The solace of separation: feminist theory, autobiography, Edith Wharton, and me

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The solace of separation: Feminist theory, autobiography, Edith Wharton, and me.

by

Susan L. Woods

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
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Approved:

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1994
Angie, Olivia, Lance, Jason, and Jerry--
encouragement, patience, and understanding.

Kathy Hickok, Dorothy Schwieder, Connie Post, and Katharine Joslin--
instruction, comments, and insights.

Brenda Daly--
It would come on her all of a sudden, a sense
of dizzying growth, as if she had been given a
special kind of eyesight so that things looked
different to her than they did to other
people....She wanted to see how everything
was.
Joyce Carol Oates  A Garden of Earthly Delights

To all those who weren't there--
Your absence made this writing possible.
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Let me begin this discussion of autobiography and theory with an autobiographical act. Recently I had the opportunity [read duty] to attend a function relating to my husband's accounting profession, a small dinner at a private club where the board of directors were to be elected. After spending the afternoon reading a Sue Miller novel, I dressed in appropriately conservative attire and met my husband. I have attended a number of these functions, and I anticipated the usual discussion of cost allocations and investment yield, a discussion in which I would be, necessarily, mute. However, to my surprise, sitting at our table were several academics: a professor of English literature from a small liberal arts college and his wife, who had received her B.A. in English; another couple who were both professors at Iowa State University, the husband in Accounting and the wife in Family and Consumer Sciences; and, of course, my husband and myself, an accountant and a lowly grad student.

The evening began with a lively critique of *The Bridges of Madison County* and evolved into a discussion of Toni Morrison's work. This was turning out to be the most fun I'd ever had in a room full of CPA's. Eventually the conversation came around to my work in graduate school. How many more classes did I have left to take? What did I intend to do after grad school? Had I decided on a thesis? In part, because I had recently finished reading several theorists who
had profoundly influenced not only the subject matter of my thesis but the style as well, and partly because of my own naivete, I was eager to share my work. I explained that I intended to critique Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*, and that I would do so using autobiographical literary criticism. I could tell I had piqued the interest of at least a few as they looked up from their artichoke hearts and green beans almondine. The professor from the liberal arts college was especially interested as he began to question me at length about autobiographical criticism. This was obviously something new to him so I tried name dropping. Had he read Diane Freedman's *An Alchemy of Genres* or Nancy Miller's *Getting Personal*? What about Jane Tompkin's "Me and My Shadow?" Adrienne Rich? No luck. Not to be discouraged, I jumped in feet first and, in my own feeble way, attempted to explain how the autobiographical act can inform feminist criticism. Before my smug satisfaction had worn off, the professor picked up his fork, pierced his artichoke heart, and exclaimed "Well! I knew, sooner or later, it would devolve to this! Now anyone's interpretation is correct. So much for universal truth!"

Needless to say, the rest of the evening was spent defending form and it wasn't until much later that I realized I was never asked about content.

Since that evening, my studies have been further enhanced by M. M. Bakhtin's theory of the novel as presented in *The Dialogic Imagination*. While it is true that Bakhtin was not a feminist—in fact, only three women writers (Ann Radcliffe, Mme. de Lafayette, and
Mme. de Scudery) are included in his work which covers the
development of the novel through the Victorian period--I find his
concept of dialogism illuminating to my own feminist interpretation
of literature and a justification (still defending form) for
autobiographical literary criticism. This is due to the fact that
language, at least Bakhtin's interpretation of language, and feminism
are similarly based on, as Diane Price Herndl states in "The Dilemmas
of a Feminine Dialogic":

- a multivoiced or polyphonic resistance to
  hierarchies and laughter at authority.
- Furthermore, in the hierarchies Bakhtin
  mentions, the novel always takes the woman's
  structural place as the excluded other:
  masculine/feminine, epic/novel, poetry/novel.

Therefore, both language and gender are "social phenomena" which are
ideologically saturated, existing alongside forces that would
simultaneously liberate and contain them. Bakhtin labels these
forces, insofar as they impinge on language, centripetal and
centrifugal. Where gender is concerned, they are known as patriarchy
and feminism.

If both these interpretations of feminism and Bakhtin are
correct, then these questions arise: How does the Bakhtinian theory
of language affect feminist literary criticism? How does a
Bakhtinian approach justify the autobiographical act? The answers to
these questions lie in a deeper understanding of Bakhtin's theory of the novel. In part, this thesis will explore, dialogically, that theory as well as the role of the feminist critic, the convergence of the personal moment and the public act of criticism, and the risks of such a moment to the graduate student.

Bakhtin compares and contrasts the dialogic language of the novel with that of the epic. The epic genre is associated with official language and a historic past. Therefore, epic language is understood to be monologic, a monologism created by the characteristics of the genre itself: a "national epic past" which is substituted in place of personal experience and free thought with absolute distance separating the epic world from reality (the author from the audience). According to this definition, traditional criticism, with its absence of personal experience and the subsequent distancing of critics from their intended audience, can also be defined as monologism.

The novel, however, is the only genre, according to Bakhtin, that continues to develop. Because the novel is more closely related to unofficial language, a "language of the living" (20), it reflects "more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding" (7). It is no coincidence, therefore, that the novel began to emerge with the rise of the comic genres, for "it is precisely laughter [low language] that destroys the epic" (Bakhtin 23). Language in the novel is dialogic, a "conversation": among the multiple voices of author, narrator, and dialogue; the various semiliterary (the letter, diary, etc.) and literary (moral,
philosophical, scientific, religious, etc.) forms; as well as between socially stratified levels of the same language (professional, colloquial, dialect). It is precisely this doublevoicedness of the novel that demands of the reader a recognition of the other, of "life and behavior of discourse in a contradictory and multi-linguaged world....The dialogic orientation of a word among other words (of all kinds and degrees of otherness) creates new and significant artistic potential in discourse..." (emphasis mine, Bakhtin 275).

Just as the monologic voice of epic poetry was used to control the language, traditional criticism is also an exercise of power. As Nelly Furman points out in Textual Feminism, the use of monologic criticism is an attempt to contain and control the dialogic language of the novel:

The literary criticism of the early twentieth century, especially, had power as its goal; it looked for the meaning in the text, sought closure, attempted definition....Seen in this way, literary criticism of the novel becomes a method of appropriating the [dialogic language] through power and denial. (Herndl 13)

If all acts of criticism seek to appropriate the dialogism of the novel, is it possible for feminist critics to avoid such a controlling role? I believe the answer is yes, and I believe Bakhtin again holds the key. As he describes in "Epic and the Novel," the monologic (controlling) language of the epic is destroyed by laughter, and,
specifically relevant to our discussion of autobiography and criticism, one of the components of the "serio-comic" genre is that it is "characterized by a deliberate and explicit autobiographical and memoirist approach" (emphasis mine, Bakhtin 27). It is this autobiographical moment, when the author and audience occupy the same plane, that surmounts the distance of monologic language. Bakhtin identifies these moments in the novel as tenuous, a "shifting of boundaries" and "border violations" (33), a theme recognized and explored by Diane P. Freedman in *An Alchemy of Genres*: "Every book, every reading, is laced and surrounded with circumstances worth considering, border crossings within the text as well as at its edges" (29). Freedman goes on to say that women's writing [and I would also suggest their reading], especially, experiences border crossings in an attempt "to challenge or escape the domineering voice(s) of the male (critical) establishments" (38). While I find it problematic to label the use of the personal moment as somehow "naturally" feminine, I do agree that "liberation from patriarchal values and practices must take place, if not begin, in language itself" (Freedman 20).

Therefore, I suggest, as a means of liberating the "dialogic" critic from the "monology" of criticism, the merging of theory and the autobiographical act. Coopting the traditional theory, placing it in dialogue with the experiential, will no longer silence the otherness of the novel, but will give voice to the experience and lives of women. Some feminists would reject the use of any traditional criticism in the exploration of new, more inclusive, forms. Using the example of
Marie Curie, who died from radiation sickness as a result of her work, Freedman urges women to reject traditional criticism and, in so doing, to deny its deadly power over them. My response to such a call is that I refuse to view theory and autobiography as either/or, proposing instead a hybrid theory which is inclusive, a theory of both/and. As bell hooks states, in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*:

feminist theorists...need to be conscientious about not supporting monolithic [masculine or feminine] notions of theory. We will need to continually assert the need for multiple theories emerging from diverse perspectives in a variety of styles. Often we simply passively accept this *false dichotomy* between the so called "theoretical" and that writing which appears to be more directly related to the experiential. (emphasis mine, 37)

Further, because, as Bakhtin states, monologic language resists change, re-thinking, or re-evaluating, and dialogic language naturally call for these behaviors, and, if one of the goals of feminist criticism is to bring about change, re-thinking, and re-evaluating, then the juxtaposition of traditional theory alongside autobiography would facilitate this goal.

This is not to say that there are not risks involved in adopting this hybrid theory, perhaps especially so for the graduate student.
One of the risks is most likely what Freedman fears: the perpetuation of domination. We must, therefore, carefully consider our actions when adopting traditional theory and identify the parts of that theory that would attempt to silence us. Once these are identified, through a dialogic discussion, we can then begin to use the power of the traditional in a new way. No longer, a "power over" which reinforces domination, dialogic theory can become a "power of," which reinforces choice. Secondly, with the use of autobiography, we risk our own feelings of security. Because "silence is often seen as the sexist 'right speech of womanhood'" the very act of speaking is threatening to women (hooks 6). Therefore, added to the initial danger of manipulating a language which strives to silence us is the intimidation of speaking personally. Will we be understood? Will we embarrass ourselves? our families? those we love?

