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"The Wound and the Voiceless: The Insidious Trauma of Father-Daughter Incest in Six American Texts"

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The Wound and the Voiceless:
The Insidious Trauma of Father-Daughter Incest in Six American Texts

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Dedication

To Dave: For All the Favors

(Otherwise I’d run out of room thanking you for everything you’ve done for me these past 6 years. And I think we both agree that the dissertation is long enough!)
Acknowledgements

As Simon & Garfunkel once said “I have my books and my poetry to protect me,” but I was certainly no rock or island in the writing of this project. My committee members and their writings have informed this dissertation, and I hope they see the traces of their work here. Of course, I assume responsibility for mistakes. To Dr. Hirsh: for taking on this project so late and turning it around and making it happen. You were the one who told me that I can criticize patriarchy and, more importantly, that I should, as you gave me the confidence to do so. I thank you for your dedication and for making me a better thinker and writer. Your response in JAC helped me understand trauma theory a little bit better and your radical feminist views are inspiring. To Dr. Lemons: for your courageous words in Womanist Forefathers and Black Male Outsider and your encouraging emails that seemed to come at just the right time. To Dr. Grewal: for your beautifully written study of Morrison’s novels that made me revisit the character of Soaphead Church. And to Dr. Runge: your book on gender and language in eighteenth-century British literary criticism showed me that official forms of power belonging first and foremost to the white middle-class male subject is unfortunately nothing new. I also thank you for your support in seeing me to the end.

I wish to thank Dave, my parents, Sarah in Uganda, Mike, Logan, my students, and those in the ILL Department for helping me bring this dissertation to fruition. And, last but certainly not least, I acknowledge those victims of father-daughter incest.
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Abstract

Cathy Caruth’s pioneering study of trauma and the posttraumatic forges a connection between the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the literary as such. Since trauma defies linguistic processing, she explains, the language used to describe it will always be figural. For this reason Caruth privileges imaginative literature, with its highly mediated nature, as a means of representing the otherwise “unclaimed” experience of trauma. Her influential reflections inform a crucial direction within trauma studies: the search for a narrative voice that articulates trauma effectively.

But how should we think about trauma that is not a singular “event” but a chronic occurrence? Over the last twenty years trauma scholarship has explored how trauma outstrips discursive and representational resources, but has only begun to address the ways gender, race, and class must complicate our understanding of the posttraumatic. I argue that in order to frame an adequate approach to the posttraumatic, we must take account of the cultural, political, and social matrix of trauma. The feminist psychotherapist Maria Root has developed an idea that she calls “insidious trauma” to refer to the cumulative degradation directed toward individuals whose identities, such as gender, color, and class, differ from what is valued by those in power. Though not always blatant or violent, these effects threaten the basic well being of the person who suffers them. Root’s conceptualization provides a useful framework for understanding certain
long-term consequences of the institutionalized sexism, racism, and classism that systematically denigrate the self worth of the socially othered who are rendered voiceless.

Where Caruth privileges literary representations of the traumatic, I explore how literature can also be a privileged site for the articulation of insidious trauma. My study addresses literary representations of father-daughter incest and the complex trauma associated with it, showing how—in very different ways—six works of modern American literature compel us to confront the traumatogenic nature of social oppression, especially that which is endemic to the structure of the heteropatriarchal family and American racism and classism.

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night* ambivalently exposes the gendered politics of psychological trauma, particularly the conspiracy of silence perpetuated by a psychiatric culture that revictimizes the female victim of incest. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* uses a story of paternal incest to work through the trauma of racism, challenging stereotypes of black masculinity even as it reinscribes patriarchal phallocentrism. Referencing Ellison’s depiction of father-daughter incest, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* marks a watershed in the inscription of incest narratives as it is written mostly from the perspective of what I call a “could-be” victim of incest. Morrison includes the perspective of the father while foregrounding the experience of the daughter, exposing child abuse as an extensive social and political problem ultimately supported by imperialist ideals.

Enabled by Morrison, Dorothy Allison’s semiautobiographical *Bastard Out of Carolina* is narrated by a young “white trash” woman who shares her story of sexual violation in defiance of that culture’s patriarchal structure. Conforming to certain class
stereotypes of father-daughter incest, *Bastard Out of Carolina* escaped the hostile backlash provoked by Kathryn Harrison’s memoir, *The Kiss*, whose critical reception suggests that, even while allowing some discussion of incest, mainstream culture continued to collude in its silencing within the context of the white middle-class. Finally, I revisit a particularly infamous literary narrative of father-daughter incest, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, but in terms of the feminist appropriation of Nabokov effected in Azar Nafisi’s memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Problematically downplaying the sexual abuse of Lolita, Nafisi appropriates Nabokov’s work to bear witness to the patriarchal subjugation of women in her home country, the Islamic Republic of Iran.
Chapter I—Introduction: The Wound and the Voiceless

We are beginning to understand that rape, battery, and incest are human rights violations; they are political crimes in the same sense that lynching is a political crime, that is, they serve to perpetuate an unjust social order through terror. Judith Herman, “Crime and Memory” (136-37)

In his chapter on trauma studies in History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory, Dominick LaCapra calls attention to the politico-ethical stakes involved in formulating an approach to the study of psychological trauma and the posttraumatic. One of the biggest challenges, he argues, is to develop a method that contextualizes trauma within a social and political framework. In recent years feminist theorists and psychotherapists have been especially attentive to the traumatic effects of oppression on women as a social group in a heteropatriarchal society saturated with sexism, racism, and classism. Challenging the definition of trauma, these feminists have asserted that trauma is well within the range of female human experience, and that in addition to being intergenerational (passed down from one generation to the next through stories or photographs, for example, in which the children or grandchildren of trauma victims may exhibit traumatic symptoms even though they never experienced the traumatic event firsthand), trauma can also be spread laterally through the mechanism of “insidious trauma.” Developed by the feminist therapist Maria Root, the idea of “insidious trauma” refers to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that, although not always blatantly violent, threaten the well being of the person who suffers them.
“Insidious trauma” provides a useful framework for understanding the long-term consequences of many types of institutionalized sexism, racism, and classism. Questioning the social structures that perpetuate victimization, this dissertation will explore literary representations of the insidious trauma related to father-daughter incest. Much of my discussion in this introduction is devoted to the evolving understanding of trauma in the work of clinicians and cultural theorists. I will be centrally concerned with how the study of twentieth-century American literature can help develop an approach to trauma that foregrounds its status as a social and political issue as well as a personal, psychodynamic one.

Root asserts that contrary to current medical definitions of psychological trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder, most of the traumatic experiences of women and those economically deprived and racially othered, are not time-limited, singular “events.” Rather, many of the traumas affecting these groups are current, cumulative, and quite common. By acknowledging outside environmental factors as contributors to psychological distress, we move away from locating the pathology of abuse within the individual’s body and start to correctly position the problem within the culture. In this introduction, I briefly chart the history of theories of psychological trauma, explain the emergence of trauma theory as such, and discuss how six twentieth-century texts that depict the social and political landscape of trauma can help in developing the approach that LaCapra advocates. Conceptually and theoretically informed by mostly radical feminist perspectives, my discussion focuses around the concept of insidious trauma to question existing hierarchal political and social systems that are inherently tied to patriarchy. Commenting on the therapeutic process for trauma victims, Elizabeth Hirsh
contends that “the possibility of individual recovery of course depends on the quality of the social fabric” (211). Engaging a liberal feminist perspective, I see hope in the individual’s ability to assert agency and transform the social fabric into a more gender-equitable place.

Three issues are central to this introduction and to my project as a whole: first, the distinction between trauma as narrowly defined in medical and diagnostic terms, on one hand, and on the other, the idea of insidious trauma as characterized by repetitive and cumulative experiences; second, and inseparable from the former, the idea of the insidious trauma of father-daughter incest as a normal function of heteropatriarchy, not a breach or breakdown in the social order; and third, the understanding that the daughters and even some of the fathers, as represented in the literature I analyze here, are victims of insidious trauma. In the case of the fathers, their trauma stems not from their gender, but rather, from their race and class. Illuminating the need for figurative language to bear witness to psychological trauma that shapes reality, my discussion explores the literary representations of the insidious trauma of father-daughter incest in the following six American texts: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss: A Memoir*, and Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. Like Cathy Caruth, who argues for the importance of literary representations in depicting time-limit traumatic events, I hope to indicate how literature can be a privileged place for illustrating insidious trauma because it provides a wide-ranging view of the personal, the political, and the social.
October 15, 1896 was a day of honest revelation. After years of listening to female patients’ accounts of sexual assault, abuse, and incest, Sigmund Freud delivered a report on 18 case studies titled *The Aetiology of Hysteria* at a meeting of the Society for Psychiatry and Neurology in Vienna. To his colleagues’ dismay, he boldly asserted, “at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are *one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience*, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood” (qtd. in Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 13). Instead of being greeted with applause, as he’d anticipated, Freud was met with stark silence from his distinguished peers, who ostracized him from their patriarchal pantheon. Not surprisingly, by the following year Freud had shifted from a trauma etiology of hysteria to an Oedipal model of psychic ontogeny, claiming, “I was at last obliged to recognize that these scenes of seduction had never taken place, and that they were only fantasies which my patients had made up” (qtd. in Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 14).

Despite his theoretical shift that ultimately defended the system and not its victims, Freud, a controversial yet inescapable figure in the genealogy of trauma theory, was among the first to explore the terrain of psychological trauma and to suggest that our conscious rationalizations fall short of explaining our behavior. He was also among the earliest men of science to bear witness to women’s stories of sexual abuse and to discover that childhood sexual exploitation lay at the root of what was then termed hysteria, and is today called psychological trauma. Furthermore, Freud glimpsed the horror of father-
daughter incest and understood that it is not uncommon, and is far too often traumatic.¹

He came dangerously close to admitting that studying the psychology of a female victim pointed to larger social and political problems—the literally wounding effects of patriarchy.

Retracting his first theory of hysteria and severing the link between sexual abuse and trauma, Freud set the stage for over a century of denying women’s realities and discrediting accounts of incest as Oedipal fantasies. In her groundbreaking book, Trauma and Recovery, which represents the fruits of twenty years of research and clinical work with victims of sexual and domestic violence, Judith Herman discusses how the theory of psychological trauma evolved out of medical, philosophical, and social history. She opens her study by explaining the “forgotten history” of the theory of psychological trauma and charting its three main waves. The late nineteenth century witnessed Freud and the age of hysteria in which the dominant psychological theory rested, as we have seen, not on the reality of women’s lives, but the mythical story of Oedipus Rex.² The catastrophe of World War I revitalized the discussion of psychological trauma when

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¹ In her 2007 study, “When Love Hurts: Preadolescent Girls’ Reports of Incest,” Joan Atwood notes that sometimes incest is not traumatic. Despite the fact that many theorists now believe that incest can contribute to an array of problems, including “anxieties, phobias, dissociative responses, lowered self-esteem, higher promiscuity, confusion about one’s sexuality, sleep disturbances, flashbacks, concentration difficulties,” in addition to “eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, and compulsive sexuality or avoidance,” some studies reported neutral effects indicating that the daughters were “virtually indifferent to their molestation,” and tended to be traumatized only after they received the reaction of adults (294, 296).

² In Trauma: A Genealogy, Ruth Leys traces trauma theory’s roots further back than Freud. She argues that our modern understanding of trauma began with the work of the British physician John Erichsen, “who during the 1860s identified the trauma syndrome in victims suffering from the fright of railway accidents and attributed the distress to shock or concussion of the spine” (3).
public was forced to deal with soldiers who began to act oddly like hysterical women. Herman explains that at first these traumatic symptoms were thought to be physical in origin. The British psychologist Charles Myers attributed them to the effects of exploding shells, and the term “shell shock” entered the field of psychological discourse. But even though this name remained in use, it became painfully obvious that these soldiers were experiencing, not physical trauma, but, rather, psychological trauma. Despite this new understanding, these warnings “were generally ignored” (Herman 26).

It would take another fifty years for the truth about traumatic disorders to be acknowledged and for Freud’s original theory that held that violence is a common part of women’s sexual and domestic lives to be validated. Further commenting on trauma’s amnesic history, Herman explains,

For most of the twentieth century, it was the study of combat veterans that led to the development of a body of knowledge about traumatic disorders. Not until the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s was it recognized that the most common post-traumatic disorders are those not of men in war but of women in civilian life. (28)

Indeed, it was through the efforts of second-wave feminists that the reality of women’s experience was forced upon public consciousness. In addition to organizing the first speakouts on rape, the movement “offered a new language for understanding the impact of sexual assault” (Herman 30). Moreover, statistics were gathered that announced the prevalence of sexual abuse. Sociologist and human rights activist Diana Russell performed a study in the early 1980s concluding that one in four women had been raped, and one in three had been sexually abused in childhood (qtd. in Herman 30). Russell was
among the first to call incest the “secret trauma,” and to suggest that a minimum of one in every six women in this country had been incestuously abused (16). She cites 1978, the year when the first feminist analyses of incest were published in book form, as a turning point in the discussion of incest, which then took a more victim-oriented perspective.³ Further, Russell criticizes Freud for the repudiation of his theory of hysteria, as well as Alfred Kinsey for his oversight in the otherwise comprehensive scientific studies of sexual behavior in the 1950s. In a thought-provoking passage, Russell questions,

Why, one wonders, did Kinsey and his colleagues have the courage and honesty to inform the scientific community and the public at large about the prevalence of homosexuality, masturbation, premarital and extramarital sexual relations, sexual contacts with animals, and some women’s capacity for multiple orgasms, when they were so unwilling to address the problem of child sexual abuse? (7-8)

Kinsey and colleagues’ silence was indicative of society at large in that incest was thought to be too taboo for words.

Calling attention to these omissions, feminists also focused on rape and other forms of violence against women and children. In her early article “Rape: The All-American Crime,” Susan Griffin made the argument Susan Brownmiller developed in Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape and that Ann Cahill revisits in her 2001 article “A Phenomenology of Fear: The Threat of Rape and Feminine Bodily Comportment”—that rape is a means to maintain male power. It is a way to keep women in a state of fear

³ The two groundbreaking 1978 feminist analyses are Sandra Butler’s Conspiracy of Silence and Louise Armstrong’s Kiss Daddy Goodnight.
by threatening their safety, limiting their mobility, and denigrating their self-worth as individuals. Millions of American girls are socialized into victim roles in a culture that allows and supports violence. As Griffin and Cahill conclude, violence is inherent in a patriarchal society. Focusing on how gender constructions are significant to the historical and contemporary struggles for African-American liberation, Gary Lemons maintains that a culture of white supremacist, patriarchal, economic exploitation “is linked to the performance of violence, particularly in the sphere of the domestic” (146). These repetitive and cumulative experiences of female devaluation characterize insidious trauma and remind the female that her safety is tentative.

Since the late 1970s, feminists have questioned the existence of an incest taboo and have noticed that the practice is not so much universally prohibited as selectively regulated. Commenting on the phallocentrism, the “phallacies,” in Freud’s Oedipus complex, some also argued for its race (white) specificity. For example, Lemons contends that in many African-American households marked by domestic violence, the son dis-identifies with his father and re-identifies with his mother in an effort to save her and not to sleep with her, as imagined in Freud’s theory (147). Paternal incest began to be seen as a paradigm of female victimization with sexual access to the female as the basis for the patriarchal right. As these feminists pointed out, incest itself is not the taboo, for it happens quite often; talking about it is (Doane and Hodges 1).

In 1980, as Herman notes, psychological trauma became an official diagnosis. Included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) III, the long overdue category “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) entered the American Psychiatric Association lexicon. The definition stipulates the necessary conditions for
granting a patient this diagnosis: The person has experienced an event that is “outside the range of usual human experience” (qtd. in Caruth Trauma 3). According to DSM III, ensuing symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, disturbed sleep, and distracted mind.\(^4\)

Applauding the professional medical diagnosis of psychological trauma, Herman then forges a link between soldiers in battle and women in domestic life, stating, “Only after 1980, when the efforts of combat veterans had legitimated the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder, did it become clear that the psychological syndrome seen in survivors of rape, domestic battery, and incest was essentially the same as the syndrome seen in survivors of war” (32). Herman’s insistence on seeing the hysteria of women and the combat neurosis of men as versions of the same kind of psychological experience results from her attempt (in 1992 when she published her book) to validate women’s reality.

**Trauma in Transit: Trauma Theory**

Around the same time that Herman was working on *Trauma and Recovery*, which sprang from her clinical work in the trenches, so to speak, theorists in humanities departments were developing a body of knowledge of trauma that initially grew out of the study of the Holocaust or *Shoah* of World War II. Trauma theory, as it has been developed in recent years by LaCapra, Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Robert Granofsky, and James Berger, among others, seems to concur with Herman that there are

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\(^4\) PTSD was originally identified in the *DSM-III* as an anxiety disorder with four diagnostic criteria: 1. Traumatic event. 2. Reexperiences of the event. 3. Numbing phenomena. 4. Miscellaneous symptoms. Leys observes that “The traumatic event was vaguely defined as an event that is ‘generally outside the range of usual human experience,’ and as involving a ‘recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone’” (232).
certain indelible characteristics of trauma, ones that do not discriminate based on gender. These theorists agree on the difficulty of representing traumatic reality. For Freud, trauma is an event in subjectivity that overwhelms the ego’s defenses, and which therefore is not itself “experienced” as such (since by definition the subject is present in his or her own experience). Building on Freud’s definition, Caruth states in her introduction to her 1996 *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* titled “The Wound and the Voice,” that trauma appears only in belated symptoms. Caruth notes that trauma is “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Trauma, therefore, is not a single, unitary phenomenon but is forever being displaced.⁵

⁵ The psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk offers a neuroscientific account of the unassimilated nature of trauma. He contends that during a traumatic event, the brain cannot handle the stimuli it receives, and consciousness splits off from experience as a defense mechanism. This splitting, he argues, is caused by hormones and neurotransmitters hyperinfusing the amygdala, the part of the brain that stores emotion and is responsible for processing information in a perceptual, sensory way. At the same time, the hippocampus, which is responsible for integrating, symbolizing, and giving language and context to an experience, is deactivated. The result is dissociation, which he defines as “the failure to integrate the cognitions, emotions, sensations, and perceptions belonging to a particular event and to synthesize them into existing mental schemata” (570). Instead of being processed linguistically, trauma, especially when experienced in childhood, leaves a neural pathway or imagistic imprint in the amygdala. Often children who have been victims of trauma have stored the information in a sensory-perceptual way in which a smell, sound, or color will remind them of the trauma and trigger that segment of memory.

LaCapra is skeptical of van der Kolk’s neurophysiological theory of trauma, questioning the “overly functionally specific model of the brain” and van der Kolk’s rejection of the Freudian concept of repression (109). For a fuller discussion of LaCapra’s concerns regarding van der Kolk’s theory, see Chapter 3, pages 107-09 of *Writing History, Writing Trauma*.

Leys has also noted the dangers of van der Kolk and associates’ shifting the focus of research from the mind back to the body. Such a focus would be at odds with a
Inaccessible, radically non-linguistic, and resistant to understanding, trauma also causes other traumatic events and has lasting effects. The trauma returns in horrific visual images and/or as olfactory, auditory, kinesthetic—visceral—sensations. For example, a victim of father-daughter incest may experience a panic attack whenever she sees a red bedspread, or a war veteran may have flashbacks to battle whenever he hears a helicopter. Since trauma is thought to stand outside experience, or, is a caesura of experience, it outstrips discursive and representational resources. Laub adds, “The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time” (69). Because of its peculiar nature, trauma is a shattering experience that distorts memory and is particularly susceptible and vulnerable to problems of understanding and reporting events.

Perhaps the epistemological and ethical challenges of representing trauma are best captured in Theodor Adorno’s statement: “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (qtd. in Rothberg 19). Although Adorno has been misinterpreted as calling for a ban on all representation, his writing suggests the need for new forms of representation capable of registering the traumatic shock of modern genocide, in particular, and of extreme experience, in general. Moreover, he acknowledges the need for a revision of what conceptualization of trauma that accounts for cultural values and political realities. Leys captures the dilemma succinctly when she writes, “although van der Kolk states that trauma is a matter of socially and contextually determined meaning, his ideas about the literal nature of traumatic memory make such memory in principle a matter of the objective state of the neurons, purged of subjective interpretation” (259). See Chapter 7, “The Science of the Literal: The Neurobiology of Trauma” in Leys’s Trauma: A Genealogy, for a fuller critique of van der Kolk’s understanding of trauma.

Laub does not mean “real” in the same sense that Jacques Lacan uses the word real. For Lacan, the “real” is that which lies outside representation and resists symbolization. The “real” cannot be recuperated but only fantasized and displaced.
constitutes traditional realistic representation, one that will take into account the limits of representing traumatic experience—or nonexperience—and one that is sensitive to the estrangement of language. Eric Santner has called the desire to gloss over trauma and disregard the discontinuous nature of trauma “narrative fetishism.” Likewise, Sandra Gilbert states in “Writing Wrong” that one cannot right wrong by writing wrong in that one’s testimony cannot reverse, repair, or undo the wrong it is reporting. This may lead one to question if trauma, that which is not presentable, should or even can be expressed or re-presented as a narrative.

