apparent when

Jessie and Peola must be disciplined, and Bea is told of the situation when she arrives home from work.<sup>21</sup> When the girls hide behind Delilah, Bea begins to feel some jealousy towards Delilah's mothering: "And now here, as if to add to her sense of alienation from a household into which she longed to remain riveted like a fungus to its walls, were two children standing huddled away from her and into the very shadow that was betraying them" (Hurst 100). Even though Delilah informs Bea of the girls' transgression of pricking Bea's father's paralyzed legs with pins, the girls still favor the safety of Delilah. This further adds to the alienation of Jessie, and even Bea acknowledges her need to be a part of the household, more importantly, a mother to Jessie. Feelings of jealousy towards Delilah continue for Bea, as Jessie refuses to go to her mother. In assessing the situation, Bea thinks to herself, "Mothers with their wits about them realized that on such moments as this could pivot the delicate mechanism of status between themselves and their children" (Hurst 102). Bea sees the moment as a way to ensure she has a positive relationship with Jessie. However, Jessie only comes to Bea after she begins to cry uncontrollably. Although Bea might deem Jessie's ultimate arrival into her arms as a positive indication of their mother/daughter relationship, the fact that Bea must cry to earn her daughter's attention suggests Jessie may not feel the same.

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that this scene, and others within the novel, places Bea and Delilah into traditional husband/wife roles. Here, Bea is expected to disseminate discipline, much in the way a husband might, and Delilah informs Bea of the children's transgressions, much in the way a wife might do. While the relationship serves as an interesting example of what constitutes traditional family life, it does not directly relate to the purpose of this study, as it is more reflective of Hurst's intentions/commentary rather than the maternal rhetoric of the mother characters.

As the business becomes more successful, Bea selects more aspects of the New Woman. She spends even less time at home. In fact, Bea spends so little time at home that when she sees Jessie in one instance, Bea smothers Jessie in kisses, even to the point that Jessie is hurt by some of them: "Mother loves you so, Jessie. She sees you so seldom. She knows she is rough, but it is because she love you so" (Hurst 121). Because Bea is away from home so much, scenes such as this one become the norm for Bea and Jessie's larger mother/daughter relationship. It is obvious that Bea wants to be there for her daughter; she covers her in kisses when she sees Jessie. Sadly, though, Bea's thoughts regarding her love for Jessie, and her continual *absence*, create conflicting messages for Jessie. Moreover, once the family moves to New York, a typical day for Bea involves little interaction with Jessie:

By now, the equivalent of any high-power business man, the order of her day was to rush out mornings before her pretty child opened eyes that were accustomed to finding her gone, back again evenings, in time for the fag end, or part of the last hour, of her daughter's day.

(Hurst 144)

In this scene, it is obvious that Bea's thoughts both at the beginning and ending her day are focused on Jessie. Such thoughts seem to establish Bea as a "good" mother since she keeps her daughter on her mind as her days begin and end. However, because Bea's work keeps her away from Jessie, such alienation of her child casts a more negative shadow over Bea's mothering because Jessie sees so little of her

mother. Though one could hardly question Bea's dedication to Jessie's well being, it is Jessie's opinion that matters most when it comes to Bea's success or failure as a mother. Granted, Bea's dedication to her business has afforded her family the ability to live comfortably in New York. Nevertheless, the relationship between Bea and Jessie becomes more like a casual acquaintance than a mother/daughter bond because as Bea's success increases so too does her *absence* at home.

The strain of the mother/daughter relationship and the apparent negative rejection of mothering due to Bea's *absence* become most apparent after Jessie is sent to boarding school at age seven. This introduces the "othermother" that is briefly referenced in Chapter Three when Margery is sent away to school. The concept of an othermother refers to a non-biological caregiver, and it also intersects with race as well as motherhood. Patricia Hill Collins refers to African American othermothers as "women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (178). Collins further states, "Othermothers can be key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood" (180). Within the black community, othermothers played vital roles in child rearing. Collins' comments certainly link to Delilah's care for those other than Peola in the home, a topic discussed later in the chapter. However, when combining the thoughts of Collins with scientific motherhood, daycares and boarding schools begin to assume the role of othermothers, furthering the relationship between race and motherhood. The

creation of daycares is largely linked to “[f]ears of maternal incompetence” (Rose 67) and working mothers needs for childcare. Moreover, differences in daycares also indicate a division of class. As Elizabeth Rose notes, “while day nurseries provided custodial care for the children of poor mothers who ‘had to work,’ nursery schools offered an educational, enriching experience for the children of well-educated, affluent families” (67). Even the type of daycare a mother could choose from was dependent on her class status. Boarding schools, then, can be viewed as an opportunity for affluent children to continue the more “enriching” educational experience that may have started in nursery school in order to become productive, upper-class citizens once they finished school. In Jessie’s case, her othermothers become the teachers and administrators at her boarding school.

For Bea, she is providing an excellent opportunity for Jessie to earn a quality education. Bea constantly reassures herself that she works for the opportunity to care for Jessie and give her a good life. To Bea, “[a]dmission [for Jessie] into Miss Winch’s school had been something of an achievement” (Hurst 173). After all, a prominent businesswoman such as herself could certainly afford to send her child to a prestigious school rather than having her attend a public school. However, as a mother, Bea still questions her decision to send Jessie so far away:

I wonder if I am educating her away from me. That will be a terrible thing, and yet I will go right on doing it. I wonder what she thinks of me. Or if she thinks of me. After all, in my world I stand for something.

Wonder just how she feels about that. She never wants things like other children. Almost as if it embarrasses her to be beholden to me. I want to give her. Those are the things that draw parents and children together. Giving. If only there were something she terribly wanted. . . . Perhaps I am just one of those tired business men to her, wanting to buy my way into her affections. I'm away from home so much. . . . Why, Delilah is a better mother to her Peola than I am to mine! Next year I am going to start a regular campaign to spend more time with her.

Next year— (Hurst 175-8)

The back and forth Bea demonstrates regarding her performance as a mother provides interesting insight into her mothering. Bea clearly demonstrates that she has her daughter on her mind as a provider. However, Bea's approach to the situation represents more of supplier and consumer relationship rather than mother and daughter. Bea wonders if Jessie wants something from her as if being around as her mother would not be enough for Jessie. Bea even laments that Delilah is a better mother, quite possibly because Delilah is a continual presence within her daughter's life, as discussed further later in the chapter. At the end of her thought, Bea continues to look to the future for another opportunity to spend more time with Jessie—"next year." But in using this delaying tactic, Jessie once again falls to the back of Bea's mind. The problem is that Jessie never hears Bea's thoughts about working to provide for her daughter. For Jessie, she only knows that her mother is



never around much, and now she wants to send Jessie off to school. Thus, Bea continues to select aspects of the New Woman, which ultimately interferes with her mothering.