I believe there are also specific risks for graduate level writing. Using the experiential, we all risk a loss of credibility. However, I believe this risk is much greater for the graduate student, a voice constantly struggling for credibility, than it is for the established writer, a situation placing that student in double jeopardy. Many of the feminist poet-critrics who serve as role models for graduate level experiential writing first established themselves through traditional theory. First, is it possible, then, for graduate students to begin their writing as Rich inspires us, in our own voices? In response to the potential danger of writing in this style because of its narrative difficulties, I believe graduate students
require mentoring from sensitive, feminist professors. Secondly, students risk failure. Of course, this is a risk for all people in all forms of writing. However, because of the tensions inherent in this form of criticism, I believe this risk to be greater for the graduate student. My own experience in adopting this form revealed specific problems when conflating the expository style of traditional criticism and the narrative style of autobiography. Exposition, which calls for directness of purpose and a straightforward thesis, often exists in conflict with narration, a style associated with slower development, an unfolding. This tension in the text results in a shifting of writing styles, accomplished, in my own experience, through considerably more revisions than traditional criticism requires. Because of the structure of the syllabus in a particular graduate level course, the graduate student who is unfamiliar with and unpracticed in combining these two styles may lack the time necessary to develop this skill.

There are several other factors which may also inhibit the student from writing autobiographically. First, if the material covered in the course ignores women's experience or, secondly, if the presentation of the material trivializes that experience, students may not risk using an approach which focuses on the lives of women. In this case, a personal style might be considered "wrong," lacking in "universal truth." Thirdly, with a consideration for the intended audience, students must carefully select, not only the content of their graduate papers, but the form as well. Students require a level of
comfort and safety, not only with the professor but with their peers, before placing themselves in the vulnerable position of exposing themselves through personal writing. I do believe, however, that with the increased presence of women graduate students and feminist professors in college faculty, this situation is improving, though very slowly. For example, I refer to Brenda Daly's unpublished paper, "I Stand Here Naked, or Best Dressed in Theory: On Feminist Re-Fashionings of Academic Discourse," in which she states that, as a graduate student, she would not risk writing in the autobiographical mode and, as a tenured professor, she still feels anxious about such an approach to criticism. Today, however, my own graduate writing includes a master's thesis with an autobiographical approach.

This brings me to the final hazard inherent in graduate-level autobiographical writing. As I submit my work for publication and for consideration in doctoral programs, my concern is that, similar to its reception at the dinner party, my work will be devalued based on form before the content of the work is ever considered. Yet I choose to write in this hybrid theory. Since all discourse is intentional, I must ask myself what are my own intentions in adopting such a style? My answer lies somewhere in the concept, again Bakhtin's, that all utterances anticipate a response:

Word[s] liv[e] in conversation...directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction.
Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue. (emphasis mine, 280)

Understanding "comes to fruition only in the response...one is impossible without the other" (Bakhtin, 282). So, I speak because I feel it is needed and because I want a response, a dialogue. And yet, I will not fully understand my words or my intentions until I hear that response. Well! It has finally devolved to this, has it?

My thesis as a whole investigates several issues. This chapter has examined, through the use of Bakhtinian theory, the autobiographical moment in literary criticism. In "The solace of separation," I apply an autobiographical reading to Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* in order to explore the use of space and the complexity of the mother/daughter relationship. Finally, "Life, death, and rebirth of a text" situates my reading of *The Mother's Recompense* within the context of its historical reception. By structuring my thesis in this manner, I am foregrounding the historicity of the autobiographical reading, realizing that my reading, although personal and experiential, is not ahistorical. That is to say, an autobiographical reading does not (cannot) exist outside of social construction. My reading of any text is naturally influenced and
shaped by my participation/position in a postmodern world as well as
my various social constructions of class, race, gender, etc.

Before I close this discussion (justification) of autobiographical
literary criticism, I must return to that dinner party, to the
distinguished professor who, if he had been wearing them, would have
placed his thumbs under his suspenders, leaned back and shaken his
head slowly in disbelief. Fortunately for that individual (and perhaps
for countless more), he had become so disillusioned with the
encroachment of feminism on literary analysis that he was
anticipating a change of direction in his career. He was currently
writing his dissertation in philosophy, a discipline with sense enough
to have universal truths.
THE SOLACE OF SEPARATION: FEMINIST THEORY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, EDITH WHARTON, AND ME

The lives and experiences of women are filled with empty spaces, and the writings by and about women reflect them. Recently, feminist critics such as Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Marianne Hirsch have enlightened us by reexamining and redefining these spaces. But what are the spaces, the gaps, in women's lives and women's writing, that these feminist critics have identified? Just as every woman is unique, the void and unvoiced in each woman's life will also be different. For me they include the ignored maternal subjective, the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship, and the survivor's perspective of the incestuous experience.

Significantly, I choose to compensate for the cultural spaces inherent in my gender socialization through the control of my physical space. I find this need to control physical space a common theme in the lives and writings of women. For example, the riveting scene for me in Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* is the moment when Kate Clephane discovers her daughter and her former lover locked in passionate embrace. This scene resonates with the silent and silenced subjects of women's lives: incest, the maternal subjective, and spatial definition and control.

--the orgasmic, incestuous moment...

All their faculties were absorbed in each other.

The young man's arms were around [Anne], her
cheek was against his. One of his hands reached about her shoulder and, making a cup for her chin, pressed her face closer. They were looking at the dress; but the curves of their lips, hardly detached, were like those of a fruit that has burst apart of its own ripeness....[Kate] felt the same embrace, felt the very texture of her lover's cheek against her own, burned with the heat of his palm as it clasped [her daughter's] chin to press her closer. (221)

--the complexities of the maternal subjective...

A dark fermentation boiled up into her brain; every thought and feeling was clogged with thick entangling memories...Jealous? Was she jealous of her daughter? Was she physically jealous? Was that the real secret of her repugnance, her instinctive revulsion? (221)

--the female need to control/define their space....

She knew only that she must fly from it, fly as far as she could from the setting of these last indelible impressions....She must put the world between them--the whole width of the world was not enough. (221-22)

As I began to read the extensive literature available on the silent and silenced spaces of women's lives, I reflected on the gaps in
my own life, both academic and personal. Edith Wharton's novel *The Mother's Recompense* exemplifies for me the interstices of women's relationships. In this paper I will first examine M. M. Bakhtin's theory of language in order to analyze how his concept of dialogism informs and enlightens a theoretical discussion of the maternal subjective, mother-daughter narratives, and incest in terms of spatial metaphors as signifiers of inter-subjective relationships. Through an autobiographical reading of *The Mother's Recompense*, I will attempt to interpret the gendered significance of space as signified in Wharton's text and as I experience it in my life and work.

An important strategy of my academic writing has been to situate myself. After Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," I thought it important (or, maybe I just liked hearing it) to let you know I had my own space. Echoes of this situational writing can be found in the writings of other feminist critics as well. In "Me and My Shadow," Jane Tompkins tells us where she is--"the birds outside my window...just myself as a person sitting here in stockinged feet, a little bit chilly because the windows are open, and thinking about going to the bathroom. But not going yet" (169). I have now reached a point in my life, however, where it is becoming increasingly difficult to define my space. Part of my family (a husband, two daughters, and two cats) live in Grinnell, a small town in Iowa; my son lives with his father in Bondurant, another, smaller town; and I divide my time between Grinnell and Ames, where I am attending graduate school, picking up my son every other weekend on my drive home. In a society
where more is better, I am living a rather malformed adaptation of
Woolf's dream. I not only have a room of my own, but I have acquired
two homes, with special interest in a third.

There are many adjustments to be made in such an arrangement,
especially since living out of suitcases can be fragmenting. Before I
continue, I should clarify that my family has been very supportive of
my efforts to complete a graduate degree and that I am fortunate in
that both my "spaces" are comfortable and homey. That is not to say
that this division, this parceling of my time and space, does not have
its stresses. It does. I could spend the rest of this paper discussing
the guilt associated with raising an eighteen- and a sixteen-year-old
in absentia; however, my purpose here is to discuss gaps, more
specifically the gap between my family and my research, my academic
self and all those other selves I am and am not.

The division I experience in my personal life, a division I have
reluctantly chosen, is also present in my academic life, a division I
have not questioned. My academic writing has a particular style, a
style developed as an undergraduate in the search for "the grade" and
refined as a graduate student in the search for the "authoritative
voice." I was fortunate as an undergraduate to be able to enroll in
creative writing courses as an outlet for my personal voice. So, while
I was writing analyses of the complexity of Portia's character in the
"Merchant of Venice," I was simultaneously developing the character
of a child molester for one of my short stories (the rewriting of a
personal experience). Both of my voices, the academic/authoritative
and the personal/experiential, had their outlet. But they were never integrated. Although Portia and Pecola, and Touchstone and Tea Cake, intrigued me as much as the characters I imagined for my short fiction, I would not (or could not) write about them in the same way.