The attempt to gain access to the objective truth surrounding the “experience” of trauma is futile. For this reason many trauma theorists, including Freud, turn to literature, privileging the mediated nature of literary works—mediated not only by the system of language, but also by the conventions of narrative and, in some cases, novelistic fiction. Recognizing that trauma can never be known in a straightforward way, Caruth, taking a de Manian perspective, argues that it must “be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Unclaimed Experience 5). Since trauma disrupts the structure of experience, the language used to describe it will always be a linguistic adaptation and therefore bound up with a crisis of truth.

A dilemma results in which one feels compelled to share one’s story of trauma but is unable to translate the experience into speech. Caruth quotes Elie Wiesel, “To speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible” (Trauma 154). Trauma is an event that

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7 In using the word **fetishism**, Santner is reappropriating a word that Freud appropriated. Fetishism, in attributing inherent value or power to an object, glosses over the structures of displacement and lack through which alone value is constituted.
simultaneously destabilizes language and demands a vocabulary—but one that will always be incommensurable in conveying it. To put it another way, as trauma signifies the collapse of signification, there exists a compulsion to speak and the failure of speech. Because of the paradoxical nature of trauma, Caruth contends that Freud turned to literature “because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3). Issues of reference, representation, and history “have long been at the heart of literary studies, where the status of the literary text—which is always by definition possibly a fiction—is in question” (Caruth qtd. in Henke xiv). In other words, the problematics and estrangements of language are always concerns for literary study. Literature and other works of art seek to give form to the contradictions of existence. Figurative language may well be the only properly referential language to convey what is a radically non-linguistic event. In response to Adorno’s assertion, poetry (as synecdoche for literature, that which is figurative) seems best suited to represent an experience that defies traditional modes of communication.

An important aid in understanding literature’s role in dealing with trauma has been LaCapra’s work. Particularly appealing about LaCapra’s theories of trauma is that he sees value in “working through” trauma, and, furthermore, recognizes the important role fiction can play with respect to understanding or reading events and experiences:

Especially in the recent past, fiction may well explore the traumatic, including the fragmentation, emptiness, or evacuation of experience, and may raise the question of other possible forms of experience. It may also explore in a particularly telling and unsettling way the affective or
emotional dimensions of experience and understanding. (*History in Transit* 132)

Since truth claims are not necessarily important considerations in fiction, this form of writing gives voice to trauma without imposing narrative closure, betraying the trauma, or turning it into the sublime.\(^8\) According to LaCapra, “many commentators would agree with Caruth in thinking that the literary (or even art in general) is a prime, if not the privileged, place for giving voice to trauma” (*Writing History* 190).

Not only does fiction offer an avenue to explore new forms of representation, it also can aid what LaCapra terms “working through,” a process that can help in the transition from victim to survivor. Appropriating Freud’s and Walter Benjamin’s terms, LaCapra contends that “working through” involves moving from *Erlebnis*, in which trauma is a shock to the system and may manifest as compulsive repetitions (or acting-out, a form of transference, or melancholia), to *Erfahrung* (a form of working through, or

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\(^8\) For a discussion of how fiction should not be read as telling lies, see Rosaria Champagne’s *The Politics of Survivorship: Incest, Women’s Literature, and Feminist Theory* (1996): she states that literary works are “narrative recastings of events unrecognized by history. The notion that novels represent untruths is historically a recent phenomenon. Prior to the nineteenth century, the novel represented a different—not lesser—epistemological entrance to culture” (3).

For a discussion about the dangers of casting trauma as sublime or as “negative sublime,” see Chapter 3 of *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence*, for LaCapra’s latest discussion. He words it best when he says, “I doubt whether a victim of an abusive, traumatic experience figures it as sublime or sacred when it is occurring” (75).

Likewise, James Berger, who understands that a merger between discourses of trauma and discourses of the sublime takes place due to absent referents and overlapping vocabularies, is adamant about not combining the two. See Berger’s “Trauma Without Disability, Disability Without Trauma: A Disciplinary Divide” for a fuller discussion of why he sees trauma as having no connotations of sacrifice and no potential for redemption.
mourning), which involves articulating the experience, which in turn may provide openings to possible futures.\textsuperscript{9} LaCapra is quick to add that working through is not a cure and that trauma may never be fully mastered; it is not a way to attain total integration of the self; it is not a total redemption of the past or absolute healing of traumatic wounds. “Working through” means “work[ing] on posttraumatic symptoms in order to mitigate the effects of trauma by generating counterforces to compulsive repetition (or acting-out), thereby enabling a more viable articulating of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and sociopolitical agency, in the present and future” \textit{(History in Transit 119)}. LaCapra does not suggest a totalizing form of working through; rather, he states that we can work to change the causes and effects of trauma. Advocating an approach to trauma that is not “oblivious to larger social and political problems,” LaCapra wants to \textit{claim the experience}, not transcend or betray it, but bear witness to it \textit{(History in Transit 112)}.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{The Silent and Silencing Trauma: From Secret Trauma to the Last Taboo}

Caruth is most moved by the “sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound” of trauma \textit{(Unclaimed Experience 2)}. For Caruth, trauma creates a structural deficit or hole in the mind—an absence in linguistic

\textsuperscript{9} Even though \textit{Erlebnis} and \textit{Erfahrung} are two distinct German terms, they are both translated into English as \textit{experience}.

\textsuperscript{10} In \textit{Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation}, Rothberg echoes LaCapra’s thoughts on the moral responsibility of “working through”: “This attempt at communication, at testimony, is above all else ethical—that is, it \textit{should} be undertaken, even if the value of its results is far from obvious, and even if what is communicated is the very failure or limit of communication” (162).
processing—where representation ought to be, and yet there is a mental imprint or a wound in which a human voice cries out: hence the title of her introduction to her compelling study of trauma is “The Wound and the Voice.” But what happens when there is more than just a linguistic challenge at work? To be more specific, what happens when that voice is crying out from the “most delicate,” “most vulnerable” member of society, a female child (Morrison 210)?11 And what happens when the trauma is chronic? In *Incest and the Literary Imagination*, Elizabeth Barnes mentions yet another problem with capturing psychological trauma: “in a patriarchal culture, women are taught not to speak for themselves” (8). Taking into account the larger social and political issues of trauma, we must rethink the definition of trauma and Herman’s insistence on seeing the trauma of soldiers in war and women in civilian life as versions of the same. Trauma affects both men and women; however, there is a significant gender component to trauma. Due to patriarchal structures, “women are more likely than men to be exposed to trauma that is sustained, repeated, and more damaging in type and severity” (Sanchez-Hucles and Hudgins 1151-52). Herman mentions, “When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable” (*Trauma and Recovery* 8).

Grouping war, Holocaust, political terror, and child abuse under the single category of trauma raises some serious ethical questions that have not been properly dealt

11 Gender, along with race and class, implications of Caruth’s analysis go unexplored in her work; however, Felman addresses the question of sexual difference in *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (1993). Felman subscribes to the recent theory held by feminist psychiatrists and psychotherapists—that “every woman’s life contains, explicitly or in implicit ways, the story of a trauma” (16).
with. In “Marked by Memory: Feminist Reflections on Trauma and Transmission,” Marianne Hirsch states, “strangely…much of the work on trauma and memory has been resistant to gender differentiation and has not been overtly informed by feminist thinking” (77). Foregrounding issues of gender, race, and class, Root insists that we “reconsider the embeddedness of current notions of trauma in conceptual frameworks that may exclude many of the current traumas of women of color and insidious trauma sustained by many people of color and women” (382). Arguing persuasively for research on political systems of structural inequalities, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Morrison, and other black female intellectuals offer a critical analysis of systemic domination that exposes the mechanics of patriarchy to show the interconnectedness of sexism, racism, and classism.

Laura Brown, who is aware that gender, race, and class are absent or submerged elements in trauma theory, challenges the definition of trauma, claiming that the DSM’s phrase, “an event outside the range of usual human experience,” does not capture the reality of women’s trauma, most of which is repetitive, insidious, and continuous. Quoting statistics from Russell’s book, Brown argues that “These experiences are not unusual”; “they are well within the ‘range of human experience’”; “They are the experiences of most of the women who come into [Brown’s] office every day” (101). She questions the images of trauma that have been composed by the dominant groups of culture (read: white, young, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle-class, Christian men) who write the diagnostic manuals, inform the public discourses, and control the pharmaceutical and insurance industries. As she calls for a more complex definition of psychological trauma that accounts for the social structures that perpetuate female
victimization, Brown insists that we ask “what kind of culture continues to reproduce fathers who rape their own children” (107).

Citing Root’s concept of “insidious trauma,” Brown claims that it offers a more adequate conceptualization that can help us recognize the subtle manifestations of trauma in a heteropatriarchal, racist, classist culture, and may aid us in understanding why many women who have never been rape- and/or incest-victims have symptoms of a rape trauma. In her feminist analysis, Brown powerfully writes,

Mainstream trauma theory has begun to recognize that post-traumatic symptoms can be intergenerational, as in the case of children of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. We have yet to admit that it can be spread laterally throughout an oppressed social group as well, when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma. When we do so, and start to count the numbers of those for whom insidious trauma is a way of life, we must, if we have any morality, question a society that subjects so many of its inhabitants to traumatic stressors. (107-08)

Just as attempting to represent trauma is ethical and needed for the process of working through, so too, discussing the social context of injustice is imperative to arriving at a more complex understanding of trauma. Berger mentions, “The idea of trauma…allows for an interpretation of cultural symptoms” (“Review” 572-73). An engaged feminist study of trauma demands it.

Brown is not alone in her call for revising the definition of psychological trauma. Many others recognize that the current definition is too narrow to encompass the
constellation of traumatic events that vulnerable members of our society suffer daily. Since Brown wrote her article, there have been some changes in the DSM, but not enough. As Brown concludes, “The DSM IV revision has failed to provide us with a diagnosis to describe the effects of exposure to repetitive interpersonal violence and victimization” (111). Instead of focusing on the physical forms of trauma specific to an individual, Brown urges us to consider the sociocultural experiences that are repetitive and cumulative. Joining with Brown, both Herman and van der Kolk are pushing for an expanded diagnostic concept to be included in the existing psychiatric canon—one that would be analogous to Root’s “insidious trauma.” Herman and van der Kolk have called this proposed diagnosis “complex posttraumatic stress disorder.” Defined as “a coherent formulation of the consequences of prolonged and repeated trauma,” complex PTSD would account for chronic trauma and for trauma experienced in childhood, as it is in most cases of father-daughter incest (Herman Foreword xiii). van der Kolk states that even though research has repeatedly shown that “the consequences of adverse childhood experiences constitute the single largest public health problem in the United States and, likely, worldwide,” the diagnostic system continues to lump together all trauma-related symptomatology under the category of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (457). van der Kolk, Herman, and colleagues are well aware of the political implications of

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12 Anthony Marsella et al. note that “the complex PTSD diagnosis grew out of clinical work with (mostly [white and middle-class]) American female adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse” (535).
broadening the diagnosis of psychological trauma and understand that the field of psychology is often slow to change.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{The Insidious Trauma of Father-Daughter Incest in American Literature}

As some trauma theorists and clinicians have claimed, trauma can result not only from a one-time event but also from a culmination of negative experiences, a phenomenon captured in the terms “insidious trauma” and “complex PTSD.” My dissertation originates in a desire to better understand how twentieth-century writers have represented the social and political problems implicit in the trauma of incest. The form of incest that I explore in this study occurs when fathers or stepfathers sexually violate their daughters. This allows me to focus on characteristic forms of father-daughter incest, which is the “most frequent type of incest” (Atwood 287). Exact figures are difficult to obtain, and it depends on which study one consults, but current data suggest that anywhere from one in five to one in three girls experiences sexual abuse at the hands of fathers or father figures (Marshall 403, Fischer 96).\textsuperscript{14} According to Atwood’s 2007 study, “The highest incidence of incest occurred between fathers and daughters, a large

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Complex PTSD is not projected to be recognized in the DSM-5, scheduled to be published in May 2013. See http://www.dsm5.org/ for the latest draft.
\item These researchers reflect the definition of father-daughter incest as outlined by Herman in \textit{Father-Daughter Incest}: incest is “defined to mean any sexual relationship between a child and an adult in a position of paternal authority. From the psychological point of view, it does not matter if the father and child are blood relatives. What matters is the relationship that exists by virtue of the adult’s parental power and the child’s dependency” (70). This definition would include biological fathers, stepfathers, and mothers’ boyfriends. Herman further defines “sexual relationship” to mean “any physical contact that had to be kept secret” (70). This definition includes any unwanted sexual activity, beyond that of penile penetration, which had previously been the only act “dignified with the name of incest” (70).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
percentage of it occurring when the girls were under 10” (306). Nancy Fischer cites the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, which has shown that the incidence of sexual abuse “has greatly increased since 1980,” which may have something to do with the official recognition of PTSD that same year (96). Fischer adds a caveat, stating that researchers are unsure if the increased rates “represent an actual escalation in abuse or more willingness of individuals to report suspected abuse” (97). Nonetheless, father-daughter incest is thought to be one of the most underreported and therefore silent crimes: most of the girls never become part of a national, anonymous statistic and many of the effects of incest go untreated (Atwood 307).

Gaining a better understanding of what one could rightly call an epidemic, my study explores father-daughter incest as a function of a heteropatriarchal society that privileges white, middle-class men, which is in and of itself trauma producing for most individuals. Analyzing these texts, I gain insight into the traumatizing factors that inflict daughters and that produce men who rape their daughters. Knowledge of the men who commit these atrocities is sorely lacking, according to Herman (“Crime and Memory” 129). Arguing that both women and men are harmed by patriarchy, bell hooks points out that we should not dismiss the scarring effects patriarchy has on men in teaching them to be emotionally unavailable and that patriarchy is particularly dehumanizing for men without class and race privilege. Additionally, knowledge of the young girls who suffer incestuous abuse has been critically neglected until recently. The question that guides my research is to what extent these texts capture the complexly traumatic dimensions of father-daughter incest, that is, how they represent and explain chronic, insidious trauma which culminates in the fateful rape(s). Part of the dissertation’s agenda is to examine
how these works identify with and show sensitivity to society’s victims and how well
their authors portray the experience of the female gender to give voice to this traumatic
experience.

Recent studies of literary incest include Janice Doane and Devon Hodges’s
*Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire* in which
they contest the idea of false-memory syndrome. They chart some of the significant
historical shifts in the discourse of incest narratives in order to ask, not if the stories are
true or false, but what a believable incest narrative sounds like. Gillian Harkins’s
*Everybody’s Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America* argues that
women’s stories of father-daughter incest have been co-opted by and yet resistant against
what she calls the “cultural logics of neoliberalism” (xvii). Throughout her study, Harkins
reads incest as a way to gain insight into the complex cultural, political, and economic
transformations from the 1970s to the 1990s. In her edited collection, *Incest and the
Literary Imagination*, Barnes includes authors who undermine belief in the universality
of the incest taboo and show how it is relative to time and culture. Her collection offers a
view of how the narrativizing of incest informs, and is informed by, discourses of sex,
gender, race, and class.

15 “False-memory syndrome” is “a syndrome that purports to describe the process by
which patients come to believe in the truth of false memories, that is, in incest memories
that are fabricated rather than recovered within a therapeutic session” (Doane and Hodges
7). Champagne calls attention to the False Memory Syndrome Foundation’s “rampant
antifeminism and misogyny” (167). For a discussion that casts further doubt on the
Foundation’s mission and that challenges the idea of “false memories,” see Brown
University’s “Recovered Memory Project,” which collects and disseminates information
relevant to the debate surrounding the question, “Can traumatic events be forgotten…and
then remembered later in life?”
Drawing on Barnes’s work, this dissertation is a book-length study that focuses on father-daughter incest as represented in twentieth-century American literature in the context of “insidious trauma,” something that has yet to be done and I attempt to provide. I examine how two novels authored by males (one white, one black), two novels authored by females (one black, one white), and two memoirs authored by middle- to upper-middle class females (one Western, one Middle Eastern) have depicted incest in their works, delineating a shift from father-daughter incest employed as a topic of literary fascination to a portrait of incest as one of the most poignant illustrations of insidious trauma. As the last three chapters indicate, there is an increasing emphasis on the female victim’s suffering and her ability to author and work through her own traumatic story. Even though the culture is changing with modest improvements being made in women’s living conditions and structural position, it is, as bell hooks quotes, “far from changed” (Will 41).

Expanding our concept of how we bear witness to trauma through language, some of these literary representations call into question traditional notions of sexual victimization, collapsing a clear distinction between victim and victimizer. As I’ve already mentioned, some novels in this study suggest that the fathers committing incestuous acts are victims as well. Specifically, Toni Morrison and Dorothy Allison go to great lengths to show that the fathers in their works suffer from forms of trauma before they traumatize their daughters. While as Minrose Gwin observes, father-daughter incest is “patriarchal power carried to its most egregious form,” men of color and of lower socioeconomic status are not immune from the horrors of patriarchy (417). Without being apologists for the fathers or making anti-feminists claims, some of the writers I examine
suggest that these fathers are victims too, implying that heteropatriarchy can be, as bell hooks points out, destructive for both the male perpetrator and the female victim. Across the six main chapters of my discussion I develop the argument that these authors bring into focus the social and political dimensions, the insidious trauma, of father-daughter incest, compelling us to confront the traumatic potential embedded in the patriarchal family structure.

**Six American Works**

When Herman published *Trauma and Recovery*, she argued that the trauma of men in war and women in civilian life are inseparably connected. Fitzgerald’s 1934 *Tender Is the Night* brings together father-daughter incest and non-combatant’s shell-shock, anticipating the connection Herman made sixty years later. Instead of using incest solely as a metaphor for the decadent, wastelandic conditions of post World War I, Fitzgerald recognizes the traumatic effects of father-daughter incest for the daughter. And instead of locating incest in the homes of poor, isolated rural subcultures and/or in disadvantaged minority groups, which dominated incest narratives in the late nineteenth century, he has the incest occur in a family of race and class privilege. In Chapter 2, ““Flinching at the Word *Father*’: Trauma Politics in Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*,” I argue that in his ambitious novel Fitzgerald reveals, at times ambivalently, the gendered politics of psychological trauma. In what he called his “confession of faith,” the book that cost him almost a decade of literary labor, he suggests that trauma caused by incest should be taken as seriously as trauma caused by war. Most concerned with his male
protagonist, Dick Diver, he is also quite sympathetic to his main female protagonist, Nicole Diver.

Toward the end of the novel, Nicole, whom the reader learns in Book 2 has been traumatized by her father’s sexual abuse, poses the following question to her husband Dick: “Am I going through the rest of my life flinching at the word father?” (290). Susann Cokal convincingly argues that the entire novel has “been built around getting her to say it” (87). Certainly Fitzgerald attempts to give Nicole voice throughout the book and to show her uncertain progression from victim to survivor. His novel explores the “plenty of consequences” that ensue as a direct result of father-daughter incest (Tender 129). To that end, Fitzgerald’s work anticipates Herman’s assertion already quoted: “When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events in her life take place outside of the realm of socially validated reality” (8). Not only does Fitzgerald write with a keen understanding that whereas the trauma of war had been socially acknowledged, the trauma of incest had not, he also shows sensitivity to the fact that Nicole has been objectified, devalued, and made vulnerable for most of her life, particularly subjected to insidious trauma while a mental patient. While carefully creating a character who suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder caused by incest, Fitzgerald exposes the limits of psychiatry as well as the gendered, racialized, and classist politics involved in what gets deemed psychological trauma.

If Fitzgerald questions civilized society by exploring the effects of incest and war, Ellison interrogates a racially-rigged society where father-daughter incest is used to mask what was equally unspeakable in 1952, the year he published Invisible Man—racism. In Chapter 3, “‘Naw You Ain’t No Man’: Black Masculinity in the Trueblood Episode of
Ellison’s *Invisible Man,*” I discuss the constitutive role language plays in representing and “claiming” the incest. I argue that Ellison, unlike Fitzgerald, uses incest primarily as a metaphor to explore interracial relations; or, to put it another way, to comment on how a white-supremacist society, which bonds together to demonstrate its dominance, “rapes” and emasculates black males. Within this homoracial-socialized abuse, Ellison paints the character of Jim Trueblood as a victim of society who learns to exploit a system that has rendered him socially and racially impotent. Well aware of the master incest narrative that erroneously confines incest to just the homes of the poor and racially othered, Ellison has Trueblood invent a story about how he impregnates his daughter, simultaneously challenging stereotypes of black men as sexually deviant and yet in ways reinforcing patriarchal phallocentrism.

LaCapra asserts that literary texts may figuratively bear witness to trauma’s effects and can open up the opportunity for new futures. The vivid story Trueblood fashions about father-daughter incest results in financial gain but at the expense of objectifying both himself and his daughter: his narrative suggests that, in addition to being therapeutic, literary representations can reproduce and mimic trauma. Trueblood has suffered a life of insidious trauma from racism, suggested in the incessant repeating of his story, ostracism from the black community, and scapegoating (disguised as charity) by the white. Having Trueblood craft a story in which he claims to have had sex with his own daughter, something his white counterparts yearn to do but cannot, Ellison cleverly shows power shifting, if only temporarily, from the wealthy, white men to the poor, black man. As he exploits the trauma of father-daughter incest, Trueblood works through the trauma of racism ironically by playing into stereotypes of the black barbarian, along with
toying with the white man’s incestuous desires, ultimately turning his trauma into a way to make money. Unfortunately, the same opportunity is not afforded the daughter, Matty Lou. Aside from our learning that she is pregnant and won’t speak to her father, little else is revealed about her, whose perspective remains obscured. The novel can be read as a way for Ellison to bear witness to the trauma of racism, but the story Trueblood invents of father-daughter incest fails to show the traumatic potential of incest as such for father or for daughter.