As Jessie becomes older, and her visits home become more infrequent, the *absenteeism* of Bea's mothering becomes more apparent with the rhetoric Jessie uses to address her mother. Rather than addressing Bea as her mother, Jessie greets her mother as she comes home with, "Hello, B. Pullman! What's the use of having a national institution for a mother unless you cry it out loud!" (Hurst 179). Here, Jessie seems to mock the success of her mother in acknowledging her as the rest of the world does rather than addressing her as her mother. Even though Bea thinks of the address as "sweet nonsense" (Hurst 179), Jessie's tone suggests that she rejects Bea as her mother. This becomes even more apparent when Bea addresses that Jessie's requests, such as staying with a friend for the Christmas holidays, "usually [came] by way of Delilah" (Hurst 180). Jessie continues to defer mothering to Delilah, even though she secondarily acknowledges the need to include Bea in her requests. Furthermore, the frequency of Jessie's requests to stay abroad at school during holidays begins to shed light on just how much Bea has alienated her daughter. In doing so, Jessie parallels Bea's actions in remaining *absent*. Moreover, in making the requests via Delilah, Jessie further distances herself from her mother's presence. After another request from Jessie to remain abroad for the summer, Bea thinks, "It was almost as if she felt the need to wait, with this daughter of hers, until they were

better acquainted. More time for each other, ultimately in the home of that now aching void of a lot in Fishrow—Jessie out of school, herself out of business. Yes, yes, herself out of business” (Hurst 215). Here even Bea acknowledges that she and her daughter need to be “better acquainted,” and in doing so she confirms that her *absent* mothering has taken its toll on their mother/daughter relationship. Further endearments Bea recollects include “Mother-the-Magnificent,” “Dear Household-Word,” or even simply “Bea” (Hurst 275). It is not until Jessie returns home at the end of the novel that the full effect of Bea’s *absent* mothering has on Jessie. While they are speaking, Jessie says to Bea, “I’m finished being awed by you. You’re grand and make me feel like a jello dessert, but, darling, if you don’t mind my telling you, there’s something almost human about you these days” (Hurst 292). Despite the attempt to rectify their relationship, Jessie’s announcement that she will no longer be “awed” by her mother further demonstrates the rift within their relationship due to Bea’s dedication to her business. Nevertheless, Jessie and Bea do try to build a relationship towards the end of the novel.

However, the final example of how Bea’s *absent* mothering affects Jessie might be the most hurtful to Bea. Throughout the novel, Bea secretly expresses her feelings for Frank Flake, her general manager who is eight years her junior. However, before she and Frank can act on their feelings, Jessie comes home and Frank falls in love with her. In all of the confusion, it is Jessie who confirms Bea’s ultimate loneliness: “But I love him and he loves me. Relieve his terror, parent; give

us the maternal blessing with caution or I may pass out of the pressure of too much happiness" (Hurst 310). Though she does not know it, Jessie thrusts a dagger through her mother's heart. Where Bea once thought she could begin to reject traits of the New Woman and find love again, more specifically to build a life after her work, Jessie has removed any possibility of such a feat. Ironically, it is in Bea's final act of the novel, giving Frank and Jessie her blessing, that Bea is no longer an *absent* mother. In granting her daughter her happiness, Bea denies her own final attempt to create a life after work. In this way, Bea finally becomes the mother she always felt she would be, when the time came.

Considering the selection and rejection of the symbol system of the New Woman allows for construction of a terministic screen of "mothering" based on the character of Bea. Although Bea is not the prototypical New Woman in that she did marry and have a child, once Bea enters the workforce to provide for her family, her dedication to her business takes over her life, and mothering is relegated to the back of Bea's mind. As a result, her actions, as well as her rhetoric, can represent both a negative and a positive intersection of the discourse necessary to help build a terministic screen for "mothering." Bea's thoughts and rhetoric are largely positive in relation to mothering because she does continue to look towards the future and developing a relationship with Jessie. However, the discrepancy between her rhetoric and her acts establishes an *absence* characteristic of negative mothering. No matter what her thoughts of the future might be, in the present, as Jessie grows up,

Bea is largely *absent*, leaving the majority of the mothering to Delilah, as will soon be discussed. As such, her *absence* in mothering is more of a selection of the New Woman who favors her ability to earn a wage and provide for herself, or in this case, her family. Unfortunately, the success Bea enjoys in her business translates into negative mothering. Despite the fact that Bea is thrown into the need to work and that she wants to have a relationship with Jessie, her *absent* mothering cannot be ignored. As a result, Bea represents both positive and negative aspects of mothering, although the negative aspects have a much larger impact on her daughter and their relationship. Nevertheless, Bea contribution to a terministic screen for “mothering” is important because many mothers must work out of necessity for survival, thus demonstrating the intersection of class and mothering.<sup>22</sup> As such, the *absent* mothering as seen in Bea must be considered when determining the impact of maternal rhetoric.

### ***Delilah***

The second major mother character, Delilah, presents a more *attentive* representation of mothering. Though Delilah also works in the business with Bea (it is her cooking and her likeness that brings the waffle shops so much success) her main “job” in the beginning of the novel is to mother the young daughters as well as

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<sup>22</sup> Within the novel, Bea is able to come home at times, mainly because the income her business earns places her family in the upper class. However, other working women may not be able to come home as much, such as blue-collar working women in the lower classes who have to work multiple jobs. The division of class, here, demonstrates that the lower-class mothers may be absent from their children even more so than Bea. Nevertheless, any absent mother would be labeled “bad” by dominant, hegemonic society.

Bea's ailing father. Delilah even goes so far as to bring the two young girls and Bea's father to one of the restaurants as she makes waffles in the kitchen (Hurst 118). Despite the failure of her experiment (they have to hire a helper for Delilah to watch the children and the ailing father as she works), Delilah's dedication to mothering remains steadfast. As the novel continues, her mothering shifts from the daughters and the ailing father to Bea, as Delilah continues to live with Bea until her death. Even when Bea asks Delilah to spend some of her money on something for herself, the only things Delilah asks for relate to Bea, the girls, or Bea's father. In fact, the only thing Delilah uses her money for is to plan an elaborate funeral (Hurst 146). No matter whom she attends to, Delilah is the consummate *attentive* mother throughout the novel.

From the first time she enters the house to care for the family while Bea goes to work, the *attentiveness* of Delilah as a mother is clear. She selects aspects of the New Negro Woman, as she tends to her domestic duties and attempts to keep Bea on track as a mother as well. For example, when Bea discovers she is actually making money from Mr. Pullman's accounts, Delilah quickly warns her about spending the extra money: "We got our chillun to think about before we go squanderin' de fust spare money dat comes in on no- 'count suvvant's wages" (Hurst 80). Despite Bea's excitement for the extra income, Delilah reminds her that the care of the children is most important. Although Delilah does not represent the overall ideal of the New Negro Woman, characteristics Cherene Sherrard-Johnson identifies

as being “beautiful, educated, middle class, and usually engaged in a charitable, conscientious trade” (10), Delilah’s attention to mothering demonstrates the Victorian ideals of motherhood that echo the words of Margaret Murray Washington which New Negro Women adopted. As the book continues, Delilah’s *attentive* mothering is apparent in that her rhetoric mainly focuses on that of her “children.” For example, as she rubs Bea’s feet upon her arrival home, Delilah says, “Doan’ you wake up mah babies. All three of ’em [Peola, Jessie, and Bea’s father] sleepin’ after de very ole debbil in each and every one of ’em sense you left dis house dis mawnin’” (Hurst 83). Here, and throughout the majority of the novel, Delilah represents the historical “sanctification [that] surrounds Black motherhood” (Collins 174). The fact that Delilah refers to all three of the people she cares for as her “babies” further demonstrates the *attentive* nature of Delilah’s mothering, thus Delilah selects aspects of the New Negro Woman.