The reason I am experiencing this separation of my academic and personal voice can be explained by M.M. Bakhtin's theory of language. According to Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*, all languages exist as heteroglots. With this definition, the context of an utterance is given primacy over the text itself. At any given moment, a series of conditions (social, chronological, spatial, etc) place internal and external pressure on utterances, insuring that a word uttered in a particular place and at a particular time will have a different meaning from the same word uttered in different places and at different times. Bakhtin calls these forces centripetal and centrifugal because they simultaneously strive to centralize and decentralize language. The novel (and my own short stories), Bakhtin argues, is a centrifugal force while criticism, an attempted controlling of language, is centripetal. As a result of the presence of these forces, the incongruities, spaces and gaps, of a culture's language are illuminated. In my own life, I find myself moving between these two forces, reading the decentralized word then writing about that word in an academic, centralized language. My language is further divided between my academic and my personal spaces.
My answer to this problem of division is to attempt what Bakhtin calls dialogism—in this instance, an attempt to fill the space between my theoretical/critical and personal/creative voices, to write myself a new place. In dialogic language "everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings," and no one stratification of language is privileged over another (Bakhtin 426). The result of dialogism is the reflection of the incongruities between languages. Perhaps this form of writing, then, is simply another attempt at controlling space, at creating a space of my own.

I turn my attention now to an analysis of spatial signifiers in Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*, specifically to the critical dissatisfaction with the ending of the novel. While others interpret the heroine as a martyr, I read her character as a maturing woman who achieves independence through the controlling of her personal space. I empathize with her choice to live apart from her daughter and former lover. Such empathy probably stems from the fact that I currently choose to live apart from my family. Perhaps a dialogic discussion of the various interpretations of the novel would, as Bakhtin predicts, open up a new space for understanding, a re-thinking of the text and a re-visioning, not only of Kate Clephane, but of all women who struggle, as I do, to move from victim to survivor.¹

¹I make a distinction here between dialogic and revisionary, between Bakhtin and Adrienne Rich. According to Rich, revision involves entering the text from a new
Because Bakhtin's understanding of language is so closely aligned with feminist theory, as in the concepts of otherness, hierarchies, and power/victimization, the act of placing the devalued personal voice alongside the powerful academic voice may reveal strengths in both. I intend, therefore, to discuss the struggle for voice/space in the novel, especially as that struggle exists for women (mothers and daughters) who are incest survivors, a theme present in the novel (and most of Wharton's other works), as well as in Wharton's and my own life. I propose that Wharton, in an attempt to imagine an alternative to the Freudian concept of the phallus, employs what Jessica Benjamin in The Bonds of Love calls a spatial metaphor, liberating the oppressed otherness of language and gender. Wharton's heroine comes finally to exist as Bakhtin's dialogic, free from the centrifugal forces of patriarchal language and space.

But what am I to do with those who say I cannot (must not) do this? With those who believe there is no place for the personal in academic criticism? Again, Tompkins' essay helped me find an answer. Throughout her essay, Tompkins develops tension in the text with the interjections that she is thinking about going to the bathroom but "not going yet." It is this tension that prompts readers perspective with an understanding of the cultural assumptions that both inform and limit us. Bakhtin's dialogism requires entering the text in search of conflicting cultural codes clothed in language. As a feminist, I would adopt Rich's revisionary stance in all critical reading whether or not I am employed in dialogic criticism.
like Nancy K. Miller to ask what this essay is about. "Is it about going
to the bathroom? Or is it about the conditions of critical authority?
Or are they the same question?" (Getting Personal 7). For me, this
confusion about authority and bodily functions began at an early age. I
was nearly six years old when the neighbor boy told me that I couldn't
go to the bathroom standing up and he could. This made no sense to
me. Of course I could, if I wanted to. And at that moment, with little
Johnny staring down at me from the other side of my own teeter-
totter, I really wanted to. So, I did. I jumped off the teeter-totter,
sending Johnny crashing to the ground, spread my legs and let go.
Johnny told me it didn't count. I had been too messy. But I was
determined that, with practice, someday I would be as good at it as he
was. Well, now Johnny owns one of the largest florist businesses in
Des Moines and I search for authority in academia instead of on the
playground. (Or are they the same thing?) So, for those who would
tell me I can't write in this genre and be taken seriously, my response
is, of course I can. Things may get a little messy, though--at least
until I have some practice.

I

A Personal Reading

Coming home is always hectic. I suffer from mothering
withdrawal. Like Kate Clephane, I have this schizophrenic fear that,
because of my absence, either the family will have fallen into
complete chaos or they will have gotten along just fine without me,
thank you very much. I'm still not sure which would be harder for me
to accept. The sun is shining today, and the bedroom has windows on two walls which let in the pasture. It's the middle of April and too cold to open up the house. But the sun is warm, and I fight off sleep. Wharton criticism is spread out on the peach coverlet. As I reread the ending of The Mother's Recompense for the fourth time, I suddenly think of Grandfather.

Grandpa was a crusty old man. He married Grandma when she was sixteen. He lost his right hand in a hunting accident. He took me skeet shooting. He was diabetic and bald. I loved him. One night my mother turned to my sister and me and told us that Grandpa was getting old. Sometimes, she explained, old men do things they shouldn't with little girls. If Grandpa ever did anything like that with either one of us, we were to tell her. My first thought was--How did she find out? Grandpa loved me in a special way, holding me on his lap on the front porch swing, his hand slipping under my blouse and rubbing the training bra I was so proud of. Somehow my mother had found out, and now he was going to get into trouble. Like the heroine of the novel, I waffled between the need for others to know and resolve this tension and my need to avoid 'sterile pain.' I had to be very careful. This was wrong and I couldn't imagine what would happen if anyone found out. I had to protect Grandpa from my mother, from that all powerful mother who knew things instinctually.

But why this reading? What in the text has stirred such powerful memories? How is my response to the novel affected by personal experience? Bear with me as I explore the questions raised
by my reading of the novel, questions this paper attempts to answer. In part, I have a strong affinity with Kate Clephane because I choose to exist separate from my daughters. I have come to realize that the process of my own individuation requires a bending, if not breaking, of the maternal bond. Similarly, I respond strongly to the novel's incest motif. True, one could argue that the ambiguous nature of incest in the novel hardly compares with the violation of Grandfather-granddaughter incest. And yet, the very violation of the limits of the incest taboo are so overpowering that, as a survivor, incest motifs raise internalized fears of re-engulfment by the perpetrator. Therefore, in reading this novel, I find myself pulled between insatiable desires--to either abandon or be subsumed by motherhood--to respond to incest with either the red eyes of Beatrice Cenci or the loving eyes of Anne Clephane.

---

2 Others, including some who have read this essay, might minimize the sexual abuse I describe by stating that my Grandfather's preoccupation with my bra is innocent of incestuous intent. In response, I use Ellen Bass and Laura Davis' definition of incest which does not require penile penetration for victimization to occur. In the words of the authors, "the severity of abuse should not be defined in terms of male genitals. Violation is determined by [the victim's] experience as a child....The precise physical acts are not always the most damaging aspects of abuse. Although forcible rape is physically excruciating to a small child, many kinds of sexual abuse are not physically painful. They do not leave visible scars" (21).
Finally, I respond strongly to the novel's resolution, to Kate's decision to return to Europe. You see, I also resolved the problem with my Grandfather, but at a great cost. Never again did I sit with Grandpa on the front porch swing. Instead, I took frequent walks to the drugstore uptown for a cherry coke and explored the railroad tracks that ran alongside the house. In the winter, I sat in the parlor with Grandma and mother where I learned to knit and crochet. More than once I heard Grandma comment on how ladylike I was becoming. I would never have traded my relationship with Grandpa for my skills at needlework. But knowing Grandpa was safe, knowing I was safe, knowing my mother was safe was recompense enough for all that separation. The crafts of women hold such sorrow for me.

II

Intervals/Interstices/Incest

(The place I am is my home in Ames. The house, which I share with an English professor, sits at the edge of a small woods; windows line the northwest wall. The property has a steep slope down to a creek, and the windows set the living room right in the treetops. But, unlike Tompkins, I'm not faced with "a floor to ceiling rectangle filled with green, with one red leaf" ("Me and My Shadow" 30). The winter has been unusually long. This is the last day of March, and it has been raining for three days. The weather channel predicts snow tomorrow. But, as I sit here thinking about Edith Wharton's The Mother's Recompense, I find I'm glad that the sky is overcast today.
Maybe I feel a little like Kate Clephane. The sun would be a distraction.)

The opening of *The Mother's Recompense* finds Kate Clephane distracted "by the slant of the Riviera sun across her bed" (3). Kate has taken up residence with a band of social outcasts, a group of gamblers, alcoholics, and people, mostly women, with something to hide. Kate's secret is the abandonment of her husband and infant daughter nearly twenty years before the start of the novel. Fleeing from what she considers an impossible situation, a controlling husband and an oppressive Victorian society, a society that conceals, Kate leaves New York with Hylton Davies. After their short, two-year affair, Kate remains in Europe. Her attempts to re-establish her relationship with her daughter are thwarted by her in-laws, her letters returned unopened.