It wasn’t until the 1970 publication of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* that a cultural space was etched out for paying attention to what happened to female victims or could-be victims of father-daughter incest. Morrison’s revisionist novel supplies a feminist portrait of incest as she shows the victimization of both father and daughter and the increasing focus on the act of incest itself. *The Bluest Eye* marks a significant shift in the discourse of incest narratives and a turning point in recognizing how gender, race, class, and nation contribute to the traumatic experience of father-daughter incest.

**Chapter 4, “Signifying, Testifying, and Bearing Witness: The Bluest Eye’s Feminist Understanding of Incest,”** discusses Morrison’s and Ellison’s deployment of the incest theme to show how racism has disempowered the black male, rendering him unable to fulfill the role of father. Certainly Morrison, like Ellison, is concerned with exploring the ways an imperialist system of racial othering emasculates black males. Throughout her novel, she suggests that the story of racial self-loathing is perhaps as difficult to tell as the taboo story of incest.

Showing the insidious nature of incestuous trauma, Morrison’s first novel considers the consequences for the female victim. At the same time, she explores the
reasons for father figures to commit such acts. In addition to examining the section told from the third-person limited perspective of the incestuous father Cholly Breedlove, this chapter explores the chapter told from the pedophile Soaphead Church’s perspective in which we see the reality of child abuse extended beyond the poor, racially-othered Breedlove family and positioned as a social and political problem supported by imperialist ideals. Morrison also illuminates why a character such as Soaphead is unfit for bearing witness to Pecola’s story and is only able to retraumatize her. The male perspective has presence in the text, but Morrison carefully controls the narrative to bring the daughter’s perspective to the fore. Pecola’s voice is provided throughout the novel and in a dissociated form captured in the chapter when she has a conversation with a hallucinated other reminiscent of Nicole Diver’s discourse. Within this multi-narrated story of injustice, told primarily from the perspective of Pecola’s young friend Claudia, Morrison’s novel paved the way for the female victim to author her own traumatic story.

In the wake of Morrison’s novel, emphasis was placed on the ethical and political dimensions of father-daughter incest. With other works of second-wave feminism, notably Herman’s *Father-Daughter Incest, The Bluest Eye* prefigured “a shift in the discourse of incest from theorizing a supposedly universal incest taboo to disclosing the actual practice of incest as a significant social problem” (Scott 86). Lynn Orilla Scott explains in her article on Morrison’s novel that “For much of the twentieth century, psychoanalytic, sociological, and anthropological disciplines theorized a universal incest taboo to explain the origins and function of culture” (86). Violations of the taboo were thought to be rare and “when they did occur,” Scott adds, “they were characterized as threatening social collapse and marking a descent into the nonhuman” (86).
As already stated, Herman, and other feminist psychologists and sociologists argued that father-daughter incest is “neither rare nor a practice confined to the abnormal, the poor, or those deemed racially-other” (Scott 86). Father-daughter incest, Herman contended, does not threaten social collapse; rather, it represents “an exaggeration of patriarchal family norms, but not a departure from them” (Father-Daughter Incest 110). Incest signals not chaos but rather an order that is familiar, the order of patriarchy. The feminist analysis indicates that rather than representing a threat to civilization, father-daughter incest is very much a part of a heteropatriarchal, racist, classist, imperialist culture and is deployed to produce power. These incestuous acts reflect normal gender relations in Western culture.

One of many female-authored incest narratives published in the 1990s, Dorothy Allison’s 1992 semi-autobiographical Bastard Out of Carolina reflects the feminist discourse of incest as common, albeit abusive, attempt to gain/maintain power in a society of capitalistic heteropatriarchy. Harkins addresses the question of why in the 1990s we witnessed a boom in autobiographical novels and memoirs about incest. She notes that during this decade “incest emerged at the center of new literary markets,” in which incest was linked to daytime talk shows, such as Oprah Winfrey’s, and popular self-help books (2). Commenting on the explosion of incest narratives, Harkins attributes second-wave feminism and the civil rights movement for transforming

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16 For one of the most important arguments that called for the reconceptualization of incest, see Gayle Rubin’s 1975 essay, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.” Building upon previous arguments that overlook important feminist concerns, Rubin reengages writers who had previously discussed gender and sexual relations economically (Marx and Engels), anthropologically (Lévi-Strauss), and psychologically (Freud and Lacan) to show how the Oedipus complex reinforces structural male domination.
cultural expectations about literary subject matter and open[ing] new venues for the publication and reception of “alternative” literature. The rise of small feminist and lesbian presses made publication accessible for women who had previously been excluded from mainstream presses, and the success of a few best sellers made even mainstream publishing possible for a select group of women. Once the publishing industry grasped the possibilities of this new market, more and more women were empowered to speak out and contradict the masculinist silencing of incest in print. (2-3)

I would add that the increase in incest narratives may have had something to do with the inclusion of PTSD in the DSM as PTSD has been referred to as “the disorder of the 1990s” (Marsella et al. xvi).

Told through the eyes of the daughter victim, Bastard Out of Carolina is a testament to the female narrating her trauma, and marks another milestone in the emergence of incest narratives. In Chapter 5, “Getting out from under ‘Daddy’s Meanness’: White Trash Trauma in Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina,” I argue that Allison writes against the cultural construction of patrilineal authority. Instead of ambiguously depicting the gender politics of incest trauma as seen in Tender, instead of using incest symbolically as in the Trueblood account, and instead of having the main narrator be someone other than the female victim herself such as Claudia in The Bluest Eye, Allison’s work is a sustained exploration of the father-daughter incest Bone Boatwright experienced, told from her perspective.
This chapter explores how Bone’s story of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse is intertwined with the victimization of her mother and her stepfather. Bone’s mother Anney has suffered from class- and gender-oppression, resisting the label “white trash” from her community at all costs, even when that means turning a blind eye to her daughter’s abuse and refusing to bear witness to her story. Allison’s novel, based on her own experiences, seems to confirm assumptions that incest is mostly to be found in the homes of the poor. Yet, she problematizes that stereotype by having the abuse come from Bone’s stepfather, Glen, whose family is middle- to upper-class. Readers learn, as Bone discovers, that Glen’s inadequacies as a father stem from not being able to live up to his own father’s high-class expectations. In its indictment of a heteropatriarchal society of capitalist greed, Allison’s work suggests that Bone works through her trauma by reclaiming her body through masturbation and by authoring her story of female violation. Allison is an out-lesbian who has said that lesbianism saved her life; however, Bastard Out of Carolina ends just shy of having Bone come out as a lesbian. The ambiguous ending of Bastard leaves open the possibility that Bone may free herself from her daddy’s meanness and recognize that lesbianism might offer a safe and healthy alternative to heteropatriarchy. Bone’s budding sexuality is unclear, but it is evident that

17 In “Sexual Trauma/Queer Memory: Incest, Lesbianism, and Therapeutic Culture” (2002), Ann Cvetkovich argues that sexual abuse is one factor among many in someone’s sexual orientation. She quotes Laura Davis, co-author of The Courage to Heal, as writing, “But saying sexual abuse causes homosexuality is making an assumption that there’s something wrong with being lesbian or gay” (334). And, as Cvetkovich adds, “why can’t saying that ‘sexual abuse causes homosexuality’ just as easily be based on the assumption that there is something right, rather than something wrong, with being lesbian or gay?” (335). Moreover, Cvetkovich states, “As someone who would go so far as to claim lesbianism as one of the welcome effects of sexual abuse, I am happy to contemplate the therapeutic process by which sexual abuse turns girls queer” (335).
Allison’s novel is a survivor narrative in which a culturally marginalized female incest victim displays full humanity and subjectivity.

As Allison’s novel suggests, by the 1990s female victims were using narrative to claim and work through their sexually traumatic experiences. However, the decade’s publishing boom was not always met with applause. In fact, the volumes of incest narratives “provoked widespread accusations of crass commercialism, aesthetic devaluation, and literary literalism” (Harkins 22). In 1997, Kathryn Harrison published *The Kiss*, a memoir that challenged the form of telling about incest and threatened many of the current dominant incest narrative paradigms. For example, the abuse is rendered more as a pursuit between two consenting adults, with the daughter portrayed as collaborator as well as victim. Harrison’s memoir documents the ambiguous terrain of the four-year affair traversed by her father (a minister, of all professions) and herself when she was in her twenties. In the immediate wake of its publication, *The Kiss* garnered scathing reviews. Even though Harrison had published much of the same material in her fictional account titled *Thicker Than Water*, which was praised by most critics, it became clear that using the label *memoir* made a big difference. In other words, kissing your father and telling about it in fiction is one thing; kissing and telling in memoir another. The bottom line seemed to be that talking honestly about incest is still taboo. Not only were reviewers shocked by what she said in her unflinching account of incest, but they were also shaken by who Harrison is—a white (blonde in fact), upper-middle-class, successful writer, wife, and mother. As Leigh Gilmore puts it, the question that weighed heavily on many reviewers was “If she could survive to marry, have children, and write the book…how bad could the incest have been?” (711-12). As I argue in Chapter 6.
“The Failure of Bearing Witness: The Politics of Truth Telling and Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss: A Memoir,*” in the face of denial, *The Kiss* tells the unwavering truth about father-daughter incest—that it is a traumatic event, despite the age, class, race, and future of the daughter.

Published in the midst of the memory wars, including the cry of “false memory syndrome,” and the culture wars, which, among other things, disputed the literary merit of memoir as a genre, *The Kiss*’s reception measured the cultural climate regarding father-daughter incest, suggesting that mainstream American society at the end of the twentieth century, although talking much about incest, paradoxically colluded in the silencing of incest and maintained the immunity of the white middle-class. Even though Allison had told a similar story not five years prior to Harrison, she did not receive such hostile reception because the context that Allison describes—poverty-stricken, uneducated, southern, white-trash—conformed to most readers’ assumptions about the vice. Harrison’s book, which includes a picture of herself on the cover, is not the familiar face of incest. In this chapter I discuss how Harrison’s memoir upsets widespread assumptions about father-daughter incest, bringing incest too close to home for many readers. Instead of reading about a young, uneducated, black girl desperately trying to account for the broken pieces of her life, as we witnessed with Pecola Breedlove, or a young, utterly poor, white girl trying to make sense of her stepfather’s abuse and her mother’s neglect, as we saw with Bone Boatwright, in *The Kiss* we confront a mature member of the literary elite who suffers from complex PTSD and is attempting to assess her role in the family affair. Throughout her narrative, Harrison explores the privilege of her father and the vulnerability of her mother. Coming from a lower-class home than her
mother’s family, Harrison’s father uses incest as a tool to reassert his paternal authority that was undermined by his wife’s conservative, bourgeois family. Like Bone’s mother, Harrison’s mother yearns for the love of a man and her own adolescent state that was taken from her as a result of teenage pregnancy. *The Kiss*, much like *Bastard*, turns its gaze on the emotional betrayal of father and mother, in which the mother assumes a prominent role in the love triangle. As Harrison explores female agency, her book revisits an important question about father-daughter incest: how does one tell the trauma when society refuses to bear witness?

My study concludes with a rereading of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, one of the most provocative incest novels of the twentieth-century that enjoyed the reputation of being simultaneously condemned as pornography and celebrated for its morality. In *Chapter 7*, “*Lolita Revisited: Reading Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books,*” I discuss how Nafisi praises *Lolita* for being the work of fiction that she claims best resonates with the lives of females in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As Nafisi’s memoir has been criticized for lending itself to conservative US ideological rescripting, a discussion of Nafisi’s uncritical acceptance of *Lolita* is needed to investigate how she imports a work about incest to comment, not on the act itself, but on how *Lolita* reveals the corrupt patriarchal system that subjugates its females.

Nafisi is quick—perhaps too quick—to forge a connection between Lolita and her Muslim female students who comprise their secret book club. Further intimating an analogy between Humbert and Ayatollah Khomeini, Nafisi argues that Nabokov motivates our compassion for Humbert’s victims, but she fails to comment on the sympathy Nabokov elicits for Humbert himself, a character who presents himself as an
unfortunate victim of social convention. Contrary to what Nafisi and other recent critics argue about *Lolita* containing a feminist statement, I contend that the novel, told almost exclusively from Humbert’s perspective, elicits great sympathy for the self-proclaimed pedophile, but does so at the expense of Lolita, who, like Matty Lou, is bodily present in the text but whose voice and thoughts are virtually absent.\(^\text{18}\) Throughout his narrative, Nabokov has Humbert enjoy “incestuous thrill” and “perverse delight,” acting on—and narrating in vivid detail—his impulsive urges (80, 17). Although Nafisi argues that Nabokov uses a blatantly unreliable narrator to reveal what the narrative otherwise works to conceal, I respond that Nabokov chooses a narrative strategy that allows him the luxury of ambivalence about father-daughter incest and glosses over how much this affair hurts Lolita, who, as we learn in passing, sobs “every night, every night—the moment [Humbert] feigned sleep” (176). Humbert wants his readers to think he is a victim of a straitlaced society and has suffered from the traumatic loss of his childhood sweetheart; however, his pleas are unconvincing and provide further justification for the pain he inflicts on Lolita. Despite what Nafisi claims about Lolita’s nightly sobs and the fact that she leaves Humbert for the pornographer Quilty, the text makes it difficult to assess the

\(^{18}\) See Tony Moore’s “Seeing Through Humbert” (2002), Eric Goldman’s “‘Knowing’ Lolita: Sexual Deviance and Normality in Nabokov’s *Lolita*” (2004), and Anika Susan Quayle’s “Lolita Is Dolores Haze: The ‘Real’ Child and the ‘Real’ Body in *Lolita*” (2009) for three of the most compelling arguments regarding the feminist sympathy in *Lolita*. Essentially they argue that Nabokov is playing with long-held perceptions of female objectification to call attention to their falsity. Moore argues that the text fosters criticism of Humbert as it undermines his control of the narrative and exposes his ploys to solipsize Lolita’s presence. Drawing a link between Kinsey and Nabokov, Goldman contends that Nabokov provides a scientific framework to reinterprets myths about female sexuality, and reveals how cultural myths dismiss the female behind the sexuality. Quayle maintains that Nabokov is clear that Humbert obsesses over Lolita’s body, leading her to praise Nabokov for his moral message on pedophilia.
extent of her trauma. Nafisi’s memoir, however, showcases the trauma of women of Iran and informs Western readers that insidious trauma knows no borders.

The work of Nafisi, along with Fitzgerald, Ellison, Morrison, Allison, and Harrison, illustrates what Herman states in the epigraph that opens this introduction—incest and the silencing of incest serve to perpetuate an unjust society. These writers present no simple assignments of individual blame; rather than painting in broad strokes of black and white, they use maddening shades of gray to capture the psychological complexity of the traumatic experience, showing its sociocultural dimensions. My project attempts to convey the urgency for revisiting father-daughter incest and to show how important literature can be for bearing witness to trauma and exposing the systems of oppression that exist and persist in our culture. I offer suggestions for reframing the discussion of father-daughter incest and argue that recognizing “insidious trauma” is crucial to this effort. Exploring the literary representations of domestic trauma and considering its social context can help prevent another traumatic story from being written.

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Chapter II—“Flinching at the Word Father”:

Trauma Politics in Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night

In a letter written to F. Scott Fitzgerald, friend and fellow artist John Peale Bishop ends an otherwise complimentary note on Tender Is the Night by voicing his concern with what he sees as the unconvincing part of the novel—the theme of father-daughter incest. “The one point in the book which stuck for me was the incest. I couldn’t quite believe it. Nor do I think it was necessary. But it’s done, and is being forgotten” (qtd. in Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald 339). Many early critics had a difficult time with the paternal incest and argued that Fitzgerald employs it as a metaphor for the decline of Western civilization, a reading first forged by Robert Stanton in his 1958 “‘Daddy’s Girl’: Symbol and Theme in Tender Is the Night.” The question remains, however, why did Fitzgerald not just use the wastelandic imagery of the postwar landscape to capture the ruins? Why does he cast Nicole Diver, his lead female character, as a recovering victim of father-daughter incest?¹

Besides being confused by the paternal incest, some early critics had a difficult time with the entire book, Fitzgerald’s last completed novel. They found the long-awaited, post-Gatsby novel to be second-best. Even though Fitzgerald started working on Tender immediately after Gatsby, it took him almost ten years to finish, not appearing in

¹ In “From Griffith’s Girls to Daddy’s Girl: The Masks of Innocence in Tender Is the Night,” Ruth Prigozy also takes up this question. Her interpretation differs from mine in that she argues that Fitzgerald employs the incest to expose the exploitative myth of female innocence that was so cherished in popular culture, particularly in cinema.
complete form until April, 1934. Initially criticized as “an anachronistic hang-over from the twenties” (qtd. in Bruccoli 3), “a curious footnote to the jazz age” (Steinberg 143), and a sprawling, imperfect, utterly personal novel, Tender briefly made it to the bestseller list and garnered some sensitive reviews, but it was clear that its initial reception did not compensate for the anguish Fitzgerald endured while writing it. It wasn’t until what Milton R. Stern calls “the Fitzgerald revival” of the 1950s that sustained scholarly attention was given to Tender (10). Fitzgerald’s ambivalent treatment of Nicole and other female characters became topics of discussion; some articles compared Scott’s Tender to his wife Zelda’s Save Me the Waltz, which was often seen as a companion piece. In addition to exploring Fitzgerald’s contributions to our understanding of modernism, criticism over the last sixty years has examined the novel’s intersecting concerns with gender, sexuality, race, and nationality. Although there has been a deepening appreciation of Tender as a perceptive novel about history, its psychological elements continue to be contested.

My chapter enlarges the critical discussion of gender and psychological politics in the novel by focusing attention on the incest theme and its relation to trauma. Even though Fitzgerald’s sympathies lie with his male protagonist, Dick Diver, and that Tender is primarily Dick’s story, his characterization of Nicole as a recovering victim of father-daughter incest reveals sexual domestic abuse, in a white, wealthy family, no less, as a topic worthy of critical attention. Building on William Blazek’s argument in “‘Some Fault in the Plan’: Fitzgerald’s Critique of Psychiatry in Tender Is the Night” (2007), in

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2 The book was serialized in four monthly installments in Scribner’s Magazine from January to April 1934.
which he maintains that Fitzgerald exposes the limits of psychiatry as practiced during his day, I argue that in doing so, Fitzgerald also exposes the gender politics of psychological trauma. I contend that in addition to reading *Tender Is the Night* as a critique of the profession of psychiatry for its impotence at healing what the narrator calls “the broken universe of the war’s ending,” Fitzgerald reveals the politics surrounding psychiatry, particularly, if not at times ambivalently, the insidious trauma perpetuated by a profession that purports to heal (245).

During the time that Fitzgerald was composing the novel, incest was still thought to be an extremely rare occurrence—one case in a million (Wilson 35). As explained in more depth in the previous chapter, Freud’s original seduction theory, which claimed that most hysterical women had repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse, was, to borrow from Bishop, being forgotten, and his revised theory, which centered on the Oedipus complex, was in full swing. A new science of psychiatry was emerging and a younger generation of trained practitioners was experimenting with new therapies, including hypnosis, psychoanalysis, ergo-therapy, and electric-shock treatment. One of the most influential concepts was *reeducation*, mentioned in the novel and endorsed by Abram Kardiner, who not coincidentally studied with Freud. It held that the goal of therapy was not necessarily to recover traumatic memories from amnesia, but rather, to achieve “a fundamental alteration in the patient’s conscious adaptation to the outer world” (Leys 194). Or, as Judith Fetterley puts it in “Who Killed Dick Diver? The Sexual Politics of *Tender Is the Night*,” *reeducation* means “that Nicole must understand that what happened to her has no political significance, no bearing on the relation between men and women” (124). And that to get better, as Fetterley explains, she must learn “to
trust men again” (124). In the midst of uncertainty about the causes and cures of psychological trauma, Fitzgerald, unlike Freud, takes women at their own word by creating a female character who suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder, or the “plenty of consequences” that ensue as a direct result of father-daughter incest (Tender 129).