Another important aspect of Delilah’s mothering is that she takes on the role of the “mammy” in the household, a stereotype of an othermother. Collins offers a comprehensive explanation of the mammy:

Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women’s behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and “family” better than

her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White "family," the mammy still knows her "place" as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination. (72-3)

Collins' explanation well describes Delilah. Although Bea never speaks to her as a subordinate, Delilah recognizes her place within the home as the domestic caregiver. Additionally, Delilah does not want the attention that is given to her as the waffle business gains success. She defers to Bea to take the lead on all business decisions. Racial issues are also rhetorically addressed by the use of the term "mammy" within the novel, especially since Delilah uses the term to describe herself. For example, when Delilah must have her picture taken to place on the maple candies, she says to Bea, "I want to keep record for mah chile of how her mammy looked—" (Hurst 88). Though the "child" for the mammy could refer to either the white or black children, Delilah seems to reference Peola here, since she references a hat in which she was married prior to the statement. In another example, when Delilah and Bea discuss the races of their daughters and the act of passing she states, "De Lawd help her an' her mammy help her!" (Hurst 121). Again, though the mammy figure could refer to her relationship to either the black or white child, Delilah most certainly speaks of Peola in this statement. Moreover, Delilah also refers to herself as mammy to those outside her family, specifically a soldier

who is a regular customer at one of the waffle shops (143). Based on the rhetorical use of the term “mammy” in the novel, Delilah projects a positive connotation of the mammy, despite the subordinate nature Collins notes in her description.

Characteristics of the mammy figure permeate Delilah’s mothering throughout the novel, which are explored further in the chapter.

Despite the *attentive* nature of Delilah’s mothering, some clear favoritism is shown to Jessie as the two daughters grow up, which highlights the intersection of mothering and race, as well as some negative aspects of Delilah’s mothering, found within the novel. The division of care between the two daughters is noted early on:

In every matter of precedence, including teeth, was the priority of Bea’s child most punctiliously observed. The duet of their howling might bring her running intuitively to her own, but the switch was without hesitancy to the white child, every labor of service adhering rigidly to that order. . . . Even in the matter of feeding, Delilah’s child who the first weeks of her life had thrived on a hit-or-miss system of nobody’s formulating, now conformed meticulously to Dr. Merribe’s carefully devised scheme for the white child. (Hurst 84)

Here, Delilah shows clear preference to the care of Jessie, which is representative of the mammy figure. Moreover, Delilah also defers to scientific mothering in following Dr. Merribe’s structure for Jessie’s care. In focusing her attention on Jessie, Delilah alienates the care of her own daughter, which harkens back to Bea’s negative



mothering. Although her intentions are good in being *attentive* to Jessie, the white child, Delilah's mother/daughter relationship with Peola, the black child, is secondary. Because Delilah privileges the care of Jessie over Peola and defers to the scientific mothering of Dr. Merriabel, Delilah deflects aspects of the New Negro Woman, and in turn sends negative messages to Peola concerning her skin color, a topic that is explored later in the chapter.

In addition to the preference of race in mothering, especially by a mammy figure, the issue of scientific motherhood intersects with race in the above passage as well. Despite Delilah's reliance on herbal and natural healing, she tries to ward off Peola getting a tooth before Jessie "by boiling up a concoction of frogs' legs in lieu of mole-feet" (Hurst 84), when it comes to the care of Jessie, Delilah defers to the doctor's wishes, which eventually get passed on to Peola by default. Even though Delilah's deferment to the doctor may be in the best interests of both children, it actually stifles her own sense of mothering. Delilah depends on her faith and her "concoctions" in order to care for the children. As the novel continues, Delilah remains steadfast in her faith, and her mothering, but her *attentive* nature to the children allows for her to accept the doctor's help when necessary.

Division of the daughters based on race also becomes apparent when Delilah must discipline the children. For instance, when Delilah catches Jessie and Peola sticking pins in the legs of Jessie's paralyzed grandfather, Delilah attempts to rectify

the order in which the two girls admit what they have done. When Bea arrives home to Delilah's explanation of what occurred during the day, Delilah states:

Dat liddle yaller-headed one or yourn is no innocenter than mah black one, only mine might as well begin learnin' herself now, that what's jes' naughty for a white chile, can be downright ag'in' de law if a black one does it. 'Taint no use mah chile tryin' to get herself raised on de idea all men is equal. Maybe dey is in de eyes of de Lawd, but it's de eyes of man I's talkin 'bout. (Hurst 101)

Here, even the order of admitting wrongdoing matters to Delilah, and her only reasoning is because of the girls' races, much like the mammy. Collins notes, "Black mothers are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior that many are forced to exhibit in their mammified jobs. By teaching Black children their assigned place in White power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression" (73). This is certainly the case in the scene above, as Delilah privileges Jessie despite the fact that both girls committed the same heinous act. Additionally, Delilah calls attention to how "men" will view the two girls. Although she could mean society as a whole, the rhetorical choice to focus on how the girls will be seen specifically in the eyes of "men" suggests Delilah cares more about how men might treat each girl based on the color of her skin. As the mother figure for both girls, Delilah takes it upon herself to make them understand the realities of "the eyes of

man” when it comes to their races. Even after Peola tries to apologize first, Delilah replies, “Peola, will you stop bein’ sorry before Jessie is sorry? Ain’t you got no way of keepin’ yourself in your place?” (Hurst 101). By trying to keep the girls in their rightful places (simply based on race), Delilah remains *attentive* in her mothering. However, one could argue that in this scene Delilah perpetuates the division of races in wanting to keep the girls separated into their “places” in society. More likely, Delilah could also simply be preparing the girls for the real world they will eventually enter. For Peola, the reality is that societal rules are different for her in comparison to Jessie, simply because of the color of her skin. Clearly though, issues of race permeate the way Delilah mothers.

The impact of passing plays a role in Delilah’s mothering as well. As the girls get older, Bea seems to worry about the way they interact, and she fears the difference in race may be the issue, even though Peola has very light skin. To this, Delilah replies: “Some day dat chile of yourn is gonna wake up an’ find my Peola black. Den what?” (Hurst 119). Although Bea wishes to defer the issue to when it actually occurs, Delilah presses on with the subject of passing:

Dar ain’t no passin’. When de time comes for mah Peola to stay on her black side of de world an yourn on her white side, we won’t have to decide it, Miss Bea. . . . Every day of mah life I’s gonna rear mah young un to know de glory of bein’ born one of de Lawd’s low-down ones. I seen her [Peola’s] pap suffer tryin’ to pass. Lord’ll gimme strength for

sparin' his chile dat sufferin' an' pain. . . . I wants mah chile full of  
nigger-love and lovin' to-be-nigger. (Hurst 119)

Delilah shows clear love of her heritage to Bea, and she clearly wishes Peola to feel the same pride. To Delilah, there is no need to pass, because one should be proud to be made black by God. Her faith is very strong, and she wants to pass the same traits on to her daughter through her mothering. In this way, Delilah continues to show her *attentiveness* in the raising of her daughter. Unfortunately, Delilah can already see that Peola may not feel the same pride in her race, and Delilah's denial of passing is most likely the cause for Peola's decision to pass, which is discussed later in the chapter. Delilah continues, "It's a curse on her already, lak it was on him [Peola's father]. Mah baby hates to be black. Ain't that terrible, Miss Bea—ain't that heart-breakin'? Shamed to be what de Lawd made her. . . . Dar ain't nothin' but glory in bein' black, baby mine, if you can look at it as bein' de will of de Lawd" (Hurst 121). Delilah clearly sees the potential for Peola to turn her back on being black in order to pass as white. In her *attentiveness* as a mother, Delilah tries to convince Peola that there is no sense in passing because there is nothing wrong with being black. However, Delilah's *attentiveness* is misguided in this situation because her actions, particularly the privileging of Jessie, demonstrate what Peola must forfeit as a result of being born black. Thus, Delilah exhibits more negative mothering towards Peola.