Following the death of Kate's ex-husband and mother-in-law, Kate's now wealthy daughter, Anne, invites her mother to return to New York and live with her in the family home. The reunion is everything Kate could have hoped for. She not only re-experiences the joy of her daughter, but polite New York society avoids any reference to her sordid past. The mother-daughter reunion, however, is also complicated by many factors: living in the patriarchal house of her ex-husband, a house that recalls many painful memories; the unforeseen independence of Anne as a result of Kate's absence during her childhood; and, most importantly, Anne's engagement to her mother's former lover. Kate's first response to Anne's engagement is
to attempt to stop the wedding, a union Kate views as incestuous. Failing this, Kate accepts their marriage, refuses a marriage proposal of her own from the stuffy Fred Landers, and returns to the Riviera, maintaining contact with Anne and Fred through frequent letters.

It is this ending, this returning to France, that critics have made problematic for me. Unlike many who critique the novel, I find the ending satisfying, my satisfaction rooted in the need to control my space and my identity. (I am unsure where this need comes from--the pressures of the maternal role?--the result of an incestuous experience?) However, in his 1986 introduction to the republication of *The Mother's Recompense*, Louis Auchincloss finds fault with the novel's accessibility to the reader of today:

> The central problem for the reader of today--and it may well also have been the same for a reader in 1925--is that Kate is making too much of the circumstance. Her horror approaches the horror of Oedipus when he learns that he has married his mother. Kate, like Hamlet in T.S. Eliot's essay, "is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible because it is in excess of the facts as they appear." (ix)

Similarly, Marianne Hirsch, in *The Mother Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, criticizes Wharton for "fail[ing] to redefine the terms of the daughterly...text" (121). Hirsch interprets Kate's actions as "underscor[ing] the compulsory heterosexuality and
triangularity" of mother-daughter plots (121). As a "reader of today," I dismiss Auchincloss' criticism based on the fact that I did not struggle with Kate's reaction. Although I agree with Hirsch that Wharton fails to redefine the daughterly text, I understand Wharton to be foregrounding the maternal subjective, a move that Hirsch calls for. Cynthia Griffin Wolff believes that the ending *punishes* Kate by permanently exiling her for refusing Fred Lander's marriage proposal and a return to New York society. This interpretation, however, strips Kate of the power of choice. It is the ability finally to choose her own destiny that offers Kate, and me, comfort at the novel's conclusion.

Lev Raphael takes a different approach in *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame*. For Raphael, Kate's actions are determined by shame, a crippling emotion that leaves the mother with no alternatives. While Raphael does understand the ending to be a happy one, he finds little recompense of his own in that fact. "Wharton's happy ending does little to counteract the negative arc of the book" (52). While I agree that Kate's earlier actions were motivated by shame, I believe a marriage to Fred Landers, a man she did not truly love, to be a far more shameful choice. By contrast, my own interpretation finds a measure of agreement in Katherine Joslin's *Edith Wharton*. Joslin understands the ending as I do:

Kate Clephane's 'recompense' is an understanding of her 'desolation', her place in society as a woman outside the traditional
roles....She is not Mrs. John Clephane nor is she Mrs. Fred Landers; she is Kate Clephane. In her return to Europe, she reembraces her expatriate self. Wharton draws for us a portrait, not of a young lady, but of an aging woman, who comes to recognize and accept the delicate nature of her life in middle age. (127)

I view Kate's decision to live apart from the oppressive New York society, apart from her ex-lover, even apart from her potentially controlling daughter, as representative of her first completely independent action, her understanding of the complexity of the mother/daughter relationship, and her need to control her physical space. Perhaps my understanding of the novel requires the reader to be "older," a reader facing the delicate nature of her own middle age. Perhaps it harkens back to my own struggle with defining my space.

A spatial alternative, as mentioned above, to the "hegemony of the phallus as the sole embodiment of desire" is offered by Jessica Benjamin in The Bonds of Love (86). According to the traditional Freudian proposition, femininity is defined as not masculine, by what a woman lacks--the phallus. In this interpretation of gender identity, the penis symbolizes power and individuation, the only way to find subjectivity. However, Freud was unable to imagine an alternative female symbol of subjectivity. The feminine, instead, is represented by sacrificial motherhood. This emphasis on motherhood as sacrificial and passive results in the female loss of subjectivity.
While Freud failed to recognize the influence of culture on the development of gender roles, Benjamin proposes a cultural analysis of the phallus. In a society where mothers are the primary caretakers of children, the phallus comes to represent, to both sexes, the powerful outside world as well as a weapon against the powerful, idolized mother. Penis envy then becomes the desire of the woman to exist spatially in a public place, to be granted recognition and subjectivity. Benjamin's female alternative to the phallus is the "intersubjective model." She explains that the phallus, the "intrapsychic model," establishes difference between I and you, while the intersubjective model establishes recognition between and within. Benjamin's model, based on mutuality and recognition, is a spatial metaphor which counters Freud's symbol of the phallus, based on separateness and power:

The significance of the spatial metaphor for a woman is likely to be in just this discovery of her own, inner desire, without fear of impingement, intrusion, or violation....Certainly,

3Benjamin's intersubjective model is similar to Bakhtin's dialogism in that both recognize the influence of culture and depend on a recognition of other. As Benjamin states "intersubjective theory describes capacities that emerge in the interaction between self and others. [The self] sees its aloneness as a particular point in the spectrum of relationships rather than as the original 'natural' state of the individual" (Bonds of Love 20)
woman's desire to be known and to find her own inner [as well as public] space can be, and often is symbolically apprehended in terms of penetration. But it can also be expressed as the wish for an open space into which the interior self may emerge, like Venus from the sea.

(128-9)

Slowly, Kate, unlike thousands of traditional male heroes, comes to recognize the otherness of her daughter and, therefore, the need of each woman to determine her own space. Initially, the differentiation between mother and daughter is obscured. The mother in Kate admits to the fact that she still likes being "mothered." She envisions Anne as part of herself, "that other half of her life, the half she had dreamed of and never lived" (60). Kate is even willing to sacrifice her own existence for her relationship with her daughter. "To see Anne living [her life] would be almost the same as if it were her own" (60).

To be with Anne, to play the part of Anne's mother--the one part, she now saw, that fate had meant her for--that was what she wanted with all her starved and world-worn soul. To be the background, the atmosphere, of her daughter's life; to depend on Anne, to feel that Anne depended on her; it was the one perfect companionship she had ever known, the only
close tie unmarred by dissimulation and distrust. The mere restfulness of it had made her contracted soul expand as if it were sinking into a deep warm bath. (emphasis mine, 69)

The result of such a concept of motherhood is the denial of subjectivity, reducing Kate to a metaphysical state in which she is subsumed. When Kate finally accepts her daughter's and her own individuality, each woman can exist outside their relationship to each other, in a separate space. Where, previously, Kate's world revolved around the men in her life (John Clephane, Hylton Davies, Chris Fenno, Fred Landers) she now begins to desire her own place in that public world. No longer in a psychological place where she is defined by her role as wife or mother, as Joslin says, Kate comes to live fully in her individuality.

The moment of her liberation comes when Kate recognizes and rejects the monologic language/space, with all its repressive forces, of the father/husband. This repression is represented by the monologic language of the law and enacted through the return of Kate's letters, in which she pleads to see her daughter, by her husband's law firm. It is this monologic language that Kate is forced to appropriate by a daughter who places her in the father's role at her wedding:

"Your mother seems to think it's your uncle who ought to give you away."
"Not you, mother?" Kate Clephane caught the instant drop in the girl's voice. Underneath her radiant security, what suspicion, what dread, still lingered?
"I'm so stupid, dear; I hadn't realized it was the custom."
"Don't you want it to be?"
"I want what you want." Their thin-edged smiles seemed to cross like blades. (235)
Kate's discomfort with this role--the role of the father--and the language it represents, is related to her subsequent choice to live in Europe, among various peoples of various languages, a choice exemplifying her rejection of patriarchal language.\(^4\) Finally, in this dialogic space, Kate exists for her daughter, Fred Landers, and others, as language, her only representation being in the form of letters. Having declared her separateness from her daughter, her former lover, her potential lover, and the monologic language system they all employ, Kate creates her own distinct space, her own world, and, through epistolary language, encourages others to relate to her dialogically. Unlike the monologic language of the law, dialogic

\(^4\)An argument could be made here that Kate's associations in Europe represent the carnivalesque as defined by Bakhtin. Mrs. Plush, Mrs. Minity and Lord Charles, because of the various roles they play and secrets they keep, are representative of Bakhtin's mask of carnival.
language, based on the recognition of otherness, always anticipates a response. Kate's letters, a representation of dialogism, expect and receive responses.

The incest motif in the novel, a theme closely tied to the mother-daughter relationship, is also represented through spatial metaphor. Benjamin states that the spatial metaphor is frequently used when women "try to attain a sense of their sexual subjectivity":

For example, a woman who was beginning to detach herself from her enthrallment to a seductive father began to dream of rooms. She began to look forward to traveling alone, to the feeling of containment and freedom as she flew in an airplane, to being alone and anonymous in her hotel room. Here, she imagined, she would find a kind of aloneness that would allow her to look into herself. (128)

Obviously, the attainment of sexual subjectivity is further complicated, if not completely compromised, by an incestuous experience. Here, then, is another connection between Edith Wharton, Kate Clephane, and myself. All of us experienced the spatial violation of incest, whether actual or fantasy, and, in an attempt to "detach" ourselves from that experience and those memories, we anticipate and enjoy our moments alone: Edith Wharton in Ste. Claire-le-Chateau, a converted monastery on the Riviera; Kate Clephane in the Petit Palais; and me in my Grandmother's parlor, or walking uptown, or in
Ames, Iowa, anywhere except the front porch swing. For it is in these open spaces that women discover their "own, inner desire, without fear of impingement, intrusion, or violation" (Benjamin 128).