Instead of using incest as a topos of cultural decline, Fitzgerald’s employment of incest and the psychological trauma that accompanies it are portrayed much more realistically. Profoundly autobiographical, Tender would not have emerged as the book it has had it not been for Zelda’s breakdown on April 23, 1930, and her subsequent unsuccessful attempts to regain her health (Donaldson 186). Richard Lehan points out, “Fitzgerald did not have to rely upon sophisticated clichés to write Tender Is the Night: by the thirties he knew firsthand—and all too well—the meaning of sickness, physical decline, and disappointment” (76). The 1930 breakdown of Zelda, whom Nicole is modeled after, led Fitzgerald to revise his original thinking for the novel, as the outline for his new plans indicates:

The heroine was born in 1901. She is beautiful on the order of Marlene Dietrich or better still the Norah Gregor-Kiki Allen girl with those peculiar eyes. She is American with a streak of some foreign blood. At fifteen she was raped by her own father under peculiar circumstances—work out. She collapses, goes to the clinic and there at sixteen meets the young doctor hero who is ten years older. Only her transference to him saves her—when it is not working she reverts to homicidal mania and tries to kill men. She is an innocent, widely read but with no experience and no
orientation except what he supplies her. Portrait of Zelda—that is, a part of Zelda. (Bruccoli 80)

This paragraph, along with Fitzgerald’s other sketches, demonstrates that his wife’s illness was the precipitating factor to the novel’s new direction. As much as Fitzgerald made Nicole a “portrait of Zelda,” “a part of Zelda,” and as much as the effects of Zelda’s illness were all too real and familiar to both Zelda and Scott, the cause of Nicole’s disintegration, the incest factor, is, according to Matthew Bruccoli, pure invention (82). However, Fitzgerald’s moving depiction and understanding of Nicole’s illness may make one question if Zelda was in fact a victim of father-daughter incest and that is why F. Scott wrote so authentically about it.

_The Limits of Psychiatry Exposed: “The weakness of this profession is its attraction for the man a little crippled and broken” (137)_

During the time that Fitzgerald was deploying and depleting his resources on the novel that would cost him almost a decade of literary labor, the topic of psychological trauma was being revisited because of the effects of World War I. According to Judith Herman in _Trauma and Recovery_, “In this prolonged war of attrition, over eight million men died in four years. When the slaughter was over, four European empires had been destroyed, and many of the cherished beliefs that had sustained Western civilization had been shattered” (20). Dying with the men on the frontlines was the idea(l) of “manly honor and glory in battle” (Herman 20). As the victors staggered back home in tatters, both physically and mentally, their symptoms mimicked those seen in hysterical women of Freud’s generation. The men’s mental breakdowns, however, were at first attributed to
physical ailments—wounds from exploding shells. But it became clear to the military psychiatrists that what these “shell-shocked” victims were really suffering from was largely psychological in nature caused by the emotional stress from war. In the midst of this revelation, Fitzgerald enlists as his male protagonist an inept psychiatrist who is unable to diagnose his own psychological ailments and is himself arguably suffering from what the novel terms “Non-combatant’s shell-shock” (180, emphasis added).

Fitzgerald is quite sympathetic to Dick’s personal and professional battles, and the novel should not be read as a critique of Dick Diver the man. Rather, through the character of Dick, Fitzgerald offers a subtle critique of the field of psychiatry as he questions what leads these mostly white, middle- to upper-class men into the profession. He suggests that in this field of predominantly male practitioners and female patients, the power dynamics that keeps females subservient to males remained intact and that the occupation may have been used as a means for these men to recover some of the masculinity they felt they had lost during the world war.

In the case of Dick, his motivations for becoming a doctor of the mentally ill are far from noble. Dick is no stranger to being attracted to young beautiful women, and like many psychiatrists of his day, he breaches the doctor-patient contract on more than one occasion. In the exposition provided in Book 2, Dick admits to Dr. Franz Gregorovius, resident pathologist at Dohmler’s clinic on the Zürichsee and later business partners with

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3 Affairs between male-doctors and female-patients seemed to have been an accepted part of the culture of early psychoanalysis and its politics that even Carl Jung was said to have breached professional ethics by pursuing a relationship with, although not one of his patients, one of his students, Sabina Spielrein (Boker 306-07). It is not clear if Fitzgerald was aware of their relationship, but he certainly knew of Jung and on at least one occasion considered asking him to be Zelda’s doctor (see Nancy Milford’s biography of Zelda, page 179).
Dick at the old clinic of Braun on the Zugsee, that he had a “bent” for going into the field of psychiatry—“there was a girl at St. Hilda’s in Oxford that went to the same lectures” (138). We also read that once practicing, Dick was accused “in no uncertain terms of having seduced” the daughter of one of his patients (187). Dick admits that he kissed her, “In an idle, almost indulgent way,” even though he was not interested in pursuing the affair any further (187). Similarly, Dick takes a special interest in the woman at Braun suffering from “nervous eczema”; he is the only doctor who could “do anything with her” (183). Before leaving her on one of his rounds, he stoops and kisses her forehead. After her death, when we learn that she had most likely suffered from neuro-syphilis, Dick can’t get over his loss for “the scabbed anonymous woman-artist he had come to love” (242). Furthermore, in marrying Nicole Warren, the young girl from Chicago, against the advice of Doctor Dohmler, Dick assumes the role of doctor-husband, forever blurring the distinction between his professional and personal lives. The novel suggests that some physicians became emotionally involved with their own patients; and as William Blazek asserts, neither psychiatry nor any science is “as purely rational as it purports to be” (72). Fitzgerald certainly exposes the emotional, at times irrational, dimensions of the field and suggests that detached, scientific superiority is a myth.

In addition to undermining psychiatry’s claims to reason, Fitzgerald exposes it to be a self-serving, money-making occupation that maintains the differential power relations between male-doctors and female-patients and the have and the have-nots. In “Fitzgerald’s Portrait of a Psychiatrist,” A. H. Steinberg claims that the patients at Dohmler’s clinic are “more the victims of self-indulgence than of disease” (140). Franz
glimpses the truth of this and capitalizes on it. For example, Franz asks Dick if the war changed him as it changed the rest. Dick dodges the question by responding, “I didn’t see any of the war” (119). “That doesn’t matter—,” counters Franz, “we have some shell-shocks who merely heard an air raid from the distance. We have a few who merely read newspapers” (119). Dick dismisses this as nonsense and Franz admits that it may be, but he also explains to Dick that theirs is “a rich person’s clinic” (119). Through this dialogue Fitzgerald casts doubt on the ethics guiding the field of psychiatry. It seems that attention goes not to those who need help the most, but to the highest bidder. The Warren family knows this. In fact, Nicole’s sister, Baby, contemplates buying Nicole a doctor, reasoning, “what could be better in her condition than if she fell in love with some good doctor” (152). Moreover, the Warren money enables Dick and Franz to buy the old clinic of Braun on the Zugersee for $220,000, which Baby thinks is a small price to pay for having peace of mind about her sister. Franz approaches Dick for this venture not because Dick is a highly-skilled physician, but because Franz needs money and knows that the Warren family has it. He exclaims to Dick, and to an eavesdropping Baby, “There we have it! Money!” “I have little money” (175). However, as he is quick to add, “the clinic is a gold mine” (175). Put simply, the Warren money has succeeded in buying a doctor-husband for Nicole and a money-making clinic for Dick. It is no wonder why Dick, who agrees to the purchase, feels forever indebted to the Warrens, whom he not incorrectly thinks own him. He seems to understand that his professional life is at the mercy of borrowed time and borrowed money.

Fitzgerald further displays the chinks in Dick’s armor and thereby the field of psychiatry by suggesting that his ego plays into Dick’s reasons for pursuing this
profession. Just as Rosemary Hoyt first sees Dick on the Mediterranean beach in Book 1 as the pinnacle of perfection, readers are (re)introduced to a promising, youthful Doctor Diver at the start of Book 2. At this point in his budding career, Dick wishes to be the greatest “psychologist” that ever lived (132). However, Fitzgerald undermines Dick’s ambitions in a number of ways. We read that at the beginning of 1917, not coincidentally the same year that the US became involved in World War I, Dick burned almost a hundred of his textbooks to heat his rooms because he couldn’t find coal. Moreover, Dick has doubts about his calling. Despite Franz’s reassuring words that fate selected Dick for the profession before he was born, he can’t seem to shake the fact that “The weakness of this profession is its attraction for the man a little crippled and broken” (137). In fact, throughout the book Fitzgerald drops subtle hints about these doctors who are themselves a little battered and wounded. Franz’s rival, Gisler, is said to be a manic-depressive and is unable to manage his own clinic, which is really run by his wife and her lover (132). Similarly, during one of his rounds, Dick ministers to a “collapsed psychiatrist” (186). Of course, by the novel’s end the most damaged doctor is Dick, exiled to small-town New York and with “a big stack of papers on his desk that were known to be an important treatise on some medical subject, almost in process of completion” (315). Although Dick seems to be practicing again, the narrator tells us that “his career was biding its time” (315). Fitzgerald points out the irony in that some psychiatrists who treat others for mental illness are not immune to breakdowns themselves.

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4 For a discussion of Dick’s repressed dissatisfaction with psychiatry, see James Ellis’s “Fitzgerald’s Fragmented Hero: Dick Diver,” in which he argues that Dick is disillusioned with the profession of psychiatry before he meets Nicole.
Perhaps one of the reasons that Dick wants to be the best “psychologist” that ever lived is to compensate for his lack of masculinity in a world that Fitzgerald presents as becoming increasingly feminized, as illustrated through his economically-independent female characters. For Dick’s generation, masculinity is demonstrated through military force. Tellingly, Dick isn’t conscripted and therefore never fires a gun. For example, we read that he was “too much of a capital investment to be shot off in a gun,” that “the war didn’t touch him at all,” and that “Doctor Diver had seen around the edges of the war” (these examples all occur on page 115). Likewise, we learn early that Abe North, whose alcoholic undoing prefigures Dick’s decline, had fought in battle whereas Dick had not. John Kuehl has observed that Dick shows the most respect in the scene in which they visit the site of the Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest military operations ever recorded; however, he most likely puts on a grave face to show off for Rosemary, reducing the deadly battlefield to a highly explosive “love battle” (57). Dick, who was poised for war after taking his degree from Johns Hopkins, is dissatisfied by his work in France, which proves to be “executive rather than practical” (117-18). In other words, he was disillusioned by the war because he did not fight on the frontlines.

Fitzgerald has Dick compensate for his lack of battle experience in what prove to be unsatisfactory ways. Instead of helping the men in battle, the “blinded or one-legged men,” Fitzgerald has Dick do paperwork (115). In place of fighting, Dick spends the war writing a short textbook, one of his many forthcoming pseudo-scholarly meditations.⁵ Furthermore, Fitzgerald describes the prewar Dick in phallic terms that may be read as

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⁵ Even Franz comments on the lack of merit in Dick’s books, saying “Soon you will be writing little books called ‘Deep Thoughts for the Layman,’ so simplified that they are positively guaranteed not to cause thinking” (138).
mocking Dick’s masculinity. The narrator explains that in his last year “at New Haven” someone referred to Dick as “‘lucky Dick’” to which Dick adds, “‘Lucky Dick, you big stiff’” (116). In keeping with this theme, Dick is often seen carrying a big stick. Similarly, his name is a not-so-sly wink to the male genitals. But, his big break at redeeming his masculinity comes in the form of a “scarcely saved waif of disaster bringing him the essence of a continent”—Nicole Diver, victim of father-daughter incest (136).

_The Gender Politics of Trauma: “‘Be a good girl and mind the doctors’” (130)_

Just as Fitzgerald reveals through Dick that many white, middle- to upper-class men become psychiatrists to compensate for feeling emasculated, he suggests through the character of Nicole that psychiatry is often used as a tool of patriarchal control. Not coincidentally, all of Nicole’s doctors are male. In this patriarchal microcosm, Nicole is silent and silenced, with one of the first things disclosed about her being that “she knew few words and believed in none, and in the world she was rather silent” (26). Her voice is absent from the scene in which the story of incest is told, also not coincidentally, through a daisy-chain of men—first reluctantly from Devereux Warren to Doctor Dohmler, then from Dohmler to Franz, and finally from Franz to Dick. The story of Nicole’s experience of incest is tucked away in the middle of the book, the original act is elided, Warren’s motives are conspicuously absent, and Nicole does not get to author her story. However, Fitzgerald’s rendition is not an apology for the father’s actions as he does not justify the reasons for Warren’s behavior (as we’ll see Nabokov do for Humbert Humbert). The
“plenty of consequences” of the paternal incest seem to be Fitzgerald’s main concern in *Tender Is the Night* (129).

Despite the gaps and omissions in the incest narrative, Devereux Warren’s actions cast a dark shadow on the entire novel. In fact, what makes most readers turn the pages of Book 1 is an attempt to find out what causes Nicole’s mysterious bathroom breakdowns. Fitzgerald builds up suspense in Book 1 and most of the plot hinges on—or rather is unhinged by—the father-daughter incest. In other words, the movement of the novel revolves around Nicole and follows the integration of her personality and how it impacts the disintegration of Dick’s. Fitzgerald, who was deeply concerned with form and technical mastery, had doubts about the organization of *Tender* after reading readers’ responses. Before formally introducing Dick, the 1934 edition opens from the young female perspective of Rosemary, the Hollywood starlet, who, in many respects sets the stage for the real daddy’s girl to enter.

Many are familiar with Fitzgerald’s original enthusiasm about the groundbreaking style of his 1934 novel in which he stated that he found the new form that Gertrude Stein and Joseph Conrad had been looking for (Donaldson 177). Many are also familiar with his later assertion that the book’s “great fault is that the true beginning—the young psychiatrist in Switzerland—is tucked away in the middle of the book” (qtd. in Cowley 104). Fitzgerald’s comments in which he changes his mind are not unlike the actions of Freud. Both men at first realized the severity of incest, but when they were criticized for their disclosures, they retreated (Freud in a much more drastic way than Fitzgerald). Fitzgerald’s latter comment suggests that Dick is the real focus of interest, with Nicole and her problems as functions of a dilemma which remains in essence that of the gifted-
but-flawed male (anti-)hero. In case there are any doubts about whose story Fitzgerald meant for this to be, we should remember that Fitzgerald’s penultimate title was *Richard Diver, A Romance*. Early negative reviews about the distorted chronology of the novel and the concealed Dick troubled Fitzgerald so much that Malcolm Cowley published the posthumous, “author’s final version” in 1951 in which the original Book 2 was moved to Book 1. Cowley justified the changes by claiming that

> One fault of the earlier version was its uncertainty of focus. We weren’t quite sure in reading it whether the author had intended to write about a whole group of Americans on the Riviera—that is, to make the book a social study with a collective hero—or whether he had intended to write a psychological novel about the glory and decline of Richard Diver as a person. (106-07)

Judging by Cowley’s efforts and Fitzgerald’s comments, *Tender* should chart the story of Dick. Despite their intentions, I would argue that the finished 1934 work shows the personal trauma of Dick *and* Nicole and how their stories are intimately intertwined.

> Whether or not we want to claim Fitzgerald as a politically conscientious artist with feminist sympathies, the novel’s disjointed structure works to reveal Nicole’s psychological trauma. As argued recently, the nonlinear narrative and the shifts in point of view illustrate how the form of the book follows its function, with the function being to show that the parts are not well integrated. The pieces do not form a coherent whole, but then neither do the characters, most of whom are dissipated by the novel’s end. Fitzgerald’s innovative, experimental style embodies, as Mary Burton notes, the psychotherapeutic situation in which first the present is offered, then the past explored,
and finally the present again analyzed. It works well to open from the perspective of Rosemary, whom we at first think will be the star attraction, because we later see that Rosemary’s point of view dances on the shimmering surface and provides a superficial take on what soon gets probed and exposed—the dark depths of the Divers. Appropriately, through the naïve perspective of Rosemary, Dick and Nicole are seen as “all complete” (19). Not until Book 2, when he is introduced in medias res, is Dick revealed to be a composite figure and shown as inept: “Neither as scientist nor as romantic philosopher can Dick Diver put all the pieces together again”—the pieces of himself and of Nicole (Callahan 190). Fitzgerald perhaps violates what Kenneth Burke calls a “categorical expectancy” in which the arrows of attention point toward Rosemary in Book 1, then “like a broken field runner” he reverses his field and “shifts suddenly” in Book 2, leaving readers to “fall figuratively on their noses as Mr. Fitzgerald is off on a new track” (qtd. in Miller 87). However, that unpredictability and random transfer embodies the purposeful incoherence of Tender, a book marked by senseless violence and psychological instability. The structural distortion of linear time is one of the main clues that we are dealing with trauma and its circular nature in which Devereux Warren’s words, “ ‘There isn’t any beginning,’” said in confidence to Dohmler when first telling the story of incest, are more true than he probably realizes (126).

The book’s focus is split between Dick, the father figure, and daddy’s girls Rosemary and Nicole. The question of what makes Dick crack has been an obvious topic of critical discussion—obvious primarily because what makes him dive into oblivion is
not so obvious. Clearly, Fitzgerald meant for this to be Dick’s story, but the reader is never quite sure what ails Dick. Perhaps he suffers from war trauma, or what Dick terms “Non-combatant’s shell-shock” (180). But we do know what makes Nicole crack—a much easier question to answer than what breaks Dick. Nicole suffers because of father-daughter incest and the silence surrounding the event, but, against all odds, seems to be faring better than Dick by the novel’s end. Whereas Fitzgerald is never quite clear regarding what causes Dick’s mental troubles, he leaves no doubt about what causes Nicole’s. War imagery serves as a backdrop to the plot, but incest takes center stage. If Zelda was indeed a victim of incest, Fitzgerald may have known that psychological trauma caused by war was a serious, validated, seemingly unquestioned condition whereas trauma caused by domestic sexual abuse was not. By making it clear that Nicole is a victim of father-daughter incest whereas Dick is a confused case of non-combatant’s shell-shock, Fitzgerald exposes the gender politics of psychological trauma and challenges contemporaneous assumptions that held war trauma legitimate while domestic sexual abuse was seen as questionable, at best. Giving paternal incest critical attention, Fitzgerald demonstrates political consciousness and moral conviction.

In the midst of Dick’s story, Fitzgerald includes sections from Nicole’s perspective, granting her complexity and humanity and rendering her mental illness with unparalleled clarity and precision for his day. However progressive it may seem that

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6 Over the years critics have grappled with what precipitates Dick’s decline. The reasons are complex, yet vague, and include Nicole’s illness, the transference and countertransference that takes place between the couple, the death of old American values embodied in the death of his father, the symbolic incest with Rosemary, who is sixteen years Dick’s junior (young enough to be his daughter), the Warren money, his desire to be loved, which is tempered by his desire to be a social climber, and alcoholism.
Fitzgerald grants his female victim voice in 1934—a huge feat given the political and social climate—Fitzgerald accomplishes this by betraying his wife’s privacy by reproducing her private letters written to him while she was institutionalized. In *Zelda: A Biography*, Nancy Milford explains how Scott “mercilessly exposed Zelda in his characterization of Nicole Diver. He drew upon Zelda’s most terrible and private letters to him, written in the anguish of the early months of her illness in Switzerland, snipped and pieced them together in Book II with very little regard for Zelda’s reaction or for the precarious balance of her sanity” (284). On at least one occasion Zelda jokingly commented on their situation, saying “‘Mr. Fitzgerald…seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home’” (qtd. in Tavernier-Courbin 28). Although Zelda was able to refer to this in jest, Scott’s actions had to have hurt her. They also undermine claiming him as a visionary feminist hero. Disappointingly, such a talented fiction writer felt the need to borrow from his wife, thus exploiting her at her most vulnerable, to add credibility to his novel. Nevertheless, through Nicole’s letters to Dick, her 17-paragraph monologue, and emerging perspective in Book 3, Fitzgerald exposes the insidiousness of Nicole’s trauma and shows how she is a victim of a collusive system of male power masquerading as a profession of healing. In these critical sections Fitzgerald reveals the patriarchal forces acting on Nicole that make it difficult, if not impossible, for her to ever transition from victim to survivor.

Strategically placed immediately before the story of incest are nine letters that Nicole wrote to Dick while she was a patient at Dohmler’s clinic. If one divorces the biographical traces from these letters, they, along with Nicole’s monologue and perspective in Book 3, offer a sensitive and perceptive rendering of Nicole’s inner
condition. Giving Nicole voice—albeit an incoherent voice at times—shows Fitzgerald’s efforts at capturing Nicole’s trauma. We know that Nicole sends Dick about fifty letters over the course of eight months and that he answers all of them. The fact that Nicole sends Dick fifty letters after meeting him only once indicates that she has transferred her paternal fixation to Dick; the fact that he answers all of them implies that Dick has a countertransference to Nicole. Curiously, none of Dick’s responses are reproduced, only Nicole’s letters. Her letters, which make frequent reference to war, link the broader cultural trauma with Nicole’s personal trauma. These pre-Armistice and pre-marriage letters to Dick indicate a “high degree of schizophrenia” and a dire pathological condition, but they also suggest that Nicole may have more understanding of her illness than the doctors of the hospital are willing to admit, and, moreover, that in keeping the truth from Nicole, they are guilty of revictimizing her (Grube 183). In two of the letters, Nicole mentions her father. She writes, “Unless they will let me write my father, whom I loved dearly” (122). The past tense suggests that Nicole no longer loves her father, and love has an ambiguous meaning here. In another letter, Nicole tells Dick that she has written her father to come and take her away. The narrator notes a change between letters seven and eight: “And then suddenly the change” (124). However, I detect a significant shift in the tone and level of self-awareness in letter four, in which Nicole expresses anger with the silence surrounding her sickness. In this letter Nicole voices her frustration with being kept in the dark about her trauma. She writes, “Here I am in what appears to be a semi-insane-asylum, all because nobody saw fit to tell me the truth about anything. If I had only known what was going on like I know now I could have stood it I guess for I am pretty strong, but those who should have, did not see fit to enlighten me” (123). She
not only rightly blames the institution of psychiatry for failing to inform her about her illness, but also demonstrates her ability to process information and her likely awareness that she is a victim of father-daughter incest (“like I know now”). Nicole is aware that her pain comes from not just her father’s rape but from the silence and lies that cover up his actions. In this letter, Nicole comes across as capable of handling the truth. As Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin puts it,

Nicole is a far stronger and more complex character than she is usually given credit for. She is inherently strong and a natural survivor who sank into neuroticism as a result of one ugly incident and the *conspiracy of silence* surrounding it on the part of both her family and her doctors. (216, emphasis added)

Nicole seems to be aware that the insidious “conspiracy of silence” prevents her from working through her trauma.