The possibility of Peola's passing becomes more apparent in another argument between the mother and daughter. After another incident between Jessie

and Peola that leads to Jessie calling Peola a “nigger,” Delilah seizes the opportunity to instill a sense of pride in Peola regarding her race, selecting aspects of the New Negro Woman. Unfortunately, Peola’s response to her mother is, “You’re so black! That’s what makes me nigger” (Hurst 151). Here, possibly because of Delilah’s privileging of Jessie in her mothering, Peola has clearly internalized that lighter skin is better. Despite both Bea and Delilah’s attempts to calm the situation, Peola continues, “I won’t be a nigger! I won’t be a nigger!” (Hurst 152). The argument continues to the point of Peola fainting. The disdain Peola feels for being black is clear, but it goes beyond her skin color. She has seen the construction of blackness as inferior, even by her own mother, and she rejects the fear of being seen as less than. Additionally, Peola’s choice to use the pejorative “nigger” to refer to the black community furthers the significance of Peola’s conflict. Of all the terms she could have invoked, Peola chooses the most inflammatory, thus demonstrating the anger she feels towards her mother. Peola’s choice of words is heartbreaking to Delilah. Nevertheless, Delilah tries to be more *attentive* to her daughter, as well as to her race. Delilah eventually sends Peola to live and attend school in an all colored environment with the “daughter of a colored professor of mathematics at Howard University and herself a teacher in the public schools” (Hurst 196). Although she defers to the “othermother,” just as Bea does by sending Jessie off to school, Delilah only sends Peola away to school once she realizes how divided Peola is about her skin color. In this way, Delilah is *attentive* to the needs of her daughter and attempts

to create a better situation for her. However, as is discussed later in this chapter, Delilah cannot control the actions of Peola once she becomes an adult.

When attempting to build a terministic screen for mothering based on the god-term of *attentive* related to the character of Delilah, there are both positive and negative aspects to consider. On the positive side, she mainly selects the characteristics found in the New Negro Woman, as she constantly focuses her attention on everyone else in her home. Delilah remains steadfast in her duties as a mother to her own child as well as to Bea, Jessie, and Bea's father. One could even argue that she approaches everything she does with the same tender, loving care as a mother, even the restaurants she partners in with Bea. Because her mothering seems to define her, Delilah's selection of the New Negro Woman is strong. Even though she also selects aspects of scientific motherhood when deferring to the family doctor at times, this reflection is quite minimal due to Delilah's large dependence on more natural, herbal remedies. Delilah's use of her own remedies further demonstrates her *attentiveness* as a mother in that she wishes to control the healing she offers to her child(ren). The pride in her race that she attempts to extend to Peola further selects aspects of the New Negro Woman, as Delilah attempts to provide her daughter with "basic necessities and [attempts to protect her] in dangerous environments" (Collins 184). As a result, Delilah provides a more positive rhetorical contribution to a terministic screen of "mothering."

However, the *attentiveness* of Delilah's mothering is sometimes misguided.

For instance, the constant privileging she gives to Jessie results in the alienation of her own daughter. Moreover, the *attentiveness* Delilah shows Jessie is not always extended to Peola. As such, Peola begins to absorb what she sees and hears from her own mother, and the result is that Peola cannot feel the same pride in her race as Delilah does. In this way, Delilah rejects the aspects of the New Negro Woman, because she fails to pass on her pride to Peola, the result of which deeply hurts Delilah. Moreover, Delilah also shows favor to Bea in the work they do together. As the business grows, it demands more of her attention, as does Bea, and her mothering, particularly in relation to Peola, suffers at times because she once again privileges the needs of a white woman. Overall, Delilah is *attentive* in her mothering and in the care she offers to those in the home. However, the privileging of her *attentiveness* to the white members of the household ultimately damages her own mother/daughter relationship with Peola. Thus, the intersection of race, work and motherhood represented in Delilah's rhetoric, as well as her actions, further complicates the creation of a terministic screen for "mothering."

### ***Peola***

Peola's connection to motherhood is the least developed of all three women within the book—it only appears in one chapter. Moreover, Peola is never a mother within the book. However, the rhetorical impact of her words, as well as her *non-mothering*, cannot be overlooked when attempting to create a terministic screen for mothering.

As the chapter begins, Peola has returned home after three and a half years in Seattle. She soon reveals that she has come to ask Bea and Delilah to renounce their attachment to her and deny any knowledge of their relationship in the future, if necessary. In justifying her request, much to the disappointment of Delilah, Peola reveals that she has passed as a white woman while living in Seattle and now wishes to marry a white man. Thus, Peola confirms the impact of Delilah's privileging of the white community.

The topic of Peola's passing shows a direct correlation between the characters in both Larsen and Hurst's novels. Much like Clare, Peola is able to easily pass for a white woman. When Peola arrives back home, she is described as having a "banana-colored pallor" (Hurst 253) and "straight black hair and straight contrasting pallor of straight brow" (Hurst 257). The appearance of Peola hurts Delilah, as she feels "[d]e white horses have cotched her [Peola]," but Peola states: "There's nothing wrong in passing. The wrong is the world that makes it necessary" (257). Where Delilah cannot understand why Peola would want to pass, even to the point of almost fainting, Peola clearly lays fault on society for her need to pass. Her rhetoric demonstrates a shift away from the anger she once used to yell at her mother. It is possible Peola's participation in society has confirmed Delilah's words, but it is also likely that Peola removes fault from her mother in order to receive the blessing she so desperately wants. Nevertheless, her act of passing clearly allows



her to find gainful employment and even a suitable man to marry, and Peola sees no shame in trying to create a better life for herself, away from her mother's fame.