An acquaintance with a breadth of Wharton's work will most assuredly reveal the author's preoccupation with the incest theme. Perhaps the most famous of Wharton's incestuous writings is the "Beatrice Palmato" plot summary and "Unpublished Fragment." "Beatrice Palmato" outlines a story in which the father, left in charge of his young daughter because of the mother's mental instability, educates her, during which time a deep intimacy develops. At age 18, the daughter marries a man who is obviously her intellectual inferior. The father dies when Beatrice is twenty. After the birth of their own daughter, Beatrice displays an abnormal jealousy of her husband and daughter's relationship. During a moment of Epiphany, the husband comes to understand the incestuous relationship between Beatrice and her father. The story ends with Beatrice's suicide, followed by an intimate discussion between Beatrice's husband and the brother of Mr. Palmato.

5 Incest motifs can be found in The House of Mirth, Hudson River Bracketed, Summer, The Gods Arrive, and The Mother's Recompense. For a full discussion of the presence of this motif in these works see Gloria Erlich's The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton. Other critics who have also recognized and addressed this theme include Cynthia Griffin Wolff in Feast of Words and Adeline R. Tintner in Mothers, Daughters and Incest in the Late Novels of Edith Wharton.
Interestingly, there are several similarities between the "Beatrice Palmato" outline and Wharton's personal life. Like Beatrice, Wharton's father was instrumental in her education. Her father not only taught her to read and introduced her to literature, but Wharton began to look on him as the source of her own literary inspiration. Her father's library was open to her and, though her mother did not allow her the raciness of novels, she took advantage of the library's store of Elizabethan and classical literature. Her romanticized view of the patriarchal library occasioned her to write, "Whenever I try to recall my childhood it is in my father's library that it comes to life. I am squatting on the thick Turkey rug...dragging out book after book in a secret ecstasy of communion... There was in me a secret retreat where I wished no one to intrude" (Life and I 69-70). Wharton, like Beatrice, is twenty when her father dies. A second similarity is that both Wharton and Beatrice Palmato marry inferior men. It is well known that Wharton's friends were surprised by her union with Teddy. After a rocky start in which consummation of the marriage was delayed for several weeks, Edith and Teddy lived virtually celibate lives. Further, the name Beatrice Palmato is most probably an allusion to Beatrice Cenci, a sixteenth century Roman woman involved in a plot to murder her incestuous father. Red-eyed Beatrice Cenci, in fact, makes an appearance in The Mother's Recompense in the form

6In a fascinating side note, Beatrice Cenci and Edith Wharton's mothers were both named Lucretia.
of a classical portrait hanging above the double bed of Kate Clephane when she returns to New York.

While the "Beatrice Palmato" revolves around the incest theme, complicated by the similarities to both the Beatrice Cenci story and Wharton's own life, the "Unpublished Fragment" is an explicitly erotic depiction of father daughter incest, a depiction that portrays the daughter as fully sexualized and excited by the culmination of father-daughter intimacy.

But she hardly heard him, for the old swooning sweetness was creeping over her. As his hand stole higher she felt the secret bud of her body swelling, yearning, quivering hotly to burst into bloom....The sensation was so exquisite that she could have asked to have it indefinitely prolonged.... (Erlich 175)

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, who first discovered the "Beatrice Palmato" and "Unpublished Fragment" at the Bernicke Library at Yale University, dates these writings at 1919-20, just prior to the publication of The Mother's Recompense. Wolff goes on to maintain that both pieces should be interpreted as fiction. It would be useless to speculate whether or not Wharton herself was a victim of incest, an accusation that, at this point, could be neither proved nor disproved. Some critics read Wharton's incest themes, present in not only The Mother's Recompense but a variety of Wharton novels, as a demonstration of the author's own victimization. However, whether Wharton's incest
motifs are a result of her being a victim of actual incest or of the Victorian social constraints to repress sexuality, both her life and her work are emblazoned with what is today understood to be a pattern of behavior common to present day incest survivors.\(^7\)

Several of the eccentricities of Wharton's life including the repression of all sexual knowledge, her subsequent sexual abstinence, and a variety of psychosomatic illnesses can be explained by presuming the hypothesis that Edith, as a young girl, was the victim of an incestuous relationship. Wharton suffered from a pattern of illnesses common to incest survivors: phobias, mood swings, severe reactions to temperature changes, nausea, asthma, and anorexia. Wharton writes, in 1908, to her friend Sara Norton:

> For twelve years I seldom knew what it was to be, for more than an hour or two of the twenty-four, without an intense feeling of nausea, and such unutterable fatigue that when I got up I was always more tired than when I lay down. This form of neurasthenia consumed the best years of my youth, and left, in some sort, an irreparable shade on my life. (Lewis 139)

\(^7\)For a full discussion of the pattern of behavior common to present day incest survivors, especially as it pertains to the survivors' tendency to establish controlling relationships with men, see Ellen Bass and Laura Davis' *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse.*
Neurasthenia, a popular diagnosis for upper-class Victorian women, was thought to be the result of an over-exertion of energy, perhaps brought on by the sexual repressiveness of Victorian codes of conduct. It should be mentioned that neurasthenia was often cured by a profession. For example, Jane Addams suffered from this disease for eight years until she founded Hull House. Whether or not Wharton's disease was the direct result of an incestuous experience, as a highly intelligent and ambitious woman she would naturally suffer from the confusion presented by the juxtaposition of her literary self against the ideal of the refined Victorian woman.

While much of this discussion has focused on Wharton and her relationship with her father (a discussion that exemplifies Benjamin's interpretation of the phallus as symbolic of the outside world and penis envy as the daughter's desire of a place in that world), it is important to understand the complexities of the mother's role as well. Erlich addresses Wharton's complicated relationship with her mother. In her book, Erlich discusses the employment of nannies and their effects upon children in upper class New York society. While Erlich describes in detail the animosity between Wharton and her mother, she cannot be certain of its origin.

8Marianne Hirsch also discusses how the maternal role in The Mother's Recompense underscores the compulsory heterosexual paradigm, in The Mother Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism.
This exaggerated sense of guilt must have derived from the idea that she deserved punishment for some injury to her mother—perhaps by regarding Nanny Doyley as her psychological mother, perhaps by trying to become her father's sweetheart. The denial and sacrifice of her own sexuality for so many years suggest atonement for a strong oedipal rivalry with her mother. (125)

Erlich goes on to say that the presence (intrusion) of the nanny could have resulted in an unresolved oedipal phase, "making space in the child's psyche for unusually florid incestuous fantasies" (31). While I find theorizing about the importance and consequence of the nanny in Wharton's life fascinating, I find this type of conjecturing no less 'reaching' than to entertain the possibility of father-daughter incest. In fact, Erlich goes on to imagine just this possibility.

Erlich raises the possibility of father-daughter incest to explain Wharton's peculiar habit as a child to "make up." Wharton wrote, in *Life and I*, about her attempts to behave as other children. Bearing the mundane play of childhood for as long as she could, Wharton would find it necessary to retire to her mother's bedroom where, with selected books from her father's library, she would pace the floor, making up stories even before she could read.

And in another instant I would be shut up in her bedroom, & measuring the floor with rapid
strides, while I poured out...the accumulated floods of my pent-up eloquence. Oh, the exquisite relief of those moments of escape.

(12-13)

This need to have the mother witness, and perhaps resolve, the tension brought from the library strongly suggests an incestuous experience. It is also representative of the dialogic act. For Wharton, in an attempt to liberate herself from the controlling language of patriarchy, of the father's library, enacted these scenes of "making up" before she was able to read. She was able to juxtapose the hegemonic language of the father, represented in the books she carried, alongside the suppressed voice of the Victorian female child. (Similarly, in an attempt to liberate myself from the controlling language of patriarchy, I juxtapose the hegemonic language of criticism alongside the suppressed voice of personal experience.)

And so I am left with a montage, bits of Wharton's life--an intelligent, frustrated child, an erotic and aging author. I am left also with my frustration with the criticism of the ending of The Mother's Recompense in which Kate chooses to live in a separate place from her daughter. I admire Kate's choice of the solace of separation. But is mine a misreading? What have I missed? I gain some comfort from the fact that Wharton herself was frustrated by these same questions. Louis Auchincloss, in Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time, states that, with her later fiction, critics began to write about a "drop in
quality of Edith's fiction" (171). Wharton, concerned about their remarks, responds in a letter:

Thank you ever so fondly for taking the trouble to tell me why you like my book. Your liking it would be a great joy, but to know why is a subtle consolation for densities of incomprehension which were really beginning to discourage me. No one else has noticed "Desolation is a delicate thing" [the quotation on the title page] or understood that the key is there. The title causes great perplexity, but several reviewers think it means that the mother was "recompensed" by "the love of an honest man." One enthusiast thinks it has lifted me to the same height as Galsworthy, another that I am now equal to Scott Fitzgerald. And the Saturday Review of American Literature critic says I have missed my chance because the book "ought to have ended tragically." Ought to! You will wonder that the priestess of the life of reason should take such things to heart, and I wonder too. I never have minded before, but as my work reaches its close, I feel so sure that it is either nothing or far more than they
And I wonder a little desolately which.