In her last reproduced letter, written after drifting in and out of mental stability, Nicole affirms that she is “slowly coming back to life” (124). She mentions that the “war is over and I scarcely knew there was a war” (124), which could indicate that the doctors, including Dick, who did not see “fit to tell [her] the truth about anything,” made her too wrapped up in her own personal troubles, wearing the domino she refers to at the close of Book 1, to realize what is going on in the outside world (123). The significance of Nicole’s letters is that they are marked by an increasing self-knowledge. Moreover, they hint at the threat of the failure of psychiatry—that many patients are never cured. Nicole knows that she has not recovered and may never be cured—hence, she qualifies “coming back to life” with the word “slowly.” Bruce Grenberg, who sees value in these letters
primarily for their insight into the war, notes that “Neither the war’s end nor Nicole’s ‘recovery’ can be intended as a complete resolution of conflict. Rather, each represents a subtle remission of continuing trauma and disorientation” (216). Nicole knows all too well that her continuing trauma will prevent her from living a normal life in the near future. The final sentences of her last letter read: “I wish someone were in love with me like boys were ages ago before I was sick. I suppose it will be years, though, before I could think of anything like that” (124). Interestingly, Fitzgerald has Nicole, the mental patient, understand that she is no candidate for love and marriage any time soon whereas Dick, the psychiatrist, the one who should know better, admits that the “the question of marrying her has passed through my mind” (140).

Suggested in these letters, and pronounced later in the novel, is the fine line between therapist and rapist. After hearing the story of incest, Dick sighs and tells Franz that all he said in his letters back to Nicole was “Be a good girl and mind the doctors” (130). Dick’s short statement captures the politics of the system. Psychiatry is shown to be a corrupt institution that infantilizes women, referring to them as girls, and teaches them to submit to white male power. Also during this exchange with Dick, Franz tells him Nicole struggled with feeling complicit in what happened with her father. Tellingly, when she was in the company of girls at the boarding school, she had no feelings of complicity. The implication is that when she is at the hospital surrounded by male doctors and reading the “little Freud” (“not too much”) the doctors give her, she feels complicit
Nicole seems well enough to know that the doctors are revictimizing her by failing to disclose the information surrounding her illness. In other words, the therapy of reeducation is shown to be a form of brainwashing, fraught with gender politics.

Strikingly, Fitzgerald has Dick admit so much toward the end of Book 2. The book that had opened with such promise for Dick ends with an emasculated Dick who is mistaken for a man accused of raping and killing a five-year-old child and who cries, “‘I want to explain to these people how I raped a five-year-old girl. Maybe I did—’” (235). Although Dick may have Rosemary in mind when he makes this speech, for he and Rosemary had just consummated their affair, it seems likely that he is also thinking of Nicole and comes very close here to admitting that his involvement with Nicole may not have been in her best interest after all.

Perhaps the more important question than what causes Nicole to crack is what or who puts Nicole back together. Against all odds, she seemingly recovers from the incest. In addition to the nine letters that Nicole writes to Dick, we hear her voice again in the exact middle, the heart, of the novel, and in this section we gain insight into Nicole’s illness and wellness. Udo Natterman argues that in this retrospective part of the narrative,

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7 Not surprisingly there are hints in Warren’s story of incest to suggest that Nicole is complicit or even that she initiates. Warren explains that Nicole would come to his bed every morning after her mother died and sometimes sing to him (129).

8 In “The Influence of France on Nicole Diver’s Recovery in Tender Is the Night,” Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin argues that “Nicole recovers in spite of the psychiatrists rather than because of them,” and attributes her recovery to the less-repressed atmosphere of France (216-17).
given through Nicole’s eyes, the entire novel is captured. This section of the book is the only time, aside from the letters, that the point of view changes from third-person to first-person. Here we gain access into the patient’s mind and receive her voice unfiltered.

Natterman argues that this passage supports reading *Tender* as a book with many characteristics of a psychological novel, commenting on the strategic placement of the scene:

> Though this segment of 17 paragraphs and some 1,500 words makes up only about one percent of the entire novel, it is nevertheless significant. It is placed in the exact middle of the novel; it constitutes the longest passage directly dealing with Nicole’s mental state; it is presented prominently as stream-of-consciousness; and it covers almost six years of the novel’s time in only four pages of the book. (213)

In this section, she adds, Nicole’s “insecurity, her dependence on Dick, her fear of being alone and being pregnant, as well as the terrors of her breakup are described with great subtlety” (222). The major events, later elaborated in the novel, are mentioned in this passage, which suggests that the novel is concerned with “the return of the repressed,” the idea that repressed elements reappear in symptoms, often as symptomatic actions. In other words, Fitzgerald recognizes the cyclical, elusive, belated effects of trauma. This section can be read, to borrow from Cathy Caruth, as “the cry” of Nicole, who attempts to work through her trauma.

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9 Although Zelda was most likely hurt by the reproduction of her intimate letters to her husband, it is said that she liked “immensely” the stream-of-consciousness section (Natterman 213).
Nicole’s section, “from Woolloomooloo Bay to Biskra” hits on, among other things, the highlights of the marriage of Dick and Nicole and provides insight into why a divorce is imminent. The passage, which seems to come out of the blue, is found in the middle of Chapter 10 of Book 2. It opens with the line, “How do you do, lawyer,” in which Nicole is negotiating with her lawyer and sister how much money she is allowed (159). From the beginning of Nicole’s monologue money is clearly shown to be a point of contention between Nicole and Dick, as is evident when Nicole says, “No, Dick refuses to have anything to do with [the money]” and again “there’s more Warren money than Diver money” (159). Then immediately, Nicole is off on another (equally troubling) topic—love. Nicole tells Dick that she thinks “it’s wonderful to be just like everybody else,” a subtle nod to the question posed by Franz during their discussion of war and the vicarious shell-shock of those who only read about war in the newspapers (159). Ironically, Dick wants to be extraordinary (the greatest psychologist that ever lived), while Nicole just wants to be normal. Moreover, Nicole notes that the seeds for Dick’s destruction have already been planted, independent of her “lovely grassless garden” (25). She says, “Dick is tired of singing it, so go on alone, Dick,” which suggests that she realizes Dick is dissipating (160). Nicole alludes to her breakdown following the birth of her daughter, Topsy. Most likely, Nicole is distraught over the birth of her daughter because she fears, with good reason, that Topsy may be a victim of incest, like her mother. Nicole’s thwarted ambitions to be more than a mother are evident in this

10 At least twice in the text, Dick thinks inappropriately about his daughter: “At first he thought nothing. [Rosemary] was young and magnetic, but so was Topsy” (207) and “What do I care whether Topsy ‘adores’ me or not? I’m not bringing her up to be my wife” (257).
passage in which Nicole expresses a desire to translate English novels into French and study medicine like Dick. She repeats Dick’s words that “work is everything,” and “a man knows things and when he stops knowing things he’s like anybody else” (161, 162). The passage closes by hinting at her affair with Tommy and Dick’s affair with Rosemary, bringing the reader full circle: the section ends with Nicole on the “pleasant shore of the French Riviera,” translating a recipe for chicken à la Maryland, which is exactly how Book 1 opens (3).

Embedded in Nicole’s monologue are references to feeling well, which suggest that she is on the mend. She states that when she gets well, she wants “to be a fine person like you, Dick” (161). Just prior to this assertion, Nicole writes, “I am tired of knowing nothing and being reminded of it all the time” (161). Clearly, this message was proclaimed in her letters to Dick. The rich juxtaposition suggests that once the conspiracy of silence is broken, Nicole can recover. She also mentions being “well the first time” with Dick; however, she tells this not to Dick, but to Tommy Barban (162). Nicole thinks that through an affair with Tommy, she will be restored to health—if only for a short time. Just prior to ending her passage, Fitzgerald writes that for Nicole “Everything is all right” aside from the presence of Rosemary, whom, lest we forget, played the starring role in “Daddy’s Girl” (162).

One of the most significant parts of Nicole’s stream-of-consciousness occurs when she states that “Talk is men” (162). Nicole reasons that when she talks she embodies one of the males in her life—Dick, her son, Dohmler, and Tommy. Nicole’s words support what the narrator discloses in Book 1: “she knew few words and believed in none” (26). Like most victims of father-daughter incest, Nicole finds language too far
removed from the traumatic event to represent it in words. In other words, she is skeptical of words. Additionally, as a female, Nicole realizes that language is gendered in that the male voice is validated and legitimized, oftentimes at the expense of the female who is expected to be seen, not heard.

*Fitzgerald’s Ambivalence: “Happy to exist in a man’s world” (53)*

For all that Fitzgerald does to give Nicole voice throughout *Tender Is the Night* and for his foresight in exposing the patriarchal forces acting against Nicole’s recovery, he undermines his progressive views about the position of women in society. Fitzgerald’s deep ambivalence about his female characters indicates that he feared the consequences an egalitarian society would have on men. We read in Book 1 that Nicole was “happy to exist in a man’s world” and that she “preserved her individuality through men and not by opposition to them” (53). Those places in the text rendered from Nicole’s perspective, however, suggest otherwise. One of Dick’s—and perhaps Fitzgerald’s—worst fears is that Nicole (Zelda) is doing what Franz’s wife, Kaethe, thinks—cherishing her illness as an instrument of power. Nicole does seem to be in better health than Dick wants to admit. At the end, she is in a position not only to deal with the truth but to challenge Dick to civil battle. Fitzgerald reveals early in the novel that Dick is preparing for war with Nicole: “Though he thought she was the most attractive human creature he had ever seen, though he got from her everything he needed, he scented battle from afar, and subconsciously he had been hardening and arming himself, hour by hour” (100). However, it becomes increasingly clear that Nicole has been mobilizing as well. In the final book, she challenges Dick’s authority when, to his dismay, she does not believe that
the girl he was accused of kissing was just a delusion. In a poignant response, she shouts, “It’s always a delusion when I see what you don’t want me to see” (190). Clearly, she holds Dick partly responsible for keeping her in the dark about her illness. Nicole’s biggest challenge is posed toward the end of the book when, in attempting to censor a song with the word father in it, Nicole exclaims, “Oh, play it!” “Am I going through the rest of life flinching at the word ‘father’?” (290). It seems probable that if Dick and the other doctors had it their way, yes, Nicole would flinch in fear every time she hears the word father. This would keep her forever under their patriarchal power, in need of their protection.

But, arguably, Fitzgerald’s conflicted views on women’s social standing are best seen in the passage with the woman with “nervous eczema.” Unlike Nicole, this woman is not content living in a man’s world. She is “unsatisfactorily catalogued as nervous eczema,” thus, defined not by name but by illness. She is said to be Dick’s “most interesting case” (183). The little history he knows of the thirty-year-old woman is that she was an American painter in Paris. She used to be very beautiful but “now she was a living agonizing sore” (183). Dick claims her as his patient and in a conversation between the two of them the nameless woman reveals that she thinks she is suffering because she had “challenged men to battle” (184). She notes that she is “a symbol of something” (185). Unlike Nicole, whose incest is shown to be more than a metaphor, this woman’s illness is employed figuratively. As Grenberg points out, she is a symbol of “all Nicole’s

11 Scott Donaldson argues in “A Short History of Tender Is the Night” that the character most closely modeled on Zelda is not Nicole but the nameless woman-artist, tortured by eczema (186). In the Zelda biography, Milford confirms that Zelda did indeed suffer a bout of severe eczema in mid-June of 1930 (169).
innocence capriciously destroyed” and of “all of Dick’s idealism” revealed to be “terribly futile” (227). However, this woman, who is really dying from a sexually-transmitted disease, is also the symbol of a generation of women who dared to step out of their prescribed gender roles and define themselves not in subordination to men but in opposition to them. On the one hand, creating such a sexually-liberated character speaks to Fitzgerald’s progressive thinking. On the other hand, she is killed off in the novel. Against Dick’s wishes, she succumbs to final defeat in Book 3.

Whereas the woman with “nervous eczema” is written out of the narrative, Nicole continues the fight, seemingly emerging as victor at the expense of Dick by the novel’s end. In Book 3, Dick’s point of view fades into the background as Nicole’s becomes more prominent. In this section Nicole finds her voice and shows that she is capable of not flinching at the word father, a turning point that suggests she is strong enough to work through her trauma, independent of Dick. In uttering these words, she turns the linguistic key and begins to unravel trauma’s hold on her. Contrary to Caruth’s model which doesn’t admit of such a “cure,” and even LaCapra’s idea of “working through,” which suggests something much more ambiguous and uncertain than a “cure,” Nicole wishes to be “cured”—“and in a new way” (289). The remainder of the book, however, implies that her trauma is a vicious cycle in which she gets passed from one man to another. Instead of being “reeducated,” Nicole thinks her cure will come through a love affair. Her “cure,” however, turns out to be a mere repetition of transference. Fitzgerald writes,

“Why, I’m almost complete,” she thought. “I’m practically standing alone, without [Dick].” And like a happy child, wanting the completion as soon
as possible, and knowing vaguely that Dick had planned for her to have it, she lay on her bed as soon as she got home and wrote Tommy Barban in Nice a short provocative letter. (289)

Nicole’s feigned sense of empowerment, along with the statement that “For the first time in ten years she was under the sway of a personality other than her husband’s. Everything Tommy said to her became part of her forever,” lends credence to what the narrator calls Nicole’s “nascent transference to another man” (293, 301). From the damming portrait Fitzgerald provides of Tommy, a barbaric character whose main goal in life is war, it is difficult to see Nicole’s idea of being “cured” via an affair with Tommy as a healthy resolution. Susann Cokal, who sees “Tommy as another father figure,” rightly notes that their relationship is “a further repetition of the wrong story” (97). Fitzgerald undermines the idea that Nicole is restored to health by having her marry Tommy. In supporting Caruth’s and LaCapra’s understanding of trauma, he provides a realistic depiction of trauma in that one is never completely restored to health. But in having Nicole marry a man picked for her by Dick, Fitzgerald denies his female character independence and agency, and by having Nicole marry Tommy, of all men, the suggestion is that we are entering the Age of Barban, the age of the hypermasculine, an age that Fitzgerald does not seem to endorse, yet one in which Fitzgerald makes Nicole complicit.12

The collapse of civilization into barbarism is realized by the novel’s end. Whereas Tommy gets the last words in the novel, the final focus is on Dick. Fitzgerald closes Tender ambiguously, with a wandering Dick whose whereabouts are unclear. Just as

12 In an early part of the novel, we read that “Tommy is one of those men that Dick’s passed along to Nicole,” establishing from the beginning Dick’s control of the situation which undermines Nicole’s attempts to come into her own by the novel’s ending (43).
Nicole’s “cure” is undermined by her relationship with Tommy, Dick’s “liberty” is questioned by his lack of substantial relationships. After it becomes clear to Dick that Nicole is in love with Tommy, the narrator states, “Then he leaned his head forward on the parapet. The case was finished. Doctor Diver was at liberty” (302). He leaves Europe for America, journeying from Geneva, Switzerland, to the less sophisticated small town of Geneva, New York. We know that he is “much admired by the ladies” and is dabbling in psychiatry (314-15). The reader hears vague facts about Dick, such as that he was entangled in an affair with a girl who worked in a grocery store and involved in a lawsuit about some medical question. Unlike the wartime letters to which Dick always responded, he now no longer answers Nicole’s letters, which suggests his attempt to entirely close the case, but Dick’s lack of communication offers no real indication that he is freed in the process.

If the ending of Tender feels unresolved, perhaps it is because Fitzgerald, who wrote much of himself into the character of Dick and much of Zelda into the character of Nicole, felt uncertain about their future. Divorcing fact from fiction became increasingly difficult for Fitzgerald during the writing of Tender. The material that Fitzgerald uses in his novel encourages comparisons to his and Zelda’s lives. As most know, his plans and drafts for his novel are a story in itself. Suffice it to say, Zelda’s mental breakdowns and attacks of dissociation made the book what it is—a study of psychological illness resulting from traumatic experience.

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13 He also modeled Tommy on the French aviator Edouard Jozan, with whom Zelda had an affair, and Rosemary on Lois Moran, the movie star with whom he had an affair.
In a sober letter to Zelda, Scott comments on the toll her mental illness took on him, telling her “You were going crazy and calling it genius” (qtd. in Milford 183). *Tender Is the Night* has much to teach about the consequences of father-daughter incest. The novel is more than a clinical study of deterioration as it illuminates the politics surrounding psychological trauma. Fitzgerald’s most insightful contributions to our understanding of psychological trauma are that women in civilian life are subjected to trauma far more often than previously thought and that father-daughter incest crosses class and race lines, occurring in privileged, quite wealthy, white families such as the ducal Warren family as much as in poor and/or black families, as we’ll see in the next three chapters. Fitzgerald anticipates a great deal of what won’t be acknowledged until more than a half of a century later—that traumatic incest and the silence surrounding it severely impact too many families and make the real taboo not so much the act itself, as it is the disclosing of the family secret. Unlike Freud, who Herman notes, “glimpsed this truth and retreated in horror,” Fitzgerald exposes the horror in his insightful novel in which he suggests that trauma is both social and personal and those experiences are often gendered (28). He recognizes as early as 1934 not only that women occupied subordinate positions but that their second-class status was often maintained by the hidden manipulations of white male power. Fitzgerald hints at the need for psychiatric reform for diagnoses and treatments that would take into account the complexity of gendered experiences. In this light, it seems that the father-daughter incest is a necessary, indeed monumental, part of the novel, that, despite what John Peale Bishop contends, should not be forgotten.
References


Chapter III—“Naw You Ain’t No Man”:

Black Masculinity in the Trueblood Episode of Ellison’s Invisible Man

“How come you don’t go on ’way and leave us?’ is the first words Kate says to me. ‘Ain’t you done enough to me and this chile?’

‘I caint leave you,’ I says. ‘I’m a man and man don’t leave his family.’

“She says, ‘Naw you ain’t no man. No man’d do what you did.’

“I’m still a man,’ I says.”

Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (66)

In “Reconstructing Black Masculinity,” bell hooks argues that black men have embraced patriarchal phallocentrism—ideals that privilege the masculine and maintain that masculinity is the central focus and source of power and authority—to devastating effects (77).¹ Instead of challenging a white-supremacist, sexist system that has denied them a satisfying manhood, hooks explains, they have reinscribed it. And instead of lashing out at white male domination, they have often turned on women, using rape and incest as reactions against their inability to be “real men” as defined by the dominant culture (76). In Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, an introspective literary exploration of black male identity, we encounter an unnamed narrator who comes of age during a time before racial integration. During his journey to self-knowledge, Invisible Man meets many characters who shape his perspectives. One character he meets early in his

¹ As Patricia Hill Collins and Margaret Andersen perceptively note in their anthology, Race, Class, and Gender, blackness, or masculinity, or any category for that matter, is not a uniform experience and the language we use to describe and define different groups can be problematic (xviii).
adventures is Jim Trueblood, a man who insists on staying with his family even after he allegedly committed father-daughter incest. Critics over the years agree that Ellison is not writing a case for incest; however, what precisely he is doing in the second chapter of his epic novel has not been so obvious.

In her 2007 article, “Jim Trueblood and His Critic-Readers: Ralph Ellison’s Rhetoric of Dramatic Irony and Tall Humor in the Mid-Century American Literary Public Sphere,” Gillian Johns provides a rereading of the Trueblood episode to argue that Ellison’s work should not be read as an accommodationist piece to appease his white readers, but as a novel that discreetly undermines “assumptions about the inferiority of black cultural values, knowledge, and authority” (231). One of Johns’s most insightful observations is that Trueblood’s story is a tall tale (not to mention a dirty joke), and thus, the actions that Trueblood describes with vivid details never happened. When viewed in this light, it becomes clear that Ellison is using this spectacular story of father-daughter incest to challenge stereotypes about black male sexual desire and to exploit listener’s naïve biases. Moreover, Ellison employs paternal incest metaphorically to get us to acknowledge racial homosociality and to reverse the social raping of black men, all in an effort to make readers confront the trauma of racism that lies at the heart of American society. However, despite his valiant efforts to work through the trauma of racism, Ellison fails to bear witness to the trauma of father-daughter incest. Progressive on the one hand, Trueblood’s narrative of incest challenges stereotypes of black masculinity, yet, on the other, it reinforces male domination and reinscribes patriarchal phallocentrism. Trueblood’s tale, as well as the entire novel, neglects to illustrate the insidious trauma that plagues many female incest victims.
Published on the eve of the civil rights movement, *Invisible Man* was praised for its aesthetic and philosophical qualities and recognized as a landmark post-WWII novel central to American and African American literary history.\(^2\) Its engagement with the politics of racism, however, sparked, and continues to elicit, impassioned debate. Some early reviewers claimed that because it did not fit in the vein of Richard Wright’s “protest literature,” it wasn’t political enough (Hill 136). During the tumultuous 1960s era when the militant black power movement emerged, a new generation of black youth started to assert that the theme of invisibility did not apply and the novel’s apparent embrace of existential freedom was too abstract. The first book-length, single-author study of Ellison and his oeuvre was published in 1980: Robert O’Meally’s *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*, contained as its central chapter a close reading of *Invisible Man*. By the 1990s, critics began to explore the ideological struggles at work in the novel in which bold claims were made for its literary historical significance and political sensibilities. With the rise of poststructuralist theoretical approaches, the novel was praised for “opening up new technical and thematic possibilities for black fiction writers” (Butler xxxiii). The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the publication of two biographies of Ellison: Lawrence Jackson’s *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (2002) and Arnold Rampersad’s *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (2007). The interest in Ellison’s life has spawned more literary outpourings on *Invisible Man* that revisit a multitude of topics

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\(^2\) *Invisible Man* was published as a whole in 1952; however, copyright dates show the initial publication date as 1947, 1948. The discrepancy is explained by the fact that Ellison published the novel’s first chapter, “Battle Royal,” as a short story prior to the novel’s publication.
including Ellison’s use of folk materials, the novel’s modernist qualities, integration poetics, and, as I address in this chapter, gender dynamics.