Peola's passing also ties to Larsen's novel in that, like Clare, Peola shows no loyalty to her race. Although Clare wanted to rejoin Harlem culture, her initial action of passing and marrying a white man clearly cuts ties with the black community. Peola is willing to do the same, and even she goes so far as to request that Delilah and Bea cut all known familial ties. Peola states of her race: "I tell you I've prayed same as you, for the strength to be proud of being black under my white. I've tried to glory in my people. . . . I haven't pride of race, or love of race. . . . I can't learn to endure being black in a white world. . . . I'm as white under my skin as I am on top" (Hurst 258). Because the social construction for race is the color of one's skin, Peola cannot relate to the black community as a result of her light skin. As a result, she can make no connection to the black community as her mother wished for her. Moreover, Peola's words here demonstrate how completely she relies on her passing. The rhetoric she uses to speak of her people demonstrates the detachment Peola feels to the black community, but her words also suggest that she wants to be white, and the disconnect Peola feels with the black race grows even stronger as Delilah continually tries to understand her daughter's request. Just before she reveals her desire to marry a white man, Peola tells Delilah:

I can't! I've nothing against them, but I—I can't be what you want. I'm not the stuff. Not in a white world. If your skin is white like mine and

your soul is white—like mine, there is no point to the needless suffering. I've got to be helped. You two can do it. And I need to terribly—now—now!—to pass completely" (Hurst 259).

The desperation in Peola's words highlights the importance of passing for her. In using the term "them," she acknowledges that she does not feel part of the black community. She acknowledges the harsh reality of society for a young, black woman where white skin is privileged. In her mind, she is better off using her light skin to her advantage, and she even suggests that she possesses a white soul, much to the dismay of her mother. In doing so, she suggests that race is more than something one sees, but it is something one feels as well. Therefore, it is possible she is running from prejudice to opportunity and safety rather than running from her blackness. Nevertheless, Peola's rhetoric demonstrates a clear denial, or rejection, of her black heritage, which in turn extends to her relationship with motherhood.

It is Peola's work that initially brings her and her fiancé together which leads to the need for her to cut ties with her family. In mentioning her work, and its connection to her need to disconnect herself from Bea and Delilah, Peola demonstrates the significance of her independence. In this way, she exhibits characteristics of the New Woman. Even though she now wants to marry, Peola would never have met her fiancé if not for her work. Peola says of her job, "I've got on out there is Seattle. Librarian in the city's finest branch. . . . Nobody knows anything, except that I'm an orphaned girl out from the East earning a decent living"

(Hurst 259). She has been able to hide in her work, and in doing so, she establishes a connection to the man she wishes to marry. Thus, work continually disrupts the family and motherhood within the novel.

However, the connection Peola has to motherhood is the fact that she will never experience it, at least with a child of her own. Her act of passing allows Peola to marry a white man, but with marriage also comes the expectation of children. When Delilah mentions the possibility of Peola's "lie com[ing] out in [her] chillun . . . ,," Peola informs them she has "taken care of that!" (Hurst 260). Her words, of course, refer to voluntary sterilization. Peola continues:

I'm not ashamed. There are millions to populate the world besides me. There is no shame in being sterilized in the name of the happiness of another. He knows, without knowing why, that I can't have children. I want my happiness. I want my man. I want my life. I love him. I'll follow him to the ends of the earth. Which is practically what I propose to do. (Hurst 260)

Her actions and her words directly link to eugenics and birth control. Though eugenics sought to purify the human race by eliminating the ability of the "unfit" to reproduce, birth control offered a way to limit unwanted pregnancies. In Peola's case, her decision to voluntarily eliminate her ability to reproduce children links only to her own happiness and the need to avoid dark-skinned children. Her actions seem to directly oppose the thoughts of DuBois, who felt as if the African American

population should only seek birth control so “the young people can marry, have companionship and natural health, and yet not have children until they are able to take care of them” (“Black Folk” 167). Rather than contributing to the black community responsibly, and becoming a mother of the race, Peola uses the eugenic act of sterilization voluntarily to ensure her happiness. Moreover, where the women of *Passing* seek to avoid multiple pregnancies (their “sterilization” is more symbolic), Peola takes matters into her own hands by deciding to remove permanently the chance of having children altogether. Although Ann Douglas notes that “educated black ‘new women’ were ‘reluctant breeders’” (qtd. in Capo 140), a direct opposition to Washington’s *New Negro Woman*, Peola, who is clearly educated, takes the reluctance to breed one step further by eliminating the possibility for children altogether. Her rhetoric can be dangerous for not only the black community, but for motherhood as well. The drastic measure she enacts in order to marry the man she loves provides a rhetorical rejection of mothering. Peola expands on her sterilization:

I’ve found A.M. He loves me. I love him. I’ve done the—the right things—about the possibility of children. Never mind how. You couldn’t believe how! It hasn’t been easy. It’s been terrible that—well, without him, I couldn’t face a life that would be as sterile as I am.  
(Hurst 264-5)

Here, Peola's hesitation to label her actions the "right things" suggests that she is unsure of her decision to sterilize herself. She even notes how "terrible" the effects of the event have been for her. However, Peola continues to reject the seriousness of her actions by emphasizing the love she feels for the man she wishes to marry. No matter what happens in the future, Peola will never become a mother.

Despite Peola's choice to never become a mother, she does offer commentary on Delilah's actions as a mother in order to receive her blessing of a complete disconnection. In her first attempt to praise Delilah as a mother, Peola says, "I know how good you are. Twenty thousand times too good for me. Twenty? Fifty! Fifty times fifty times! Everything you've given me has been more than I deserve, and you've given and given and given me since the day I was born. . . ." (Hurst 257). Here, she acknowledges the sacrifices Delilah has made as a mother in order to make sure Peola had opportunities for a good life, even those that go beyond material items. Even though she wants her life to go in a different direction than her mother planned, Peola still seems grateful for the mothering she received. Peola continues her plea to Delilah: "Listen. You scarcely know me. I've gone my way, able to do so because you have been good and indulgent and generous. I haven't been a good daughter. I know that. I haven't been anything you deserved to have me be—" (Hurst 258). In continually announcing her failings as a daughter, Peola appears to praise her mother, but she also avoids any praise of Delilah's mothering specifically. This suggests that Peola's adult life is a direct contradiction of how Delilah raised, or

wanted to raise, Peola. Moreover, in renouncing her own ability to have children, Peola's actions contradict the praise she seeks to offer her mother.

Consideration of the selection and rejection by Peola of the symbol systems of the New Woman, the New Negro Woman, and mostly eugenics contributes further to the creation of a terministic screen of "mothering." Overall, her actions, as well as her rhetoric, represent a negative intersection of the discourse necessary to help build the terministic screen. Peola calls attention to an important decision many women of color had to face, sometimes not of their own volition. Not only does Peola actively participate in passing, but she makes the difficult decision to have herself sterilized. Such an act establishes the possibility for multiple positions regarding the symbol system of eugenics. Where many women were forced into sterilization, often because of their race, as discussed in Chapter Two, Peola makes the decision to undergo sterilization so that she may marry a white man and eliminate the "fear" of producing dark-skinned children. Even though she demonstrates the same fears as Gertrude and Clare in *Passing*, Peola eliminates her fear altogether, and by extension removes any opportunity to mother, a clear rejection of the New Negro Woman. Although her rhetoric suggests it was not a decision she made lightly, the announcement of her decision remains shocking, nonetheless. When considering Peola's selection of eugenics, her contribution to a terministic screen of "mothering" is undoubtedly negative. She cannot fall into the good/bad dichotomy of motherhood because she will never be a mother.

Nevertheless, she remains a representative of a terministic screen for “mothering” because many women decide they do not want to mother. As such, the *non-mothering* woman, as represented in Peola, remains inextricably linked to maternal rhetoric.