(Lewis 483)

And so it is with my own reading. It is either nothing or far more. While others tell me I *Ought to* live and read in the spaces society has assigned for me, I find solace in the fact that separation, whether from my family or from other critics, is recompensed by the growth of reason in my own life. Up to this point, I feel neither the desolation nor the doubt that Wharton expresses, but I anticipate that, someday, I might.

III

Interstate 80, Near Newton, Iowa:
A Journey Toward The Integrated Voice

It's seventy minutes from Grinnell to Ames and I enjoy the time alone. My car is equipped with a tape deck, and I once listened to all of *Winesburg, Ohio* en commute. Sometimes I tune into Rush Limbaugh. (I teach a composition class on argumentative writing and it's good for me to listen to the opposing viewpoint.) The drive in December is especially long due to the cold weather and the early sunsets. I blame December for my passing interest in country music and the fact that I know all the lyrics to several Randy Travis songs. The car speeds along at 68 miles per hour, and sometimes I pass Colfax or Mitchellville without even realizing it. It wasn't always this easy. The first time I left I cried. Commuting is easier now, and, because it is, I don't get letters anymore. But, like Kate Clephane, I do miss the letters. Being so self-sufficient is lonely.
May is a lovely month. The sogginess of spring is over. The land is drier and a deeper green. I roll the car window down an inch or two and let the wind blow on my hair. On this particular drive I think about The Mother's Recompense and my Grandpa, about Kate Clephane and myself. I understand my reading now, my comfort in Kate's "desolation." This is the novel as I, too, would have written it, as I did write it in my own experience with my Grandfather, as I rewrite it now in my continuing re-examination of that and other relationships.

The concept of rewriting is present in the ending of The Mother's Recompense when Kate feels as though "she had ...simply turned back a chapter, and begun again at the top of the same dull page" (261). Aline, Kate's maid, then poses a relevant question--"What was the good of all the fuss if it was to end in this?" (261). The good of it is not the ending. The recompense is in the writing and the rewriting of it, in the control of space and language. As Kate considers it philosophically, the good of it is that "To begin with, it had been her own choice...and that in itself was a help" (emphasis mine 262). Desolation by choice, a privilege not often given to the incest victim, is a delicate thing. As delicate as the afghans and doilies in my hope chest.

The incest theme in The Mother's Recompense is, as Erlich defines it, oblique, "incest at one remove from technical actuality" (146). This helps to explain Auchincloss' remark that "Kate is making too much of the circumstance....the prospect of a sexual union between
Anne and Chris Fenno [is not] sufficiently revolting to cause Kate such trauma" (ix). Yet, I realize now that the incest theme does not simply lie in the relationship of these two characters. Kate and Anne both have desires for the other that border on the sexual. Further, the definition of the characters with whom Kate is involved is often vague --"Why, in the very act of thinking of her daughter had she suddenly strayed away into thinking of Chris?" (73). Anne and Chris are reciprocal characters in Kate's incest motif. The story opens on Kate's anticipation of a telegram from Chris Fenno begging her to "Take me back" (7). A telegram does arrive with a message offering reunion; however, instead of coming from the former lover, it comes from Anne. "I want you to come home at once."--and again--"I want you to come and live with me" (emphasis mine 10).

At the moment of reunion, Kate experiences her now adult daughter in a physical and sensual way:

She thirsted to have the girl to herself, where she could touch her hair, stroke her face, draw the gloves from her hands, kiss her over and over again, and little by little, from that tall black-swathed figure, disengage the round child's body she had so long continued to feel against her own. (30)

Later, after Anne's engagement to Chris Fenno, Kate walks in on the two young lovers embracing each other and responds with jealousy. I would suggest Kate's jealousy is as much for the (physical) love of
her daughter as it is for her lost lover. Anne is attracted to her mother, as well. Falling easily into the role of lover, Anne usurps the father's character by (re)giving her mother the family jewels for her coming out into New York society. With echoes of the father's manipulative love, Anne attaches a note instructing "Darling, these belong to you. Please wear some of them tonight..." (63).

Given the oedipal twist Wharton places on these characters, separation is the only option open to Kate Clephane, an option that Wharton also chose, and the only option I could imagine in my own life. After Wharton's divorce, the author developed a circle of friends not unlike the outcasts Kate Clephane befriended. Among these were Gaillard Lapsley, Howard Sturgis, Robert Norton and Percy Lubbock. All far younger than Wharton, the group revolved around her, and she spent her later years in Europe, fiercely independent yet flirting and being fussed over.

Perhaps Wharton, like Kate and myself, found solace in separation, in the control of our space. Kate Clephane had previously sought her identity by establishing relationships with men (husband, lovers, boyfriend) and, thereby, with what she believed she lacked (power, penis, personhood). Through separation and the establishment of her own space, Kate chooses to find her subjectivity not in what she lacks but, rather, in what she is. The Mother's Recompense is, perhaps, also a rewriting of Wharton's own incestuous experience (perceived or actual), an attempt to re-imagine her family relationships. In this way, Wharton writes a story where everyone
wins. Anne gets to have the lover-father, a desire directly expressed in the "Unpublished Fragment," in Wharton's feelings for her father, and in my own love for my Grandfather. Rewriting her life experience resolves Wharton's dilemma with incest, filling the gap between the "Beatrice Palmato" story line, the suicidal horror of the incest victim, and the "Unpublished Fragment," "the daughter's pleasure in bringing to climax a lifetime of paternal seduction" (Erlich 37). Kate is recompensed by the control of her life, her space, and her language, a control that is vital to the incest survivor (I imagine her walking uptown for a cherry coke), while Anne's recompense is the continued relationship with the incestuous parent (sitting on a front porch swing talking about skeet shooting). It also occurs to me, as I (re)write my own incest experience, the recompense for the separation from my grandfather was my knowledge of our safety. Similarly, Kate is recompensed with the knowledge of Anne's safety from "sterile pain."

IV

Shutting away in a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened...
(The Mother's Recompense 272)

Twice during my many journeys between my two homes, my two spaces, I have been surprised. At mile marker 153 of I-80, the ditch along the south side of the interstate slopes up, reaching toward the corn field on the other side of the fence. The ditch is blanketed with prairie grass native to Iowa which revolves around the color wheel of nature's seasons. In the spring the slope is chartreuse, the color of
Easter grass. By the fourth of July, it has darkened to an emerald green. August turns the ditch to a burnished red, and, by November, it is the color of wheat. The first surprise was in December. The snow-covered slope was white but not without color for, in the middle of this grassy embankment, there stands a solitary pine tree exquisitely shaped. It was a week before Christmas, and the tree stood fully decorated for the holiday. Complete with red and silver garlands, ornate bulbs, and wrapped gifts nestled beneath its lowest branches, the tree rose above the traffic. There are no structures built close to this spot, no houses or businesses, and I am convinced that the tree was decorated just for me. The hair rose on the back of my neck as I thought, perhaps, I was the only one who saw it.

The second surprise came this spring as I first began writing this paper. Easter was a week away, and, as I drove the seventy miles between Grinnell and Ames, I again noticed the tree. This time it was covered with brightly colored Easter eggs hanging from silver threads. Did anyone else see it? If, as I imagine, I am the only person to notice this solitary tree growing on this strip of pasture, the surprise comes from such a private revelation in such a public space--the same surprise I feel in the autobiographical moment of an academic essay. Therefore, if I am not completely comfortable in the restrictions of my respective spaces and voices, I find solace in the fact that, sometimes, when travelling between them, there is joy in the open spaces of the journey.
LIFE, DEATH, AND REBIRTH OF THE MATERNAL TEXT:  
A HISTORY OF THE MOTHER'S RECOMPENSE

It is now my intent to situate my autobiographical response to *The Mother's Recompense* within the broader historical reception of the novel as well as within the historical reception of maternal texts. An overview of the critical reception of Edith Wharton's works reveals five separate phases—phases which have direct bearing on the interpretation of the maternal subjective. According to Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret P. Murray in *Edith Wharton: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography*, these phases can be identified chronologically as: (1) reception of the early works, prior to the publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905; (2) the high point of her literary career, during the years 1905-1920, when she was one of America's leading authors; (3) from 1920-1937 when she was still highly popular and given the title of the *Grande Dame* of American Letters, yet beginning to be viewed as old-fashioned and outdated; (4) the years 1937-1975 when almost no critical discussion of her works was written; and (5) 1975 - present which has seen a proliferation of Wharton criticism, especially psychological and feminist studies (xxvi-xxvii).

In and of themselves, these broad categories are interesting to Wharton scholars. However, I believe a more focused discussion of the history of mother-daughter plots will reveal how critics have historically evaluated the maternal subjective. Therefore, I will
focus upon the history of the mother-daughter plot within the context of its reception as revealed by the historical reception of *The Mother's Recompense*.

Traditionally, mother-child narratives have silenced the mother, giving the child's voice subjectivity while objectifying the maternal. Denying the maternal subjective is, for example, necessary for a "successful" transition into adulthood and the perpetuation of the traditional heterosexual paradigm. However, as Marianne Hirsch explains in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, this denial is often problematized by female and feminist narrators.