Critics over the years have noted the importance of the Trueblood episode, but only a few have commented at length on the chapter. Selma Fraiberg was the first to explore Ellison’s use of incest in her 1961 “Two Modern Incest Heroes.” As her title suggests, she praises Trueblood for rising above the Oedipus myth and casting off the pretense of innocence by acknowledging his unconscious motives. She concludes that “it is the myth that destroys” (661). Later that same decade, Peter Hays revisited the theme of incest in Ellison’s novel, arguing that the Trueblood scene should be read as a satire: “Ellison is satirizing the prejudices of all who believe that any black, true-to-his-blood, regularly commits bestial acts like incest” (335). Hays maintains that Ellison employs incest as a metaphor for interpersonal and interracial relations in the novel. In 1984, Houston Baker added his voice to the discussion. In “To Move Without Moving: An Analysis of Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison’s Trueblood Episode,” he performs a close reading of the chapter to contend that Trueblood’s narrative enables him to transcend the stereotypes that whites have imposed on him. He emerges not just as a creative, but also a commercial, man who capitalizes on his story of incest. Trueblood, claims Baker, successfully challenges the castrating effects of white philanthropy. By the end of the 1980s, as feminist scholars began to object to Ellison’s depictions of female characters in Invisible Man, Hortense Spillers published “‘The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight’: In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers.” She was one of the
first to comment on how Trueblood’s wife and daughter are silenced characters. She concludes her essay by claiming that the incest taboo prevails for good reason.3

Understandably, only a few critics devoted entire essays to the incest: *Invisible Man* is not centrally about father-daughter incest. In fact, the portrayal of incest is confined to the second chapter of the novel, a mere 35 pages in a book just shy of 600. The novel is not Trueblood’s story, but is essentially the tale of a nameless black man who journeys from the rural south to Harlem, seeking personal identity. Aside from the Prologue and the Epilogue, the entire story is told as a flashback, in which the reader learns about the many memorable, yet traumatic, events Invisible Man experiences. In sum, he is used by almost everyone he comes in contact with.

The novel opens with a description of the “battle royal,” a humiliating event in which the narrator, who has just graduated from high school, is made to perform for the white men before he can deliver his graduation speech. Evident in this passage is white male homosociality which is characterized by Southern racist discourse and anxiety about—or displaced homoerotic desire for—black male sexuality. In this scene, Ellison shows Eve Sedgwick’s concept of “homosociality” in which (white) men in patriarchal societies establish strong masculine networks—homosocial bonds—primarily through exchanging women, proving their heterosexuality, and, as we see in this scene and throughout the novel, exhibiting their abhorrence of black men. Ellison illustrates how this phenomenon is a white male prerogative that does not apply to the black male

3 As we’ll see in Chapter 4, the publication of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* reinvigorated discussion of the Trueblood episode as critics such as Michael Awkward, Janice Doane, and Devon Hodges argue that Morrison is consciously revising Ellison’s chapter to foreground the daughter’s experience of incest.
community whose solidarity is foreclosed. The oppressive white male society splits Invisible Man from his community, which is essential for maintaining the inequitable power dynamics as it thwarts an effective cohesive struggle against the oppressor. Prevented from bonding with other black males, the black “boys” of the battle royal are made to perform for entertainment purposes: after a beautiful blonde woman is paraded in front of them, causing at least one to have an erection, they are made to box blindfolded and then tricked into picking up from an electrified rug what is later revealed to be fake money (26). In the first chapter, Ellison sets the tone for the rest of the book in which black men are denied humanity and pitted against each other for the enjoyment of white men.

Although Invisible Man is given a scholarship for the black college upon giving his speech at the end of the battle royal, his undergraduate years are cut short. He gets expelled from college as a result of the Trueblood events. He then ventures to New York with what he assumes are letters of recommendation from the president of his college but turn out to be anything but. After teaming up with the Communist party, the Brotherhood, which Invisible Man thinks will provide a venue for evoking social change and gaining equal rights for black men, he becomes disillusioned by the group’s failure to honor individuality. And so, by the novel’s end, we find Invisible Man in a secluded hole in a basement in Harlem contemplating his personal and social responsibility.

Charting the novel’s plot might indicate that the Trueblood chapter is a convenient device that furthers the storyline, for Invisible Man gets expelled from the

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4 These letters that Dr. Bledsoe writes say essentially the same thing that Invisible Man dreams his grandfather to say at the end of the first chapter: “To Whom It May Concern”; “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (33).
university because, instead of showing one of the white college founders, Mr. Norton, evidence of racial progress, Invisible Man showed him the shack of Jim Trueblood, who so willingly shares his story of incest. The episode is brief and Trueblood and his family are barely referred to in the rest of the novel. But, Ellison could have chosen any number of reasons to have his narrator expelled from college. He chose a story of father-daughter incest told from the perspective of a poor black farmer to a white, wealthy, seemingly-cultured Mr. Norton and Invisible Man, who is chauffeuring Norton for the day. The novel as a whole can be read as a Bildungsroman that dramatizes Invisible Man’s neo-mythic journey and transformation from innocence to experience/hipster-ism. The Trueblood episode is the initiating factor (more so than the battle royal) that signifies Invisible Man’s “loss of virginity” and true beginning of being educated in the ways of a racially-rigged male society that bonds together in fear of, or homoerotic desire for, black male sexuality. Invisible Man’s journey begins in earnest after he leaves the college founded and controlled by white men. For most of the novel, he grapples with reconciling the conflicting messages dealt to him by the Nortons and the Truebloods of society.

Challenging Stereotypes and Moving Past Trauma

The second chapter is a dizzying hall of mirrors in which the reader never quite knows if Trueblood committed the incest or not. Johns points out that there are good reasons to doubt the truth of Trueblood’s tale and read it as a rhetorically-sophisticated game in which master storyteller and trickster figure Trueblood outsmarts his captivated

5 As we’ll see, in the final chapter of the novel Trueblood is mentioned in an important way that speaks to Invisible Man’s coming-of-age.
audience, and not as a definitive account of how Trueblood impregnated his daughter. As Invisible Man is made to entertain an audience of white men in the previous chapter during the battle royal, Trueblood also entertains the white men, in his case with a humorous, albeit at times crude, story of incest. Knowing that direct acts of aggression against whites are socially prohibited, he fashions a story that conforms to stereotypes of black male desire. Even before Invisible Man and Norton hear Trueblood’s story, Ellison drops subtle hints to suggest that the story is fabricated. We are first told that Trueblood’s reputation prior to the incest was one of hard worker and caring father. Moreover, we learn that Trueblood has a knack for storytelling: he was known as the “one who told the old stories with a sense of humor and magic that made them come alive” (46). When Trueblood is asked by Norton to talk with him, he complies “without surprise” (51) and begins his tale as if rehearsed: “as though he had told the story many, many times” (54). And, of course, one cannot gloss over the twinkle in Trueblood’s eye as he looks from Invisible Man to Norton in the midst of his story: “Trueblood seemed to smile at me behind his eyes as he looked from the white man to me and continued” (61).

Such details do not account for the damning evidence of Matty Lou’s pregnancy or the axe wound inflicted by wife Kate upon discovering the incest that Trueblood is made to carry with him for a fictional eternity; however, it seems plausible that Matty Lou was impregnated by the young boy who, Trueblood notes, has been “‘startin’ to hang ‘round her’” and that the axe wound is a self-inflicted wound, a rather small price to pay when compared to the money the white folks give him after hearing his story (54). Moreover, we are told that when Invisible Man and Norton pull up to Trueblood’s house, an old cabin still standing from the days of slavery, “Both women moved with the weary,
full-fronted motions of far-gone pregnancy,” which suggests that both Kate and Matty
Lou are in their final trimester (47). And yet, the axe wound that Trueblood claims he
received from Kate the night of the incident has “[f]lies and fine white gnats” swarming
around it, which suggests that the wound is still open (54). Did Kate really harm him so
badly that months after its infliction, his wound is still gaping? It doesn’t seem likely
although Trueblood metaphorically embodies the wound of the American black family.

The incongruities are not just confined to Trueblood’s tale. The story leading up
to the story of incest is also rife with contrasts that upset assumptions about “civilized”
white patriarchal society. Just as we learn a little about Trueblood before we meet him,
we also are given a few details about Mr. Norton. In his initial description of Norton,
Ellison writes, “A Bostonian, smoker of cigars, teller of polite Negro stories, shrewd
banker, skilled scientist, director, philanthropist, forty years a bearer of the white man’s
burden, and for sixty a symbol of the Great Traditions” (37). One can’t help wondering
about the content of the “polite Negro stories” that Norton circulates.

As Invisible Man drives Norton around for the afternoon, Norton shares a story
about his daughter, his own true blood. The white college benefactor explains to Invisible
Man that his destiny is somehow connected with the destiny of black people; however, as
we’ll find out soon enough, it also has a strange connection to his now-deceased
daughter. Fraiberg points out that “His love for his daughter and his good works for the
Negro are the two sustaining forces of his life. We do not understand yet how they are
connected” (656). As Norton tries to make clear what he means by their shared destiny,
he indulges in detailed description of his daughter who died while abroad with her father,
a loss that consumes an aging Norton. Describing his daughter, Norton tells Invisible Man,

“She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. I could never believe her to be my own flesh and blood. Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again…She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. A delicate flower that bloomed in the liquid light of the moon. A nature not of this world, a personality like that of some biblical maiden, gracious and queenly. I found it difficult to believe her my own…” (42)

As heartfelt (and provocative) as Norton’s evocation of his daughter might sound, his words take on new meaning in the context of the Trueblood episode.

Commenting on Norton’s peculiar relationship with his daughter, Robert Stepto affirms that “Appropriately enough, her image is not a photograph on the wall or a totem on the lawn, but a cameo of sorts which her father reverently carries on his person, as close to his waist as to his heart” (374). Curiously, this grieving father has yet to forgive himself for his daughter’s death, or for his “fatal attraction” to her. According to Hays, Norton may very well blame “himself for her early death, considering it as divine retribution for his lust” (336). Ostensibly moved by Norton’s tale of his daughter, Invisible Man “[h]alf-consciously” veers off the beaten path and ends up at Trueblood’s shack (46). With thoughts of his daughter on his mind and her photograph pressed to his person Norton meets Trueblood, whose wife and daughter are both pregnant, seemingly by Trueblood. Upon seeing what he perceives as a monstrous demonstration of surfacing
unbridled sexual urges, Norton is envious that Trueblood committed such an inconceivable act and is baffled that he is “unharmed”: “‘You did and are unharmed!’ he shouted, his blues eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation” (51, emphasis added). The suggestion is that Norton’s conscious and unconscious impulses are at odds. The white patriarch’s envy is hard to overlook in trying to make sense of the Trueblood episode in the grand scheme of *Invisible Man’s* epic design. Mary Rohrberger correctly observes, “Norton’s interest in Trueblood’s story is characterized by an urgency explainable only by the assumption that he must have shared a powerful attraction to his own daughter, now dead” (127). Hays is even more direct in his reading of the Norton/Trueblood pairing: “The word ‘envy’ above gives us a clue, if we need one: Trueblood has done what Norton had wanted to do” (336). Indeed, Norton, who “almost ran across the road” to Trueblood’s lawn, is interested in hearing Trueblood’s story of incest because he desired his own daughter (50). It is no wonder why Norton proves to be a one-man enthralled audience. When questioned how he has “‘looked upon chaos’” and has not been destroyed, Trueblood responds, “‘I’m all right, suh…My eyes is all right too’” (51). Trueblood’s intriguing reply suggests that, unlike so many of the characters in the novel who are plagued by social blindness, Trueblood can see just fine, a stark contrast to Norton, who fails to see that the white patriarch is deeply implicated in the story of father-daughter incest.

In addition to problematizing Invisible Man’s naïve biases and search for truth, the Trueblood episode challenges white male domination as it shows power shifting, if only temporarily, from the white upper class to the black lower class, or what Ellison calls in his Epilogue, “the lower frequencies” (581). Trueblood seems to be well aware of
how he is seen by society. His black male selfhood is defined as the image of the brute, which, in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, bell hooks describes as “untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling” (xii). hooks explains that in a “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” the black man is thought to have inferior intelligence and morality (xii). As such, he is predisposed to commit father-daughter incest. Invisible Man notes how easily Trueblood matches the assumptions that breed institutional inter- and intra-racism: “We were embarrassed by the earthy harmonies [the country quartet of the black-belt people] sang, but since the [white] visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet” (47). He is said to have earthy qualities and to emit animal sounds. In sum, Ellison constructs him as living the stereotype of “the primitive.” For most of the chapter, Trueblood as trickster figure presents himself in an unrefined, presocial state, almost bragging about how he violated the incest taboo.

Ellison complicates the stereotypical image of the oversexed black male, however, by having the incest result from a convoluted, coded, yet highly suggestive

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6 Intra-racism describes the phenomenon in which a racialized group internalizes white supremacy, and, in turn, self-loathing, and redirects the gaze and judgment at members of its own community. Those individuals at the lighter end of the spectrum are considered more attractive, and are therefore privileged, whereas dark skin is stigmatized. Ellison addresses the stratified color line in a 1964 interview in which he reiterates the “old saying amongst Negroes: If you’re black, stay back; if you’re brown, stick around; if you’re white, you’re right” (864). For one of the earliest critical uses of the word *intra-racism*, see Wallace Thurman’s “Harlem Facets” (May 1927). For a recent article that explores intra-racism and African American artistic expression, see Faedra Chatard Carpenter’s “Addressing ‘The Complex’-ities of Skin Color: Intra-Racism and the Plays of Hurston, Kennedy, and Orlandersmith” (2009).
dream that parodies Freudian dream- scape. The incest, if it was in fact incest, arises not from some conscious desire on Trueblood’s part (although the storytelling would be conscious) but rather from a miscellaneous dream in which it becomes increasingly clear that Trueblood doesn’t desire his daughter nearly as much as he desires the white man’s power. Through the erotic dream, Ellison is able to juxtapose Trueblood’s longing for power with Norton’s lust for his daughter. As Leon Forrest puts it, “we discover an abundance of underground images indicating that Trueblood lusts for power in the real world as much as the powerful Norton lusts for the body of his own daughter” (309). The story of how Trueblood “‘done fouled!’” (to use Kate’s words) begins with the best of intentions as Trueblood is innocently enough sleeping three abed with himself and wife on either ends and daughter Matty Lou in the middle, all in an effort to keep warm (62).

Before he finds himself atop Matty Lou, Trueblood explains that he had a distorted dream of intercourse, which ultimately leads him to “dream-sin,” providing yet another indication that Ellison is using incest as a metaphor for interracial relations in the novel (62). As Trueblood “drops[s] into the dream,” he provides not-so-subtle clues to suggest that his entry into the white woman’s bedroom is analogous to his entry into his daughter (57). The dream opens with Trueblood, who “‘don’t quite remember it all,’”

As Baker sees it, “From Freud’s point of view, Trueblood’s dream and subsequent incest seem to represent a historical regression” (78). Furthermore, Baker argues that “Insofar as Freud’s notions to totemism represent a myth of progressive social evolution, the farmer’s story acts as a countermyth of inversive social dissolution. It breaks society down into components and reveals man in what might be called his presocial and unaccommodated state” (78). In case we missed the Freudian undertones in the Trueblood chapter, Ellison plants a reminder later in the novel in which “An open book, something called Totem and Taboo,” was resting on the desk of the homosexual Emerson Jr. (180). But as John Hersey says, “none of the Freudian explanations seem adequate” to fully explain what Ellison is doing in the Trueblood chapter (291).
looking for “some fat meat” that the white folks own (57). The white folks, however, send him to Mr. Broadnax, who lives up on a hill. After climbing the steep hill, Trueblood goes in “the front door” (57). Although he “knows it’s wrong,” he says that “he can’t help it” (57).

If we miss the point about Trueblood’s lust for power, Ellison makes it quite clear in the remainder of Trueblood’s dream, which, in conformity with Norton’s and other white men’s expectations, is filled with sexual detail evoking the stereotype of black male promiscuity. Trueblood notes that no one is in the living room so he goes into what turns out to be “a big white bedroom,” where everything in the room is white, and not coincidentally, belonging to a white woman (57). At this point, Trueblood notes that the scent of woman is overwhelming: “all around me I can smell woman, can smell it gittin’ stronger all the time” (57). The implication of this line seems to be that Trueblood is unconsciously penetrating his daughter. Immediately realizing his mistake in being in a white woman’s bedroom, he tries to escape, but to no avail. In fact, the dream turns into something of a nightmare when Trueblood realizes that there is “one of them tall grandfather clocks” in the corner of the room, which is striking the time (57). Out steps a white lady who’s “got on a nightgown of soft white silky stuff and nothin’ else” (57-58). Trueblood again attempts to flee, but he notices that he is stuck. The woman in his dream (or daughter in his story) starts to scream, holding Trueblood tightly around his neck. He is afraid to “touch her ’cause she’s white,” but in a moment of frenzy, he throws her on the bed (58). Mr. Broadnax then enters the room/dream and dismisses Trueblood’s dilemma with the statement, “They just niggus, leave ’em do it” (58). Trueblood, though, can’t dismiss his jam so readily. He instead enters the “hot and dark” door of the
grandfather clock and runs, “runnin’ so good it’s like flyin’” (58, 59). Upon seeing what he thinks is a jack-o-lantern, Trueblood runs towards it only for it to burst. In place of “a scald,” feelings of drowning in a lake overwhelm Trueblood, who soon enough is “through it” and “relieved to be out and in the cool daylight agin” (59).

After sharing his dream with Norton and Invisible Man, Trueblood next launches into details about the nightmare he is unwittingly engaged in with his daughter. As Spillers puts it, “If the preceding sequence might be termed a narrative replay, then what follows equals a full-dress opening night” (135). Upon waking up, Trueblood realizes that he is on top of Matty Lou, who is repeatedly crying out “Daddy” (59). Thoughts of Kate pass through Trueblood’s mind: he is afraid of waking her up because he knows she will not understand that the incest is the result of a “crazy dream” (59). However, even fear of his wife’s reaction doesn’t prevent him from sneaking in details that cast Matty Lou, whom he thinks has just recently become sexually active, as the seductress. Trueblood questions, “‘maybe sometimes a man can look at a little ole pigtail gal and see him a whore—you’all know that?’” (59). Norton seems to know. Further commenting on Matty Lou’s complicit role in the mess, Trueblood interprets her sleepy mumbles to be what “a woman says when she wants to tease and please a man” (56). Trying to get himself out of a “tight spot,” “to move without movin’,” to “walk out” after “flyin’ in,” Trueblood states that he is not the only one struggling with conflicted emotions (59). According to Trueblood, “‘Matty Lou can’t hold out no longer and gits to movin’ herself’” (60). Matty Lou, just like the white woman in his dream, grabs hold of him, and, as Trueblood says, “‘She didn’t want me to go then—and to tell the honest-to-God truth I found out that I didn’t want to go neither’” (60). By this point in the story, it is clear that
in addition to writing a satire of black male barbarism, as Hays notes, Ellison is questioning who is guilty, and hints that perhaps Matty Lou should take some of the blame (335).