### **How *Imitation of Life* Contributes to a Terministic Screen of “Mothering”**

In continuing the trend seen in Chapter Three, mothering proves to be a complex term that holds multiple meanings for mothers. Much of the positive rhetoric related to mothering comes from Delilah, who clearly establishes mothering as the most important part of her life. She selects aspects of the New Negro Woman in that she subscribes largely to ideals of Victorian motherhood. She even defers to scientific motherhood at times despite her preference for more natural healing. Delilah’s pride in her race also represents positive rhetoric with regard to motherhood as a selection of the New Negro Woman. For example, she declares that passing should not be used by black society, particularly her daughter. In this sense, Delilah is a clear selection of positive mothering because her motives seem to tie directly back to the welfare of those for whom she cares. However, negative maternal rhetoric is seen in Delilah as well. In her *attentiveness* to the white members of the household, Delilah actually alienates her own daughter in many ways. The privilege she shows to Jessie establishes the need for Peola to feel as if she should pass. Therefore, the misplacement of Delilah’s *attentiveness* sheds

more negative light on her mothering. Overall, though, Delilah's intentions for mothering are positive.

Both Bea and Peola solely represent negative rhetoric of mothering in the novel. Because Bea focuses on her business, she alienates Jessie throughout most of her life. Even though Bea seems to work at her success in order to provide for Jessie, her dedication is misplaced. As a result, Jessie tends to lean towards Delilah's counsel when she needs mothering, which is typical for the mammy figure. As a result, Bea's selection of the New Woman (after her marriage) creates a rift between her and Jessie that may never be closed, even after Bea gives up hope of love in order for Jessie and Frank to marry. Furthering negative rhetoric of mothering, Peola's selection of both the New Woman (before her marriage) and eugenics cast a dark shadow over the terministic screen. Her choice to voluntarily remove her ability to have children makes her a *non-mother*. Thus, her eugenic act negatively contributes to the creation of a terministic screen of "mothering."

Within *Imitation of Life*, both negative and positive types of mothering clearly exist. Within the novel, especially within the characters' rhetorics, a terministic screen for "mothering" continues along the lines seen in Chapter Three and remains much more complex than the "good" and "bad" dualisms that most in dominant culture seek to assign mothers. The characters both select and reject the god-terms that describe the mothering actions of each one. For Bea, despite her good intentions for Jessie, the intersection of her symbol systems establishes a sense of



*alienation* related to mothering. For Delilah, despite the rift she establishes between she and Peola due to her privileging of Jessie, her intentions as well as the intersection of her symbol system largely demonstrates the *attentive* nature of mothers who wholly dedicate themselves to those for whom they care. For Peola, the intersection of her symbol systems and race highlights the dangers of eugenics. On the surface, Peola represents the option for women not to mother, more specifically the New Woman. However, because eugenic practices were so often tied to issues of race, the voluntary nature of Peola's choice further complicates the impact her decision has on mothering. The intersection of all three mothers and their god-terms with the established symbol systems further exposes the complex nature of a terministic screen for "mothering." As a result, their choices continue to provide a better understanding of maternal rhetoric.

## CHAPTER V

### CREATING A TERMINISTIC SCREEN FOR “MOTHERING”

*All I would claim is that, illusion or not, the human race cannot possibly get along with itself on the basis of any other intuition. The human animal, as we know it, emerges into personality by first mastering whatever tribal speech happens to be its particular symbolic environment.*

*--Kenneth Burke, “Terministic Screens,” 1966*

*Terministic Screens speak to the point at which language and experience move together. They emphasize the way that terms push us into various channels and fields, which continually shape and reshape our vision and expression. Terministic screens are thus always screening—progressively unfolding, moving, and intersecting. They are active, dynamic, and progressive, a result of their movement in experience.*

*--Paul Stob, 2008*

The complexity of the term *mothering* becomes apparent when rhetorically exploring the mother characters found in the selected works of Nella Larsen and Fannie Hurst. More importantly, consideration of the characters as mothers first, allows for a more comprehensive rhetorical discussion of mothering representations within these two novels and suggests the need for additional studies on other novels from the period. After a personal interest piqued concerning the rhetorical representation of mothers in American women’s fiction, I wondered

how maternal rhetoric might be relevant to the selected literature, and by extension to society. Additionally, I wondered how the selected fiction written by women engages, alters, or furthers the discourse surrounding maternal rhetoric. In this final chapter, I synthesize and analyze the intersecting discourses established by each mother character in the previous two chapters in order to establish a terministic screen for “mothering” that demonstrates the rhetorical representations of mothers in these two texts and which also shows the “cultural work” of the two novels. Before proceeding, I will briefly summarize the analysis of each novel and the mother characters within them.

### **The Basis of Analysis**

In order to answer my questions, I first applied the theories of “terministic screens” and the “symbolic action” of language established by Kenneth Burke to the mother characters within each novel. Using both theories, I became “a symbol-user to make sense of [a] reality” focused on mother characters in the selected novels written by American women (Kleine 152). In turn, I sought to create a terministic screen for “mothering.” In order to do so, as noted earlier by Burke, I had to construct my own reality (symbol systems) in order to create the terministic screen. Once I understood the symbol systems to apply, it was necessary to construct god-terms for each mother character. Thus, in creating my own terministic screen, I had to use other terministic screens that each mother character represents, once again proving that terministic screens cannot exist without intersecting other terministic

screens. Although each mother character within the novels intersects with mothering differently, the difference in the mothers is what leads to a more complete terministic screen for the larger concept of mothering. As Blakesly asserts, “Rhetoric is only necessary when there is ambiguity, when an issue or an idea’s merit can be seen from two or more perspectives, each of which may be reasonable” (22). Thus, the rhetorical exploration of each mother character warrants attention, and this study seeks to close a noticeable gap in scholarship regarding the rhetorical representation of mothers within these two texts.

To begin, the mothers within *Passing* were assigned god-terms to determine how they intersect with selected symbol systems established in Chapter Two. Doing so allowed me to intersect my own reality with those of the mother characters of Gertrude, Clare, and Irene. Based on the god-terms of *conflicted*, *selfish*, and *selfless*, I was able to discern the complicated rhetorical representation of mothers within the novel. Next, god-terms were assigned to the mother (and non-mother) characters in *Imitation of Life*. The characters of Bea, Delilah, and Peola were assigned the god-terms of *absent*, *attentive*, and *non-mothering*. Once again, the intersection of the symbol systems proved that mothering discourses complicate what it means to mother, and as such the terministic screen of “mothering” becomes much more complex than I originally expected.

The next step in answering my questions was to consider the cultural work of the novels, a theory established by Jane Tompkins. She asserts, “a novel’s impact

on the culture at large depends not on its escape from the formulaic and derivative, but on its taking into a storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form" (xvi). As Chapter Two establishes, there are plenty of "commonly held assumptions" with regard to motherhood (Kinser; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky; and Thurer). As such, the maternal rhetoric used by each character provides the cultural work for each novel. This topic is mainly analyzed in this final chapter, but the foundations were certainly established in the previous two chapters. The attention paid to each character with regards to motherhood is hard to ignore, although other scholars have done so. Though other aspects such as race, sexuality, and working success are more obvious topics to consider within each novel, as seen in the existing scholarship on the novels, motherhood was underrepresented, at best, and this gap needed to be closed. Due to the construction of my own reality, motherhood became a glaring topic worth considering, and I was surprised to learn that so few pieces of scholarship explore the issue,<sup>23</sup> especially on a rhetorical level. The conclusions I have drawn are summarized below.