Women write within literary conventions that define the feminine only in relation to the masculine, as object or obstacle. Female plots, as many feminist critics have demonstrated, act out the frustrations engendered by these limited possibilities and attempt to subvert the constraint of dominant patterns by means of various 'emancipatory strategies.' (8)

Hirsch identifies and historicizes these emancipatory strategies: in nineteenth century plots the heroine fantasizes her singularity by "disidentif[y]ing from the fate of other women, especially mothers;" during the modernist period this desire is replaced by the heroine's artistic abilities and her affiliation with both male and female role models; and, finally, post-modernist plots revolve around the narrator's complex "multiple relational identity" (10).
An application of this narratological history to *The Mother's Recompense* reveals that Wharton—a daughter of the Victorian era, a writer of the modernist period, and a visionary—crosses the boundaries that Hirsch defines. It may be that maternal narratology is more complex than Hirsch imagines. This boundary crossing is probably due, in part, to the fact that Wharton wrote during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, from the romantic to the modernist period. True to the nineteenth century form of mother-daughter narrative strategies, Kate Clephane disidentifies from the fate of other women from her social class when she leaves New York with Hylton Davies. This disidentification is further magnified by the fact that she similarly rejects motherhood by abandoning her daughter, Anne. However, Wharton also reflects modernist strategies by developing Anne into an independent woman with artistic ambitions, allowing her the privileged autonomous space of the art studio and a mixture of male and female relationships and role models. Finally, Wharton also utilizes postmodernist strategies when, as stated above, she ludically complicates and reimagines the Oedipal triangle, making mother and daughter reciprocal objects of desire.

*The Mother's Recompense* was first published in 1925, a period of transition in American culture, in Wharton's career, and in American critical practice. For example, beginning in 1880 and continuing through the 1920s, society witnessed the emergence of the New Woman as an alternative to the Cult of True Womanhood and the
doctrine of separate spheres. New Women were characterized by their rejection of motherhood and marriage. In this way, the label New Woman not only represents Kate Clephane and her choice to leave her daughter and husband, but it illustrates the female modernist narrative strategies as defined by Hirsch.

It would seem that the appearance of New Women under progressive reform represented a strong wave of feminism. However, in "The Social Enforcement of Heterosexuality and Lesbian Resistance in the 1920s," Lisa Duggan states:

The 1920s was a period of backlash against feminism and the Left in American history. It followed decades of profound structural change and ideological ferment during which the economic relations of industrial capitalism and the gender relations of the patriarchal family had been seriously challenged. During the 1920s, these challenges were quieted. Capitalism and patriarchy were modified but stabilized. (76)

One such stabilizing factor used to halt the progress of feminism was sexology. S. Weir Mitchell, an American sexologist influenced by the work of the Viennese neurologist Krafft-Ebing and physician to Edith

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9For a fuller discussion of the New Woman, see Smith-Rosenberg's "The New Woman as Androgyne" in Disorderly Conduct.
Wharton, administered warnings about the physical dangers of education to women's bodies.

The nervous force, so necessary at puberty for the establishment of the menstrual function, is wasted on what may be compared as trifles to perfect health, for what use are they without health? The poor sufferer only adds another to the great army of neurasthenics and sexual incompetents, which furnish neurologists and gynecologists with so much of their material.... Bright eyes have been dulled by the brain-fag and sweet temper transformed into irritability, crossness and hysteria, while the womanhood of the land is deteriorating physically. She may be highly cultured and accomplished and shine in society, but her future husband will discover too late that he has married a large outfit of headaches, backaches and spine aches, instead of a woman fitter to take up the duties of life. (qtd in Disorderly Conduct 259).

The debilitating disease Mitchell describes was known as neurasthenia. Physicians treated this malady with 'rest' cures for women, reinforcing their infantilization and isolation, whereas they used 'exercise' cures for men, which required rugged outdoor sports and other public activity (Lutz 20). In other words, the cure for
neurasthenia was the reinforcement of gender specific roles modeled after the doctrine of separate spheres.

It was during this time as well that the New Criticism of T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards in England had begun to compete with genteel criticism in the United States.\(^{10}\) Genteel criticism's necessary presentation of sympathetic women characters is crucial when considering the historically negative reception of a work such as *The Mother's Recompense* in which the "hero" of the story is an unsympathetic female. Because of the genteel tradition's demand that women writers present sympathetic female characters, Wharton's fiction, especially *The Mother's Recompense*, fails.

This statement raises the following questions: Was genteel criticism open to plots depicting female subjectivities, especially the maternal? Could novels succeed, indeed could they be accepted, if they centered on the frustrations of women lives, or, given the superficiality of genteel criticism, frustrations at all? In "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," Nina Baym claims that "stories of female frustration are not perceived as commenting on, or containing, the essence of our culture," with the result that they are absent from the canon (74-75). It could also be added that, given the devalued

\(^{10}\)Genteel criticism can be identified in several ways: first, by the focus on establishing a connection between literary figures; second, by the presence of seemingly trivial biographical facts; and third, by the sympathetic presentation of female characters, especially those by women authors.
status of women's work, maternal narratives would be devalued as well.

It was during this backlash against feminism that *The Mother's Recompense* was first published. While it is true that Wharton was born and came to womanhood in the Victorian period, she was also a product of the rise, and subsequent containment, of American feminism. Her novels and her life reflect the tenuousness of the times as expressed in the contemporary debate about what it meant to be a woman in modernity. It is true that, ideologically, as Tom Lutz states in *American Nervousness*, “Wharton was never a New Woman, and she remained a ‘lady’ until the end of her life....She held to her ideas about civilized living until her death.” However, by choosing writing as a career and divorcing Teddy, Wharton rejected the traditional female role and lived the economically independent life of a New Woman which her female protagonists, Kate Clephane excluded, are often denied (232).

Another critical approach to *The Mother's Recompense* during the late 1920s was heavily influenced by New Criticism.¹¹ A major flaw of the novel, according to many New Critics, is the fact that the "hero--the labeling of the chief male person--is decidedly a cad"

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¹¹As defined in Vincent Leitch's *American Literary Criticism*, New Criticism is concerned with ahistoricizing and depoliticizing texts. This requires close readings which focus on the text's structural and rhetorical devices. Further, New Criticism privileges form, theme, irony, satire, etc.
(qtd. in Tuttleton, Lauer, & Murray, 399). Here critics refer to Chris Fenno as the novel's hero, apparently unable to imagine Kate Clephane, a woman, as the protagonist. According to New Critical interpretation, the conventions of tragedy, as set forth by Aristotle, are violated by Edith Wharton's plot. Given New Criticism's parameters, contemporary critics (and those who, for the next four decades, followed in their footsteps) were unable to discuss the maternal subjective and the mother-daughter plot. The crux of the contemporary reviews focuses on Kate's relationship with Chris and her subsequent refusal to marry Fred Landers while little or no mention is made of Kate and Anne's relationship. When it is discussed, the mother-daughter relationship is judged abnormal and obsessive.

A reading of these New Critical reviews also raises questions: Did New Criticism allow for depictions of female subjectivity? That is, under Aristotle's definition of tragedy, is a text which is not centered around a male character doomed for failure? When you consider that, until the 1950s, New Criticism was the approach du jour, and also that, during this same time, texts by and about women were not valued, the answer is, evidently, yes. Under this rubric, texts which express the maternal subjective and explore mother-daughter relationships would necessarily be misread.
The Fruition and Failures of Feminist Reception

The 1970s saw a proliferation of critical approaches. Under the influence of Jacques Derrida, American deconstructionists such as Harold Bloom began to critique New Criticism. Similarly, following the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, feminist criticism began to question American literature's tradition of valuing the male-centered, male-experienced text over female-centered, female experienced texts. Further, leftist-influenced critics began questioning the very concept of canon and the critical theory that helped to produce it. The uncertainty that arose from these truly new critical approaches allowed for new discussion of canonized texts as well as discussion of previously devalued texts which centered on the work and experiences of women. Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* was one such work.12

R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis' biography, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, previously a major work for understanding Wharton's life, is criticized by some feminists for not going far enough in connecting the effect of many private details of Wharton's life directly to her work. Cynthia Griffin Wolff's *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* does just that. Wolff's book, using Erickson's model of human development, is a major Wharton biography written from a

12 It should be noted that not all of the credit for the renewed interest in Wharton's fiction can be attributed to movements in American criticism. The unsealing, in 1969, of the author's papers at Yale also contributed to this interest.
psychological/feminist stance. Wolff believes that Wharton suffered maternal rejection, was emotionally starved as a child, and battled major psychosexual trauma. According to Wolff, Wharton's writings became an avenue for the healing of these traumas and are also valuable as an insight into the lives of women in Wharton's contemporary society. Insofar as The Mother's Recompense is concerned, Wolff believes, as stated earlier, that the ending punishes Kate by permanently exiling her for refusing to conform to the roles of mother, wife, and member of Old New York society. However, this interpretation is problematized when one considers that some feminists allow women the possibility of choosing, as Kate does, to live outside oppressive roles and societies. Further, if we apply Hirsch's narratological history of mother-daughter plots, we can see that Wharton does not situate herself solely in the character of Kate Clephane. Instead, the author works through her earlier childhood traumas by simultaneously situating herself within the characters of Kate and Anne, existing as both mother and daughter.13

Works like Wolff's A Feast of Words established a place for the writings of women in literary criticism. The earlier critical

13This is not to say that the maternal and daughterly subjective are treated equally. Wharton preferences the maternal subjective throughout the novel, an innovative move Hirsch calls for. However, a fuller understanding of the novel is obtained when the complexities of the mother-daughter plot are foregrounded than when either the maternal or the daughterly narrative is privileged.
discussion of the 1970s allowed for, in the 1980s, an expansion of the critical discourse surrounding texts like *The Mother's Recompense*. No longer confined to the narrow discussion of whether or not women's texts are valuable, the 1980s saw a flowering of topics and themes relevant to women's writings. For example, the 80s produced twelve reviews of *The Mother's Recompense*, covering such topics as mother/daughter relationships, the marriage theme, representations of art in the writings of women, as well as a feminist-Marxist and a feminist-myth approach. Feminist criticism, alone or in combination with other critical approaches, allowed for subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, differences in the critical discussion of texts.