Not only does this chapter expose Norton’s incestuous passion and cast doubt on Matty Lou’s role in the affair, it also reveals the internal African American class tensions, how the black male community is prevented from homosocial bonding, and Invisible Man’s inexperience. Trueblood explains that he is unsure if he is guilty. In his words, “‘I thinks and thinks, until I thinks my brain go’n bust, ’bout how I’m guilty and how I ain’t guilty’” (66). The black community certainly thinks that Trueblood is guilty. Upon learning of the incest, Kate, we’re told, starts “talkin’ the unknown tongue, like a wild woman” (61). She goes after Trueblood with a double-barrel shotgun, an iron, and finally an axe, reasoning that it is better to “spill [blood] than to foul” (62). Neither Kate nor Matty Lou speak to Trueblood. Likewise, the black preacher doesn’t believe that Trueblood is sorry and he “tells [him] to git out of his house, that [he’s] the most wicked man he’s ever seen and that [he] better go confess [his] sin and make [his] peace with God” (66). And, the “biggity school folks up on the hill” try to run him out of the county for being a disgrace to their community (52). Even Invisible Man, who admits to being “torn between humiliation and fascination” is upset by Trueblood’s ability to talk so freely about incest in the presence of a respectable white man (68). Invisible Man thinks that in spite of the college’s attempts to lift up Trueblood and the other black-belt people, Trueblood “did everything it seemed to pull us down” (47). In the midst of his story, Invisible Man fears that Norton will find him guilty by implication: “How can he tell this to white men, I thought, when he knows they’ll say that all Negroes do such things?”
At this point in his journey, Invisible Man does not understand why Trueblood would fashion a story of sexual violation. Here Ellison highlights Invisible Man’s persisting naiveté, which he won’t confront until the novel’s end.

In contrast to the way Trueblood is ostracized and disowned by his own family and black community, he is rewarded by the white folks, something that he claims he can’t make sense of although the reader knows that he understands it quite well, even capitalizes on it. Trueblood notes that the white men “‘wanted to hear about the gal lots of times and they gimme somethin’ to eat and drink and some tobacco’” (53). Claiming to be scared of the white authorities at first, he then relaxes when he sees that “‘lotta folks is curious and goes outta they way to help’” (52). Instead of being outraged or perturbed, the whites want to keep the sharecropper among them, arguably for less than noble reasons. By helping Trueblood, the white community can maintain the hierarchal social structure and sublimate their own desires by listening to Trueblood’s story. It is a way for them to assuage their own feelings of guilt, whether stemming from incestuous desires and/or from racism, and to reward Trueblood for showcasing the stereotypical traits of black masculinity as a frustrated manhood that ultimately seeks expression in violent and deviant ways.

Trueblood’s story seemingly confirms the culturally-dominant beliefs in the immorality of those racially othered, and thereby helps to justify the white community’s own prejudices in a way that they can cleverly disguise as charity. He tells Norton and Invisible Man that he is better now than ever before:

“Why, I guess there ain’t a colored man in the county who ever got to take so much of the white folkse’s time as I did. So finally they tell me not to
worry, that they was going to send word up to the school that I was to stay right where I am. Them big niggus didn’t bother me, neither. It just goes to show yuh that no matter how biggity a nigguh gits, the white folks can always cut him down. The white folks took up for me. And the white folks took to coming out here to see us and talk with us. Some of ’em was big white folks, too, from the big school way cross the State. Asked me lots ’bout what I thought ’bout things, and ’bout my folks and kids, and wrote it all down in a book. But best of all, suh, I got more work now than I ever did have before…” (53)

In addition to more jobs, Trueblood receives much charity: “he and his family acquire new clothes and shoes, abundant food and work, long-needed eyeglasses, and even the means to reshingle their cabin” (Baker 80-81).

Instead of being chased out of the county, the white community give Trueblood more help ““than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a nigguh he was”” (67). Even, perhaps especially, Norton follows suit. When first hearing about the incest (“They say that her father did it”), Norton questions how Trueblood is faring and says, ““Perhaps I could help”” (52). At the end of the tale, a traumatized Norton, who has turned a whiter shade of pale, reaches into his “red Moroccan-leather wallet,” not coincidentally pulling out the picture of his daughter, and hands Trueblood a hundred-dollar bill, the exact amount that the “college folks” were going to give him to leave the county and settle elsewhere (69). Also not coincidentally, as Norton hands Trueblood the money, his children are singing “London Bridge’s Fallin’ Down,” appropriately signifying the decline of Western civilization. What is also worth noting is that in
contrast to Invisible Man, who strives to do everything right, Trueblood “admits” to doing everything wrong and is rewarded. At the beginning of the chapter, Invisible Man had high hopes that Norton will give him “a large tip, or a suit, or a scholarship next year” (38). At the end of the chapter, a defeated Invisible Man curses Trueblood: “I saw Jim Trueblood wave as I threw the car into gear. ‘You bastard,’ I said under my breath. ‘You no-good bastard! You get a hundred-dollar bill!’” (69). As it turns out, Invisible Man gains nothing and seemingly loses everything that day. As a result of the day’s events, he is stripped of his scholarship and expelled from the university, receiving letters that ensure he won’t meet with success any time soon.

**Reinscribing Patriarchal Phallocentrism: Trueblood’s False Sense of Emancipation**

Undoubtedly, Trueblood’s cleverly-contrived narrative poses a challenge to the assumption that all African American men are happily promiscuous, incestuous, or absent fathers. Despite the challenges it poses to stereotypes of black masculinity, however, Trueblood’s narrative of incest conveys a false sense of emancipation. At the end of his tale, readers should question, just how rewarded is Trueblood? Even though he gains financial wealth through the telling of his tale, his narrative is a commodity in which he, much like Invisible Man and the other black males of the battle royal, is made to perform stereotypes of male blackness and entertain the white men. This public posture of entertainer, Baker explains, is one of the only resources “that blacks at any level can barter for a semblance of decency and control in their lives” (90). Moreover, Trueblood’s “wealth” is dependent on the white people’s charity, further solidifying the hierarchal structure that keeps blacks subservient to whites. According to Baker, “In one sense, the
entire Trueblood episode can be read as a pejorative commentary on the castrating effects of white [male] philanthropy” (77). Indeed, the white men provide for Trueblood’s family in a way that he never could; thus, he is shown to be less of a man in a society that prides itself on having its male members fulfill the roles of provider and protector.

Moreover, Trueblood’s cunning story of father-daughter incest masks the trauma of racism that Trueblood himself suffers. Instead of blatantly telling the reader about Trueblood’s trauma, Ellison veils the trauma and misleads naïve or not-yet-initiated readers into believing that the incest seems to result in quite the opposite. Spillers notes that Trueblood seems to “emerg[e] wealthier, healthier (because of ‘new wealth,’ we are led to suppose), and wise” (133). But the causes and consequences for Trueblood suggest otherwise. For example, the story of incest opens with Trueblood, wife, and daughter sleeping in one bed because of utter poverty: it is so cold and they are too poor to afford coal. Racial discrimination becomes apparent when Trueblood explains, “I tried to git help but wouldn’t nobody help us and I couldn’t find no work or nothin’” (53). The implication is that no one wanted to hire a black man. Additionally, Trueblood’s storytelling becomes an almost ritualized repetition of trauma that further indebts him to the white community. Although Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra, among others, have argued that there is therapeutic potential to narrating one’s story of trauma, this does not seem to be the case with Trueblood. Trueblood’s tale provides him a voice, but the story he articulates is one in which both he and his daughter are objectified and retraumatized.

The most disturbing part of the Trueblood tale, at least for this reader, is that in working through the trauma of racism, Ellison has Trueblood invent a story of father-
daughter incest that does not show the traumatic potential of incest for father or for daughter. Playing with the stereotypes of black masculinity and having Trueblood contrive a tall tale of familial sex, he has Trueblood exploit the trauma of father-daughter incest. Furthermore, Ellison suggests that to counteract feelings of emasculation and impotence brought on by a white male supremacist society that bonds together over racism, one of Trueblood’s only alternatives is to demonstrate his potency through his seductive tale about how he impregnated his daughter and has not just one, but two, women with child.

Trueblood, who is smarter than Norton or even Invisible Man would be willing to admit at this point, seems to understand that although incest is *said* to be an act of regression, it is also a secretly-sanctioned way to gain access to patriarchal phallocentrism. He knows that phallic power, being “a real man,” means being entitled to a number of things—including the body of one’s daughter. Discussing the black man’s (limited, if not outright denied) access to the patriarchal role, hooks argues in “Reconstructing Black Masculinity” that rape by black men should be viewed as a political action in which black men act out their feelings of powerlessness in an attempt to gain entry into patriarchal culture (76). Trueblood’s allegiance to patriarchal phallocentrism is demonstrated in the words exchanged between him and his wife in which he insists, despite her protests, that he is a man and “‘man don’t leave his family'” (66). It seems as if Trueblood, who successfully externalizes stereotypes of black masculinity, has internalized social constructions of white masculinity, failing to

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8 Doane and Hodges read Trueblood’s assertion as a “scary rather than responsible claim to power” (37). Trueblood’s wife, we know, dismisses it altogether.
recognize that these ideals may be just as damaging to black females as stereotypes have been to black males.

Ellison’s treatment of women in general, and Matty Lou in particular, have understandably troubled many critics. Female characters are few and far between (literally between, as in the case of Matty Lou as described in Trueblood’s tale), and the ones who are included in the novel are overwhelmingly stereotypes. Summarizing feminist responses to *Invisible Man* in her article on Ellison’s invisible women, Claudia Tate writes,

> Questions about the female characters in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* seem to elicit two types of response: The initial one is, “What women?” since women clearly occupy peripheral roles in the novel. And then after Mary Rambo and the other female characters—that is, the old slave woman, the magnificent blonde, the rich sophisticate Emma, the anonymous seductress, and finally the prophetic and pathetic Sybil—are recalled, the second response is something like, “Oh, those stereotypes.”

(163)

Commenting on the surreality, sexuality, and role of women in *Invisible Man*, Rohrberger voices similar concerns:

> Nowhere in *Invisible Man* is there a woman not characterized as automaton—prostitute or mother. From the blonde woman in the opening scene, through the innocent and nameless black girls who dream of romantic love and marriage, to Sybil, subsumed by fantasies of rape, to
Mary, the “good” mother, who sustains as well as destroys, the women are one-dimensional figures playing roles in a drama written by men. (130)

Certainly, Trueblood’s narrative of incest fits into the homosocial drama constructed by white men in which women are static characters. Spillers is direct in her objection to the way in which Kate and Matty Lou are portrayed:

For all intents and purposes, the wife/mother Kate and the daughter/surrogate love Matty Lou are deprived of speech, of tongue, since what they said and did and when are reported/translated through the medium of Trueblood. These silent figures, like materialized vectors in a field of force, are curiously silent. (132)

Since the entire tale of incest is told by Trueblood (and the rest of the story told by Invisible Man), Matty Lou is deprived of speech, and, the reader receives a limited account of the incest and never knows the extent of her trauma—whether stemming from racism or from familial abuse.

Unlike Tender Is the Night, in which Nicole Diver’s voice and thoughts are included, in Invisible Man, Matty Lou’s feelings are never shared with the reader. She is bodily present in the text. For instance, when Invisible Man and Norton pull up to the Trueblood cabin, Matty Lou and Kate are performing a typical female job—washing clothes. It becomes clear though that it is Trueblood who airs the dirty laundry. As the women scurry off upon Invisible Man’s and Norton’s arrival, the implication is that these women are meant to be seen and not heard, a standard practice/role of the female in patriarchy. Emphasis is placed on their pregnant bodies, not on their voices. In fact, Matty Lou is consistently denied voice throughout the saga. Aside from moaning the
words “‘Daddy, Daddy, oh, Daddy’” during the alleged incest and then saying
“‘Mamma! Oooooo, MAMA!’” when Kate finds out what has happened, Matty Lou is
not granted voice (59, 62). Trueblood explains that in addition to Matty Lou not speaking
to him, after she finds out she is pregnant, she “won’t speak a word to nobody” (67). The
little we do know about her suggests that she was complicit in, if not encouraging, the
incest with her father. In other words, Trueblood, and perhaps even Ellison, wants his
listeners to think that the “pigtail gal” wasn’t so innocent and played a role in the
seduction (59).

Equally problematic is the pregnancy of Matty Lou. Arguably, in suggesting that
both Kate and Matty Lou were impregnated by Trueblood, Ellison conveys the virility of
the sharecropper and this could be read as a way to reverse the impotence Trueblood has
experienced from being a black man in a white male supremacist society. Baker notes
that “only the Trueblood encounter reveals the phallus as indeed producing Afro-
American generations rather than wasting its seed” (80). Not coincidentally, Ellison casts
the poor farmer as the most fertile, the truest to his blood, father in the entire novel.
Proving Trueblood’s masculinity in the eyes of white men, it also suggests that in
patriarchal culture real manhood is predicated on using the female body. Although the
implication is that the Trueblood name will live on in his numerous offspring, Matty
Lou’s baby is bound to be ridiculed and seen as a “‘black ’bomination,’” since, regardless
of whether Trueblood committed the incest and impregnated his daughter or not,
Trueblood has the last word, in this case only word, so his legend will prevail (67).

Unfortunately, Kate doesn’t fare much better than her pregnant daughter. With
child herself, Kate has the potential to be the moral center of this chapter, and perhaps
most importantly, to pose the biggest challenge to patriarchal phallocentrism. Kate edges *slightly* beyond stereotype and decides to take action into her own hands. Upon finding out about the incest, she tries to do what she can to punish her husband and to protect her daughter. For instance, she charges after Trueblood with weapons. When thinking that Trueblood ran off for good, Kate surrounds her daughter with “a heap of women” and even calls Aunt Cloe to perform an abortion on Matty Lou’s baby, reasoning that this would be the most humane outcome (66). However Kate’s efforts are futile, for once Trueblood comes back to claim his spot as head of the family he overpowers his wife and children. He runs off the heap of women and threatens to kill Cloe if she touches a finger on any of “my womenfolks” (67). Kate’s only alternative, like her daughter’s, is to retreat in silence.

*Invisible Man and the Woman Question*

At the end of his overview of Invisible Man’s critical reception, Robert Butler states, “Certainly much more needs to be said about Ellison’s envisioning of female experience and how feminine values are an important part of his vision” (xxxvii). Certainly seeing beyond the stereotypes of black *masculinity*, affirming black *manhood*, lies at the heart of Ellison’s novel. Invisible Man is primarily concerned with how white society has failed to see the complexity of black *male* identity, nullifying and rendering it invisible. As the novel comes full circle, Ellison leaves us to ponder white society’s pervasive social blindness juxtaposed with Invisible Man’s newfound vision. In the final chapter Invisible Man has an epiphany in which he makes a connection between himself and Trueblood. Finding himself in a situation eerily similar to the one described by
Trueblood in the second chapter, he states, “It was a state neither of dreaming nor of waking, but somewhere in between, in which I was caught like Trueblood’s jaybird that yellow jackets had paralyzed in every part but his eyes” (568). In the second chapter, Trueblood first used the jaybird metaphor to explain to Invisible Man and Norton that he felt “‘frozen’” once Kate discovered the incest: “‘I was just like a jaybird that the yellow jackets done stung ’til he’s paralyzed—but still alive in his eyes and he’s watchin’ ’em sting his body to death’” (63). At the very end of the novel as the narrator reflects on his journey, he realizes that he is not that different from Trueblood: they have both been immobilized yet can clearly see their situation and place it in a larger context.

Recognizing his alliance with Trueblood, Invisible Man discovers his distance from Norton. In the Epilogue, the brief reunion between Invisible Man and Norton marks a turning point in Invisible Man’s indoctrination in which Norton’s persistent delusions contrast with his emerging perceptions. In the novel’s concluding pages, Invisible Man runs into a disoriented Norton on a New York City subway. The “thinner,” “wrinkled,” yet “dapper” Norton asks Invisible Man for directions to Centre Street (577). Invisible Man, however, is struck by Norton’s lack of recognition for a man whom he claimed as his destiny. Upon questioning, “‘But don’t you really know who I am?’” Invisible Man is disheartened to learn that he neither recognizes him nor remembers claiming him as his future (578). Furthermore, Norton is not in the least bit ashamed. At the end of their exchange, a confident Invisible Man tells Norton that “if you don’t know where you are, you probably don’t know who you are” (578). “In the public space of the New York train,” Johns writes, “the Invisible Man is at home with moral and social ambiguity, as well as verbal play, while Norton holds fast to the comparatively mechanical social
privilege to which he is accustomed” (250). Invisible Man finally realizes the humanity of Trueblood and those who speak from “the lower frequencies” (581). Moreover, he acknowledges that Trueblood is one of the invisible men who use the power of the spoken word to combat the trauma he experiences because of the color of his skin.

Despite furthering our understanding of the experiences of many black men in the United States in the 1940s, Ellison’s stance on the experiences of black females has not been so clear. Rohrberger proposes that Ellison includes stereotypical female figures in his novel to call attention to the stereotypes and objectification. The fact that Invisible Man, even after his 600-page journey, fails to acknowledge the humanity of women and realize that they share a common plight, has much to tell us about women’s place(s) in patriarchy. For example, on more than one occasion he is confronted with vulnerable females, but, instead of forging a connection between his journey to self-actualization and women’s attempts for equality, he disregards black females as inconsequential mammy figures (Mary and Kate) and uses white females as sex objects (Sybil, the white woman in Trueblood’s dream, and the stark-naked blonde woman who dances for the men at the battle royal). There is a brief moment of human recognition by Invisible Man during the battle royal scene when he focuses on the eyes of the blonde woman, which are filled with “terror and disgust,” much like the terror in his own eyes (20). However, the progressive thinking is undermined in Ellison’s sentence: “I wanted at one and the same time to run from the room, to sink through the floor, or go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of the others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her thighs formed a capital V” (19).
Showing that women occupy a subservient role in patriarchal culture, Ellison does not have his main character treat women’s problems with the emphasis they deserve. If the message of female inferiority wasn’t clear through Trueblood’s tall tale of father-daughter incest in which daughter and wife are silenced and marginalized, then it is hard to miss toward the novel’s end when Ellison has his narrator reassigned in the Brotherhood and made to lecture downtown on the Woman Question. Upon learning about his new assignment, Invisible Man is outraged: “I stood there, hearing the rapping of [Brother Jack’s] gavel echoing in my ears, thinking the woman question and searching their faces for signs of amusement, listening to their voices as they filed out into the hall for the slightest sound of suppressed laughter, stood there fighting the sense that I had just been made the butt of an outrageous joke” (407). Ellison has Invisible Man finally reason that he should feel honored to speak on such a taboo topic for a black man; however, he comes to this realization only after he thought is was an amusing joke, at best, or severe punishment, at worst. And not surprisingly, the Woman Question is quickly dropped when Invisible Man is called back to Harlem; the implication is that there is more important work to do than lecture on women’s issues.

Perhaps even more troubling than the haste with which Invisible Man disregards the Woman Question is his encounter with Sybil, a white woman whom he met during the woman lecture series and who is a self-proclaimed nymphomaniac consumed by a desire to be raped by a black man. Further revealing the damaging effects of black male stereotypes and challenging the taboo on black males’ sexual desire for white women by having the affair initiated by the white woman, Ellison leaves it to his reader to unveil and challenge stereotypes of femininity. Similar to what we’ve seen in the Trueblood
episode, the female as seductress becomes a recurrent theme, most pronounced through Invisible Man’s sexual tryst with Sybil. Invisible Man initially wanted to gain insider information about the Brotherhood and thought the best course of action was to go through a woman—one of his comrade’s wives. Although it is Invisible Man’s decision to seek out the company of a female, she turns out to be more than he expected. Much like Trueblood, he describes his situation as one of entrapment, in which he is made to play the role of the sexually-aggressive black man. Ellison conveys the dangers of such stereotyping for the black male. He does not, however, show how stereotypes of female sexuality deny complexity and humanity to females.

Ellison’s novel, including Trueblood’s contrived story of incest veiling racism, bears witness to the trauma of racism, but it does not bear witness to the trauma of incest. A male-centric narrative, Invisible Man shows how the male characters are certainly products of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy that represses and silences the female voice. As the male perspective is foregrounded, the female’s point of view is almost written out of existence, rendered invisible. Invisible Man’s understanding of females, most clearly illustrated through his encounter with Sybil, proves just as problematic as Trueblood’s portrayal of his daughter and wife because he, too, denies the female complexity by sketching her in stereotypical terms. Seeking a unified masculine self that racism has denied, Invisible Man’s coming-of-age is incomplete in its failure to acknowledge women’s hardships and sorrows. Exploring the rampant racism of its day, the novel calls attention to the homoerotic nature of white-male supremacy and furthers our understanding of the trauma of inter- and intra-racism. Succeeding in challenging
assumptions of black masculinity, the novel nevertheless upholds white men’s interests and privileges when it comes to representing the insidious trauma of sexism.

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Chapter IV—Signifying, Testifying, and Bearing Witness:

*The Bluest Eye’s* Feminist Understanding of Incest

*She stood there, her hands folded across her stomach, a little protruding pot of tummy.*

“Maybe. Maybe you can do it for me.”

“Do what for you?”

“I can’t go to school no more. And I thought maybe you could help me.”

“Help you how? Tell me. Don’t be frightened.”

“My eyes.”

“What about your eyes?”

“I want them blue.”

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (173-74)

In 1970 Toni Morrison told the daughter victim’s story of sexual violation. One of the first works courageous enough to foreground the daughter’s experience, *The Bluest Eye* accomplished a great feat: authored by a black woman who criticized patterns of patriarchal dominance in the black community, its act of breaking the community’s silence was thought by some to be even more taboo than the act of incest itself. Her ambitious first novel expanded the literary canon and encouraged many female authors to bear witness to such subjects as incest, racism, and domestic colonialism. In addition to employing father-daughter incest as a metaphor for racial relations, Morrison treats the paternal incest as literal, tragic, and traumatic.