### **Synthesizing the Terministic Screen and the Cultural Work of the Novels**

The terministic screen for mothering proves to be complex in nature. Using the rhetoric of the mother characters within the selected novels and considering the

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<sup>23</sup> Some existing scholarship include Vivyan C. Adair's "Of Home-Makers and Home-Breakers: The *Deserving* and the *Undeserving* Poor Mother in Depression Era Literature," Licia Morrow Calloway's *Black Family (Dys)Function in Novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Fannie Hurst*, and Kimberly Monda's "Self-Delusion and Self-Sacrifice in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*."

intersections of the mother characters with the symbol systems established in Chapter Two allowed me to construct the terministic screen based on my own reality and reading of the mother characters' maternal rhetoric. Using the six established god-terms allowed me to better construct the terministic screen in relation to the symbol systems. Moreover, each god-term demonstrates what all of the mother characters have in common because they each intersect each other's god-terms in different ways. An exploration and synthesis of each god-term establishes the terministic screen for "mothering."

The first god-term explored, *conflicted*, is represented in the rhetoric of each mother character within the selected novels. To begin, in *Passing*, Gertrude's conflict relates to her passing and wanting to make sure her sons can pass as well. She is so conflicted that she announces she and her husband will have no more children (Larsen 26). Even Clare shows conflict in her mothering because she wishes to forgo her passing to become part of the black community once again (Larsen 56). Though her decisions typically serve her own needs, there is still conflict present in Clare. Irene's conflict becomes apparent when she worries about her husband's possible affair and how it might affect her family. Her conflict is also evident in her attempting to help Clare negotiate her mothering (Larsen 52-3). In *Imitation of Life*, Bea's conflict is present almost the entire novel. Her conflict stems from her working and how it negatively impacts her mothering. Delilah's conflict is shown when she mothers Jessie and Peola. She privileges Jessie, but her need for Peola to

feel pride in being born black conflicts with her race, class, and employment-based responsibility for meeting Jessie's needs first and in consequence privileging the white Jessie over her own brown child. Most likely as a result of Delilah's actions, Peola's conflict is demonstrated in her decision to sterilize herself. She had to decide between marrying the man she loves and continuing to live her life as a white woman and the ability to become a mother. Though her marriage proves more important, the conflict still exists. Based on the rhetoric and actions of each mother character, conflict certainly makes up part of the terministic screen of "mothering."

The god-term of *selfish* can also be seen in the rhetoric of each mother character. First, in *Passing*, Gertrude exhibits selfishness when she decides to pass and force her children to pass. Although it is unclear if they are aware of their Negro heritage, Gertrude gives no indication that they will participate in any other community but the white one. Her decision to have no more children is also selfish, as it only serves to allow her to pass. Clare's selfishness is well documented in Chapter Three, as she only considers herself in the decisions she makes, even when it comes to mothering. Her comments regarding the abandonment of Margery so that Clare may reenter the black community are the epitome of her selfishness. Irene is also selfish when it comes to her children, almost to the point of losing her own identity within her mothering when she obsesses over the possible affair between Clare and Brian (Larsen 76-8). Irene seems to remove her husband from the parenting equation when she entertains the idea of the affair. Though one could

argue her selfishness is for the good of her children, it still exists. Within *Imitation of Life*, Bea's selfishness stems from her work. Because she allows work, and her success, to come first in her life, the relationship she has with her daughter suffers. Delilah is also selfish at times because she wishes for Peola to embrace her Negro heritage without attempting to appreciate the confusion Peola must feel when she sees her mother privilege Bea's white daughter, Jessie. As a result of Delilah's selfishness, Peola decides to pass anyway, which effectively ends the relationship between Delilah and Peola. The selfishness of Peola is seen in the form of her voluntary sterilization. Her decision eliminates the possibility of a family for her husband and permanently alienates her from her mother. Even though it is never established that her husband wants a family, Peola makes the decision for him. Because her inability to have children is self-imposed, she displays selfish tendencies so that she may marry a white man and continue to pass. Moreover, Peola loves her fiancée, and wants to eliminate any possibility that he will not maintain his love for her. As a result, Peola's selfishness derives from love, but she will never be able to extend her love to any children. Whether the selfish nature of each mother character is for the good of her children or not, it is clear that selfishness contributes to the terministic screen of "mothering."

Additionally, the god-term of *selfless* is also apparent in the rhetoric of each mother character. In *Passing*, whether it can be viewed as positive or not, Gertrude's selflessness can be seen in her rhetoric regarding her sons. Though she feared they



might be born dark-skinned, they were not. Because her sons can pass as well, Gertrude does indicate that she wants the best life possible for them, which suggests a selfless nature to her mothering. Though it is tough to find a selfless act in Clare's maternal rhetoric, perhaps her willingness to leave Margery is a selfless act. One could argue that by wanting to leave Margery with her father, Clare actually does the right thing because she could come to resent Margery if she remains a member of the white community, which could strain their relationship even further. It all depends on whether or not John discovers Margery's Negro heritage. Moreover, if Margery knew her mother's true feelings, it could have a lasting, negative affect. Thus, she may be better off without Clare in her life. Irene's selflessness is seen throughout the novel. She continually demonstrates that mothering is the largest part of her identity, and she even attempts to help Clare see the importance of mothering. In *Imitation of Life*, the same thing that shows Bea's selfishness also demonstrates her selflessness in mothering. She is willing to go to work, thus sacrificing a strong relationship with Jessie, in order to make sure Jessie has good opportunities in life. In the ultimate selfless act, Bea forgoes her own romantic feelings for Frank so that he and Jessie can marry. Delilah's selflessness is actually an important aspect of her mothering. She never does much for herself, and she always puts the needs of her "children" before her own. In fact, the only thing she spends a great amount of money on for herself is her funeral. Despite the privileging she shows Bea and her family over Peola, Delilah's mothering is selfless. Much like

Clare, selflessness is difficult to discern from Peola. However, perhaps her choice is selfless in that having a dark-skinned child could be dangerous for a passing black woman, as well as her child. No matter the motivation behind each mother character's acts, selflessness can be seen in each one, thus, contributing to the terministic screen of "mothering."

Next, the god-term of *absent* can be considered in relation to the maternal rhetoric of each mother character. Gertrude and Peola's absenteeism can be seen in both women's decision to not have (any more) children. Though Gertrude already has children, she declares she will have no more. Peola, through her voluntary sterilization, will have no children. Thus, both remove themselves from the lives of potential children. Clare is often absent in Margery's life, as Clare spends most of her time trying to separate herself from Margery in order to reenter the black community. Irene's absence can be seen in the attention she pays to Clare. Throughout the book, Irene's focus is on trying to help Clare see the value of motherhood, so one could argue that at that moment, she is absent from the lives of her sons. Bea's absenteeism is well documented in that her work takes over her life. As a result, Bea can never establish a strong relationship with Jessie. Delilah is absent at times for Peola when she privileges Jessie's care. The attention Delilah gives to Jessie over Peola makes her absent in her own daughter's life at times. Though it may be a stretch to call every mother absent in their child(ren)'s lives, the inclusion for the terministic screen of "mothering" remains.