Elizabeth Ammons's *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* is an example of a Marxist-feminist interpretation of the influences of patriarchal economics on women. In response to these influences, Ammons argues, Wharton developed a mystic maternalism. For example, Ammons traces mythic and fairy tale patterns of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White in Wharton's fiction. In her very short and

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14For example, Louise Barnett's "American Novelists and the Portrait of Beatrice Cenci" examines the representation of art in fiction. Barnett compares the representation of the Cenci portrait in *The Mother's Recompense* with Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* and Melville's *Pierre*, recognizing that, in the male texts, the portrait is romanticized while, in a femlae text, it represents Mr. Clephane's inability to understand women in his society.
highly critical discussion of *The Mother's Recompense*. Ammons finds problems with the novel's ending, just as critics do earlier in the century. Ammons believes that, while Wharton is sympathetic to Kate Clephane, the author is unable to forgive a mother who rejects her maternal role. Therefore, Ammons believes, Kate is forced to suffer eternally for abandoning her daughter. One explanation for such critical feminist interpretation is the political nature inherent in feminism. That is to say, some forms of feminist criticism seem to demand particular responses to patriarchy as a means of furthering the feminist agenda.

Annette Zilversmit and Marianne Hirsch both published psychological discussions of *The Mother's Recompense* which focus on the maternal. Zilversmit's Ph.D. dissertation, "Mothers and Daughters: The Heroines in the Novels of Edith Wharton," critiques the internal motives of Wharton's female characters, claiming the heroines are victims of impoverished childhoods. Hirsch, on the other hand, in "The Darkest Plots: Narration and Compulsory Heterosexuality, Freud/Horney/Woolf/Colette/Wharton," criticizes Wharton for "fail[ing] to redefine the terms of the daughterly...text" (121). Hirsch sees compulsory heterosexuality and triangularity as submerged plots in women's writings. As such, women's narratives perpetuate the Oedipal paradigm and resituate women as "objects in the economy of male desire" (21). Giving her own rereading of both the Oedipus story and Freud's family romance, Hirsch believes that repression of the maternal narrative continues today. Nina Baym picks up on Hirsch's
point when she states that current American theory excludes "stories about universals, aspects of experience common to people in a variety of times and places--mutability, mortality, love, childhood, family, betrayal, loss [and, I would add, motherhood] ("Melodramas" 7).

The mother/daughter theme is also foregrounded in two essays by Adeline Tintner: "Mothers, Daughters and Incest in the Late Novels of Edith Wharton" and "Mothers vs. Daughters in the fiction of Edith Wharton." In the first, Tintner claims that the strained relationships between mothers and daughters in Wharton's later fiction is a representation of the struggle for the father. Tintner understands the presence of this theme as symbolic of the changing roles in the modern American family. In her second essay, Tintner claims that Wharton's poor relationship with her own mother, as well as an incestuous relationship with her father, resulted in Wharton's inability to write sympathetic maternal characters.15

The 1990s has so far produced five critical essays regarding The Mother's Recompense. Susan Goodman's Edith Wharton's Women: Friends & Rivals uses biographical information from Wharton's life, as well as a psychological approach, to respond to Ammons and Zilversmit's claim that the author portrayed isolated and competitive female characters. Goodman disagrees with this interpretation, arguing instead that Wharton's heroines attempt to define themselves

15Further, Tintner believes Wharton's depiction of motherhood was greatly influenced by Henry James, who regularly created passive maternal characters.
in relationship to other women. Goodman's assessment of The Mother's Recompense. "Edith Wharton's Recompense," focuses on the same-sex bond between daughter Anne and mother Kate, a focus not allowed by earlier formalist interpretations that insisted upon a male hero as protagonist or by earlier feminist interpretations that insisted upon a specific feminist agenda. In Goodman's analysis, Kate's struggle is the conflict between defining herself as a mother and as a woman.

Lev Raphael takes a different approach in Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame, examining what he believes to be a long neglected area--the effect of shame on Edith Wharton's life and writings. Using Silvan Tomkins's affect theory of psychology, Raphael believes Wharton's neglected fiction to be far stronger than previous critics have allowed. Affect theory is useful in explaining Wharton's submissive female characters, according to Raphael who states,

My aim is not to prove that shame is central to every single piece of fiction Wharton wrote, but rather to demonstrate that in certain cases the failure to recognize the centrality of shame has led to inappropriate evaluations and mistaken interpretations of a number of Wharton's novels and novellas. (ix)

For Raphael, Kate's actions are determined by shame, a crippling emotion that leaves the mother with no alternatives, and an understanding of this allows Raphael to interpret the ending of The Mother's Recompense as a
happy one. However, Raphael fails to foreground the maternal subjective in his interpretation, to determine the source of Kate's shame. Feminists might argue that Kate's shame is an offshoot of the devaluation of--or the shaming--society places on the maternal.


This exaggerated sense of guilt must have derived from the idea that she deserved punishment for some injury to her mother--perhaps by regarding Nanny Doyley as her psychological mother, perhaps by trying to become her father's sweetheart. The denial and sacrifice of her own sexuality for so many years suggest atonement for a strong oedipal rivalry with her mother. (125)

Erlich states that the employment of Nanny Doyley, Wharton's mother figure, could have resulted in a splitting of the parental figure--psychological/biological mother--resulting in an "exaggerated sense of guilt" (125). Erlich examines a variety of Wharton's texts and posits that the author's writing is permeated with the anxiety of a rejected child; surrogate mothering, for Wharton, was filled with a sense of loss.
In summary, an overview of the reception of Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* raises many questions. Prior to 1970, the dominant criticisms did not allow for discussion of female-centered texts, especially if the character was an unsympathetic one. Genteel criticism called for a particular type of heroine and subject matter. New Criticism, on the other hand, valued the male "hero" over any female subjective, relegating much of women's writings to popular, non-canonical status. As a result, women's experiences, including the maternal, were open to misinterpretation and harsh criticisms. Only with the advent in the 1970s of different critical approaches, specifically feminist criticism, were controversial texts such as *The Mother's Recompense* granted their proper place in the American literary discourse. Or were they?

Feminists today are still troubled by the ending of *The Mother's Recompense*, preferring a more positive portrayal of women in order to further their own political agenda. With shades of genteel criticism, though for very different purposes, feminist critics also devalue this text. Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy, in *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*, recognize this feminist problematic with maternal texts.

Feminists sometimes have used the universal experience of daughterhood as the basis of a critique of patriarchally defined motherhood, with the feminist daughter analyzing the social conditions which must change if motherhood is
to be redefined. However, not all daughter-centric accounts of mothering move through the daughter's experience to the mother's...many remain uninterested in the mother's subjectivity. Why? (2)

Marianne Hirsch, according to Daly and Reddy, gives four answers. Four areas of avoidance and discomfort with the maternal emerge with particular force in feminist rhetoric. First, the perception that motherhood remains a patriarchal construction....Second, feminist writings are often characterized by a discomfort with the vulnerability and lack of control that are attributed to, and certainly are elements of maternity....Third, Elizabeth V. Spelman has identified 'somatophobia'-the fear of and discomfort with the body-as a pervasive discomfort among women and within feminism. Nothing entangles women more firmly in their bodies than pregnancy, birth, lactation, miscarriage, or the inability to conceive....Fourth, the separation between feminist discourse and maternal discourse can be attributed to feminism's complicated
ambivalence about power, authority, and...anger.

(165-66)

Moreover, Baym’s “The Madwoman and Her Languages” posits that “literary theories [and I would include feminist theories as well] are designed to constrain what may allowably be said or discovered” about or in a text (emphasis mine, 199). Further she states, “we never read American literature directly or freely but always through the perspective allowed by theories.” It was, as I explained in the first chapter, an attempt to avoid such a "constrained" reading that prompted me to develop my personal reading of the text before examining its historical reception. Theories account for the inclusion and exclusion of texts in anthologies, and theories account for the way we read them” (“Melodramas”, 3). Existing theories of literature have historically devalued women’s texts and/or women’s experience, including the maternal experience. Because of the controversy surrounding the ending of The Mother's Recompense, I believe this text has not been able to exist outside the criticism used to evaluate it. Indeed, I would ask, can any text? Finally, until a theory is developed which allows for the "un-heroic" female subjective as well as the failed maternal, this text will not receive the value it is due.
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**1930s**


**1940s**


**1950s**


1960s


1970s


1980s


1990s