The next god-term of *attentive* can be applied to the rhetoric of the mother characters within each mother character of the novels. In *Passing*, Gertrude is attentive in that she does want a good life for her sons. Her conflict related to race most likely leads to her attentiveness. At times Clare can be considered attentive in that she does not seem to want harm to come to Margery. It is possible Clare is oblivious to the potential danger John poses to their daughter. As Clare abandons the idea of mothering, it is possible she thinks Margery would be better off without her mother; thus, she is attentive to what is best for Margery. Irene is attentive to motherhood throughout the novel. Her rhetoric continually praises the act of mothering, and motherhood is a defining characteristic for Irene. In *Imitation of Life*, Bea's attentiveness is present, but it is also misplaced. She wants attention from Jessie when she comes home, but to Jessie, Bea is like a stranger. In the end, however, Bea is attentive to Jessie's needs when she realizes that Frank and Jessie are in love. When Bea sacrifices her own love for Frank in order for Jessie to be happy, Bea is finally attentive to her daughter's needs. Delilah's attentiveness is explored within Chapter Four. Because her role within the novel is to mother the entire household, she must be attentive. Although she does privilege the white members of the family, Delilah is attentive to each person she cares for within the novel. Much like her selflessness, Peola's attentiveness is hard to connect, but it can be done. One can argue she is attentive in that she is aware of cultural norms regarding dark skin, and she wishes to prevent such ridicule for any potential child.

In this sense, her attentiveness is a proactive measure. Whether their attentiveness has positive or detrimental effects on their children, it is still important to consider when building a terministic screen of “mothering.”

Finally, the god-term of *non-mothering* can be applied to the rhetoric of each mother character. Gertrude and Peola’s non-mothering can be considered together. Where Gertrude’s decision to have no more children is more symbolic, Peola’s non-mothering is permanent, and the idea of “controlling” the ability to give birth directly links to non-mothering. In this way, Clare is much like Gertrude and Peola. However, Clare’s non-mothering goes one step further, as she indicates she wishes to separate herself from Margery as well. In opposition to the other mother characters of *Passing*, Irene’s non-mothering is not as much of an issue; however, one could argue that when she gives so much time to Clare she is not mothering her own sons, thus becoming a non-mother. Shifting to *Imitation of Life*, Bea represents non-mothering when she is at work. The attention she pays to her career is attention she does not pay to Jessie. Moreover, because Bea allows othermothers to mother Jessie, she becomes a non-mothering figure. Delilah can also be linked to non-mothering when it comes to Peola. Because Delilah privileges the care of Jessie, as well as Bea and Bea’s father, over her own daughter, Peola might feel as if her own mother does not “mother” her. Additionally, in sending Peola off to school, just as Bea did with Jessie, Delilah allows othermothers to help raise Peola; therefore, making Delilah a non-mother despite her good intentions. At some point throughout

each novel, each woman becomes a non-mother. Though some represent non-mothering more than others, the god-term must still be a part of the terministic screen for “mothering.”

Synthesizing all six god-terms establishes the terministic screen for “mothering,” which was the focus of this study. Because each god-term plays such a strong role in representing maternal rhetoric, the complexity of a term such as *mothering* becomes apparent. As such, the terministic screen for “mothering” established here defines the act as *conflicted*, *selfish*, *selfless*, *absent*, *attentive*, and *nonexistent*. The fact that each mother character, as well as her maternal rhetoric, embodies each god-term serves to further the notion that motherhood, and the act of mothering, extends far beyond the good/bad dualism that dominant culture seeks to divide mothers with. As a result, this study establishes the need for more rhetorical discussion regarding maternal rhetoric. Current and future consideration of maternal rhetoric, including rhetoric utilized by literary mother characters, must become as complex as the discourse established here.

Moreover, building the terministic screen also serves another function, as it demonstrates the cultural work of the novels. Based on the cultural construction of the good/bad dualism for mothers, the maternal rhetoric used by each mother character certainly reflects the reality of dominant, hegemonic society. Thus, the novels and the mother characters within them do cultural work in that they construct examples of maternal rhetoric and how it impacts women who mother.

Overall, it is clear that the novels do intersect with maternal rhetoric in that they help to establish a terministic screen of “mothering” that illuminates the conflicted and conflicting social construction of motherhood and the maternal rhetoric used to discuss mothering. Moreover, this study demonstrates that maternal rhetoric must get beyond the simplistic and dangerous good/bad dualism that permeates current discussion.<sup>24</sup> The act of mothering has proven to be complex, and the future studies of maternal rhetoric must reflect such complexities.

### **Building Toward Further Maternal Rhetoric Study**

As previously noted in Chapters Three and Four, there are multiple avenues of future study that could result from this project. For instance, the terministic screen established here is merely a construction of my own reality, as well as the realities of the mother characters within the two selected novels. Paul Stob notes:

symbols, terms, and language form the building blocks, the bricks and mortar, of the structures of our collective life. We employ symbols that construct our social realities, similar to the way a contractor employs the materials and labor that construct a house. Consequently, the realities we face are not inherent in nature but are built up discursively and can therefore be reconstructed as we alter our discursive practices. (131)

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<sup>24</sup> See Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky’s *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in the Twentieth-Century America*, Andrea O’Reilly’s *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, and Patrice DiQuinzio’s *The Impossibility of Mothering* for more on current discussions of motherhood.

In other words, the terministic screen I have constructed for “mothering” based on the symbol systems and god-terms here may not be the same for another critic. Additionally, the terministic screen I built here may not be the same screen I would construct for “mothering” at a different point in my life. This furthers the notion that “[n]othing is stable in Burke, nothing foundational” (Simons 16). Though it is certainly frustrating to consider the fluid nature of terministic screens, the potential avenue for rhetorical exploration is exciting to consider, especially when taking into account the complexities of a term such as “mothering.” Moreover, Simons goes on to state, “the trip up the mountain and the view from the top are nearly always worth the fall” (16). I have certainly found this to be the case with this study.

Other avenues of study could take a more feminist approach. One possible avenue of study could revolve around the construction of the family, as noted in Chapter Four. Moreover, the topics of othermothers and the mammy figure<sup>25</sup> in *Imitation of Life* could warrant further exploration. Finally, the intersectionality of motherhood and passing could become its own project. No matter what the focus, the topic of maternal rhetoric remains open for analysis. I wish to echo Adrienne Rich’s sentiments when she states, “We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood” (11). Although her seminal text on motherhood was published forty years ago, her message

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<sup>25</sup> This is not to suggest that no one has approached this topic before. One could build upon the ideas Licia Morrow Calloway establishes in *Black Family (Dys)Function in Novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Fannie Hurst*, in which Delilah is discussed as a mammy figure.

remains valid. There is still more to be explored regarding maternal rhetoric, and I look forward to seeing additional studies of maternal rhetoric.



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