Claiming the novel as a privileged site for representing the trauma of incest and racism, Morrison has said that her work “bears witness” to the challenges her community
faces as “narrative remains the best way to learn anything” (LeClair 371, 372). In her literary representation of the insidious trauma that plagues her black characters, Morrison constructs an inventive, carefully controlled structure employing multiple narrators. An early version of the novel used third-person narration to tell the story of Pecola and the Breedlove family. Dissatisfied with its inability to engage the reader, Morrison revised the point of view to introduce the perspective of Claudia MacTeer, who grew up black and poor, a could-be victim of father-daughter incest herself. Serving as main narrator of the fragmented account, Claudia reflects on the experiences of Pecola and gains psychological mastery over her friend’s trauma through narrative. Diverging from the male literary tradition, Morrison has Claudia’s perspective, divided between her nine-year-old self and the adult Claudia, dominate the story.

Although a pioneering work for narrating from the could-be victim’s perspective and representing the daughter’s trauma, *The Bluest Eye* has been criticized in recent years for not being feminist enough. Commenting on the relationship between voice and empowerment, some fault the novel for silencing the dispossessed protagonist while seeking to redress power relations. Pin-chia Feng thinks that the work ultimately fails because, dominated by Claudia’s narrative, it omits Pecola’s perspective. Contending that the story is over before Pecola begins to speak, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges are dissatisfied with the experimental chapter where, they claim, Pecola fails to find a voice. Monica Michlin criticizes the novel’s “ambiguous” structure that silences the child, “in what could be read as an additional move of abuse and victimization” (181). She adds, “the fact that Pecola does not survive psychically and that the story is told by everyone but her is one of the things that feminist writers have necessarily revised since” (181).
Responding to these critics’ charges, this chapter argues that the novel is not ambiguously structured, but is a closely constructed narrative with aesthetic design that includes the male perspective while bringing the experience of the female to the fore. To better understand how this is achieved, I look at three late chapters in the novel—Cholly’s, Soaphead Church’s, and Pecola’s. Although Morrison includes many pages detailing the trauma men of color often experience, and in this sense extending sympathy to an incestuous father, she remains in control of the Cholly and Soaphead chapters, never simply handing over her narration but presenting their thoughts through a third-person limited perspective. In the Cholly chapter we are given his perspective but not his voice, and gain understanding not just about how the incest happened, but also why it happened. The chapter focused on the perspective of the critically neglected figure Soaphead is strategically juxtaposed between Cholly’s and Pecola’s chapters. Here Morrison exposes the reality of child abuse as a social and political problem, an effect of institutional racism, classism, and imperialism, and not solely confined to the particular context of poverty. Missing from the few pieces of scholarship on Soaphead is a discussion of how this pedophile, while immersed in his own pathologies, ironically attempts to bear witness to Pecola’s story. We gain some understanding about why a character steeped in racist and sexist thought would not be able to bear witness, but only retraumatize Pecola. Morrison shows black men as victims of patriarchal phallocentrism in a capitalist society of white supremacy. Perhaps more importantly for this study, she considers the effects these violations have on Pecola, the scapegoat of society whose perspective is rendered in a first-person, schizoid narration that offers some understanding of why she steps over into madness.
The Bluest Eye was ahead of its time and close to two decades passed before critics recognized the importance of the work, as Morrison points out in her 1993 Afterword. Connecting the novel’s initial reception and the lack of attention given to Pecola, she implies that it took twenty-five years for society to acknowledge the oppression of young girls, particularly poor, black girls like Pecola: “With very few exceptions, the initial publication of The Bluest Eye was like Pecola’s life: dismissed, trivialized, misread. And it has taken twenty-five years to gain for her the respectful publication this edition is” (216). Rejected by twelve publishers, one of whom claimed that the book lacked structure, it was out of print by 1974 after its initial publication with Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Although published in the midst of second-wave feminism “‘when a growing, middle-class women’s movement was just beginning to acknowledge the reality of its black and poor sisters,’ an overview of the critical discourse of the time shows that from the readership the book received little, if any, understanding” (Surányi 11). Morrison acknowledges its mixed reviews: “It got a really horrible review in the New York Times Book Review on Sunday and then got a very good daily review” (qtd. in Schappell 73). It was not a commercial success, earning Morrison only $3000, and receiving less critical acclaim than most of her later works. According to Nancy Peterson, it took five years for the first scholarly treatment of The Bluest Eye to even appear; however, Joan Bischoff’s “The Novels of Toni Morrison: Studies in Thwarted

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1 For example Morrison’s 1977 Song of Solomon won the National Book Critics’ Circle Award for fiction and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award, and her 1987 Beloved received the Pulitzer and in 2006 was voted by New York Times the best piece of fiction written in the US in the last twenty-five years. Interestingly, the winner for the previous twenty-five years was Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (Tally 2).
Sensitivity” missed Morrison’s essential concerns and seemed to confirm her fear that black female writers would not receive proper scholarly attention.

We should not forget how revolutionary *The Bluest Eye* was. Writing a fragmented, nonchronological account of the physical violation and psychological destruction of eleven-year-old Pecola, a “little-girl-gone-to-woman” who longs for white beauty, Morrison shows the interconnectedness of racism, rape, classism, and imperialism (31). Crediting Morrison’s bravery at openly addressing those topics along with incest, racial self-loathing, and intraracism, Adrienne Seward claims that the novel “dealt with a lot of no-no’s,” subjects “that weren’t supposed to be discussed in the black community” (qtd. in Denard 211). For breaking the silence of taboo topics both within and beyond the black community, *The Bluest Eye* “is now seen as a landmark in American literature, signaling a shift away from the white male-dominated literary establishment” (qtd. in Denard 211). As Justine Tally puts it, Morrison didn’t just move from the margins to the center of the literary canon; she moved the center (1). The novel that significantly departed from the dominant symbolic representations of father-daughter incest, which had been almost entirely male authored, inspired a whole generation of African-American women, such as Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Cade Bambara, to tell their own stories. Additionally, as I show in the following two chapters, dealing with familial rape more realistically than earlier works, *The Bluest Eye* was

2 Karen Stein notes that when Morrison’s work first appeared, at least one critic argued that she was limiting her canvas by focusing on black characters: this critic contended that Morrison “was wasting her talents writing about the African American community rather than about ‘the universal human condition’ (which usually means the white community)” (15).
instrumental in enabling incest victims to claim narrative as a vehicle for working through their trauma.

There has been an impressive growth in Morrison scholarship in the last three decades, which makes approaching the novel that launched Morrison’s career a daunting task. According to Marc Conner, “no living American author had commanded more attention and critical production” between 1980 and 2000 (x). In addition to two edited collections devoted to The Bluest Eye, the latest published in 2010, there are numerous essays in compilations and monographs on Morrison and in literary journals. Critical discourse has focused on the significance of Pecola’s name, the role of religion, magic realism, blues aesthetics, Morrison’s intended audience, her influences and whom she influenced.

J. Brooks Bouson’s 2000 study of shame, trauma, and racial self-loathing in Morrison’s novels explores how The Bluest Eye depicts the wounds caused by inter- and intraracial shaming and how father-daughter incest is most destructive to the child. Although Bouson does not use the term “insidious trauma,” she was one of the first to argue that Morrison shows what recent trauma theorists are beginning to understand—that trauma can result from a constellation of experiences in addition to a single offense, and that the patriarchal family holds traumatic potential. Drawing on Bouson, I also reengage Michael Awkward’s argument to discuss how The Bluest Eye builds on Ellison’s Invisible Man by providing a revisionary feminist reading of his male-biased narrative. Unlike Awkward, who argues that Morrison “rejects” her male ancestors Ellison and James Baldwin to clear canonical space for herself, I see her work signifying
on *Invisible Man* as it simultaneously pays tribute yet critiques the novel. Like Ellison, Morrison explores the effects of racism and classism on the individual; however, she expands his canvas to include an entire community’s role in familial sexual abuse.

**How The Bluest Eye Was Born: Reshaping the Trueblood Mold**

Morrison’s efforts to have *The Bluest Eye* published despite repeated rejections attest to her belief in a work she saw as groundbreaking and critical. Her reasons for writing the novel take on a storytelling quality of their own, as Nellie McKay observes: “It took marriage, two sons, a divorce, an eighteen-month return to Lorain, an editing job at the textbook subsidiary of Random House in Syracuse, and writing at night after the children were asleep (to combat the loneliness she felt then and there) to bring her efforts to full bloom” (3). The pulse of the novel first ran through her in 1962 and by 1965 began to take book form. The seeds grew out of a conversation she had with one of her elementary-school friends, who told Morrison “she knew that God did not exist because her prayers for blue eyes had gone unanswered” (qtd. in Bouson 24). Troubled by the mental image of a beautiful black girl receiving blue eyes, Morrison wondered who told her she wasn’t good enough without them. Aside from personal reasons for bringing the book to fruition, Morrison attributes its publication to social and political concerns: dissatisfied with the lack of young black female characters in published novels, she exclaimed that “nobody had taken a little black girl seriously in literature—ever” (“10 Questions”).

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3 I employ Henry Louis Gates’s definition of “signifyin’” as the African-American literature term for intertextual readings whereby “black writers read and critique other black writers as an act of rhetorical self-definition” (242).
Besides being the first novel to give a black female child center stage, *The Bluest Eye* was original because, Morrison claims, “No African American writer has ever done what I did, which was to write without the white gaze” (qtd. in Houston 252-53). Morrison distinguishes herself from her male predecessors: “Everybody I knew, the ones I admired—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*—invisible to whom? Not me. They are confronting the enemy; the enemy is a white guy, or the white establishment or something” (Houston 253). Instead, writing for a black audience, she felt freed from having to explain elements of her work which draw on African-American traditions. Doing so allowed her to focus on “a real girl, and how it hurts, and how we are [accomplices] in that hurt” (Houston 256). In reading the works of black men, Morrison noted that “Things are going too fast in 1965,” and she was afraid that these real girls were going to get skipped over (Houston 256). *The Bluest Eye* is her attempt to capture the time before the 1960s revolution when “black is beautiful” became a rallying cry, and to remember why it became a necessary statement in the first place.4

Developing a minor scene in *Invisible Man* when the protagonist sees an advertisement in a Harlem store window for a product that promises a whiter complexion, Morrison reflects throughout her novel on the time when black was “ugly.” She notes that some black women would go to devastating extremes to do what the dominant white society required—“get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” (83). Morrison states that for women who subscribe to such ideals, the funkiness is embodied in a

4 Despite (or perhaps because of) its early publication date, McKay argues that “*The Bluest Eye* makes one of the most powerful attacks…on the relationship between Western standards of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women” (3).
number of ways—a laugh too loud, a gesture too generous, a behind swaying too freely, and lips lined a little too fully (83). The vigil for eruptions of funk has to be constant. Later Pecola, with her dirty torn dress, matted plaits, muddy shoes, soiled socks, and safety pin in place of where a hem should have been, is seen as embodying the dreaded funk and reprimanded for it. She is indoctrinated at an early age into a society that, as Morrison writes, labels some plants flowers and others weeds.

The taboo topic of racial self-loathing was “terribly important” to Morrison who noticed its glaring absence in literature (Houston 256). To undercut the power of white ideology and standards of beauty, Morrison famously opens with a subversive appropriation of William Elson and William Gray’s nationally known Dick and Jane primer stories. Breaking up, running together, and deconstructing the primer’s text on her novel’s first page and subsequent chapter headings, she reveals how these readers, while promoting literacy, disseminated racist, classist messages at the expense of black children, whose existence they effectively erased. The Breedloves and even the MacTeers serve as the antithesis to this idyllic image of home and family.

Morrison’s work, with few white characters, broke ground by critiquing the primer story/master narrative. Like Ellison’s subtle critique, her novel shows how destructive white ideologies are to black people. In addition to writing for a largely black audience, Morrison was one of the first African American women writers to powerfully attack Western standards of formal education and female beauty and to address in her novel how the latter is one of the “most destructive ideas in the history of human

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5 These primers were widely used in elementary schools across the United States from the 1930s through to the 1970s.
thought,” for it “originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion” (122). Building on Ellison, she exposes the damaging internalization of white standards and the black community’s complicity in racial self-loathing.

Asked if she intended to revise the work of well-known black male writers, Morrison said she was adding her voice to the tradition, not reproving it:

When I began writing I didn’t write against existing voices. There had been some women writing—Paule Marshall, Zora Neale Hurston, though I hadn’t read Hurston yet. When I began, there was just one thing that I wanted to write about, which was the true devastation of racism on the most vulnerable, the most helpless unit in society—a black female and a child. I wanted to write about what it was like to be the subject of racism. It had a specificity that was damaging. And if there was no support system in the community and in the family, it could cause spiritual death, self-loathing, terrible things. (Dreifus 102)

But despite this claim, parts of her novel have given critics ammunition to argue that it is a purposeful revision of Ellison’s Trueblood episode, in which Morrison gives voice to those that had been skipped over in Invisible Man.

Ellison once said that he did not “know Miss Morrison personally,” but there is little doubt that he was familiar with her work—and even less doubt that she knew his (qtd. in Stepto and Harper 10).6 Awkward convincingly argues that Morrison’s work is a

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6 There is evidence in Morrison’s text to support the assertion that hers is a conscious revision of Ellison’s—the similarity between the last names Trueblood and Breedlove and the fact that both incest accounts include similes comparing breath to a balloon. In Invisible Man, Ellison writes, “I heard the sharp intake of breath, like a toy-balloon
self-conscious revision of the Trueblood tale as she indicates that the construction of identity is not only racialized and classed but also gendered, and that the violent sexual initiation of the daughter is just as important as that of her father: “Morrison writes her way into the Afro-American literary tradition by foregrounding the effects of incest for female victims in direct response to Ellison’s refusal to consider them seriously” (201, emphasis added). Morrison offers a feminist slant on Ellison’s male-biased depiction of father-daughter incest, exposing the dangers of adhering to patriarchal phallocentrism steeped in sexism, racism, and classism, an awareness missing from Ellison’s second chapter. Awkward sees Morrison “taking Ellison to task for the phallocentric nature of his representation of incest which marginalizes and renders as irrelevant the consequences of the act for the female victim” (201).

Revisiting the connection between *Invisible Man* and *The Bluest Eye*, Doane and Hodges note more similarities than differences between the two and contend that Morrison creates sympathy for the father, much like Ellison. Observing that *The Bluest Eye* has been praised for its thoughtful understanding of the father’s point of view, they conclude that the female victim’s perspective remained unspoken, “unsayable,” as late as 1970 and note “we should not forget how hard it was for Morrison to tell Pecola’s story or how hard it may still be to recognize the complexity of Morrison’s effort to break a 

suddenly deflated” (49); in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison writes, “a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon” (163). Both also include a variation of the phrase “I am what I am.” In Ellison’s novel, the protagonist says, “I yam what I am!” after scarifying down the yams (266); in Morrison’s novel, Soaphead writes in his letter to God, “I am who I am.’ Like Popeye? I Yam What I Yam?” (180).
culturally enforced silence” (45). Morrison’s ability to represent and humanize Cholly, and, to a lesser extent, Soaphead, may be explained by the literary tradition of sympathetic fathers, such as Jim Trueblood and Devereux Warren. Similarly, the narrative troubles Morrison had with telling the female victim’s story from her perspective is understandable given the model of Matty Lou.

Where Fitzgerald conveys whiteness and wealth as the norm, Morrison, like Ellison, is driven to understand how a racist, classist culture has denied people humanity. A central theme in black American literature, invisibility is taken up in The Bluest Eye as Morrison explores the conditions under which her characters—both male and female—are rendered invisible. Both novels force the reader to look at black male characters like Trueblood, Cholly, and Soaphead, who with reference to the dominant culture’s construction of masculinity, have been emasculated or feminized by being positioned as passive victims of white male aggression. Because of this polarized construction of gender, figures like Cholly and Soaphead reinscribe patriarchal phallocentrism and mistakenly align themselves with the oppressor in attempting to escape the role of victim.

Morrison also turns her gaze on those whom she calls in her Afterword the “most delicate” and “most vulnerable” members of society—poor black girls (210). When Pecola goes to Mr. Yacobowski’s store to buy Mary Jane candies, which bear the image she hopes to acquire by ingesting, the narrator tells us that the blue eyes of Mr. Yacobowski reluctantly look toward Pecola as his hand hesitatingly offers her the candy:

Slowly, like Indian summer moving imperceptibly toward fall, he looks toward her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time
and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. (48)

Morrison illustrates how invisibility is visited on Pecola because she is black and poor (as is Trueblood), and also because she is a female child. The vacant gaze of Mr. Yacobowski suggests that nothing in society would allow for a white male storeowner to give a poor black girl a look of approval or acceptance. Pecola has internalized her outsider position so much that she reactively wishes herself into invisibility. Hearing her parents argue, she prays to God, “Please make me disappear” (45). She wishes for all but her eyes to fade away. Rendered invisible and scapegoated from the black community, much like Trueblood, Pecola’s plight seems even more tragic than Trueblood’s: as Trudier Harris suggests, Pecola could give him a lesson in living the blues (75).

Morrison interrogates how racism has “bred” not love, but insecurity and self-doubt, and how black fatherhood has been warped in a Western society that consequently sacrifices black children (Dickerson 123). Like Ellison’s, the novel encourages readers to struggle with the ways its black characters were metaphorically raped by whiteness. Depicting father-daughter incest in all of its contradictions, Morrison dramatizes the insidious trauma suffered by the Breedloves as a family, and how Cholly’s sexual violation of Pecola cannot be isolated from the larger context of racism and domestic imperialism. She refuses to divorce the single act of incest from the larger cycle of abuse. In so doing, she makes it difficult to blame any individual; her mission is not to indict persons, but to bear witness to the victims of systemic violence.
“SEEFATHER”: Cholly Breedlove

At the beginning of the story, Claudia discloses the outline of a plot—Pecola’s rape and impregnation by her father, Cholly’s death, and their baby’s death. She concludes, “There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how” (6). Despite what Claudia says, in the Cholly chapter it becomes clear that Morrison does want to explain why such an action would occur. Instead of allowing her reader to confront incest as an isolated event, she devotes a 30-page chapter to detailing the pieces of Cholly’s sordid past and witnessing how he is simultaneously victim and victimizer. Unlike the Trueblood tale that only takes up the better part of one chapter, Morrison places incest at the center of her story. Instead of having Cholly emerge as wealthy and wise, or at least remorseful, after the experience, she shows the forces that have led to his aggression and arguably, his distorted expression of love.

Before the reader even turns to the Cholly chapter, Morrison provides a couple of prefatory pages painting him with the stereotypical traits of the black man as irresponsible, abusive, and criminal, but then explaining how he got to be that way. He is at first defined as an incestuous father who impregnated his daughter, had “dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt” (6). In the beginning pages, the reader is introduced to “Dog Breedlove,” who “had burned up his house, gone upside his wife’s head, and everybody, as a result, was outdoors” (17). Already established as poor, “a renting black,” Cholly adds insult to injury by taking away the roof over his family’s head, further showing how far the Breedloves are not only from the ideal Dick and Jane family, but also how outsided, othered, they are from even their own black community who put
Cholly in the ranks of animals, such as “an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger” (18). Like Fitzgerald’s Warren, he is no stranger to alcohol, described as drunk at least twice (including during the incest scene). Summed up as “a no-count man,” Cholly was thought to be sent to his wife to be harshly judged and rightfully punished (42).

In accounting for Cholly, Morrison provides her reader with his dark history before she gives the account of Pecola’s rape. Making coherent the pieces of Cholly’s traumatic past, as she claims only a musician could do, she shows him as lifelong victim.

From the beginning of his chapter, the reader knows that he never stood a chance to succeed in society, for his father left town before he was born and his mother abandoned him when he was a mere four days old. Knowing that his parents didn’t want anything to do with him, it is no wonder that he doesn’t know how to be a father to his own children, Pecola and Sammy—the latter, ironically named after Cholly’s neglectful father, has run away at least twenty-seven times by the age of fourteen. When Cholly is fourteen, the one stable figure in his life, Aunt Jimmy, dies, leaving Cholly once again an orphan. His efforts to reunite with his estranged father meet with disaster, as Samson Fuller dismisses his son in no uncertain terms: “Tell that bitch she get her money. Now, get the fuck outta my face!” (156). These words sting him, and the scene concludes with a soiled Cholly curled in fetal position crying for his dead Aunt Jimmy. Morrison sums up his familial trauma: “Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose” (160).

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7 The reader can infer that the ages are not accidental and serve to reinforce the idea that traits, good and bad, are passed on—are bred—into the next generation.
The event that seems to have the most profound effect on Cholly’s sexual development occurs during Aunt Jimmy’s funeral reception, a traumatic event in itself, when Cholly engages in sex for the first time. The experience with Darlene is initially marked by curiosity and first-time innocence when Cholly notes, “Their bodies began to make sense to him, and it was not as difficult as he had thought it would be” (147). However, the difficult part comes in due time—Cholly notices that two white hunters are standing over him, watching as they have sex. Like Trueblood, who entertains the white folks with his tale of incest, Cholly, the target of white discrimination, is made to perform for the racist raccoon hunters, who instruct him to “‘Get on wid it,’” and to “‘make it good, nigger’” (148).

Internalizing white supremacist constructions of masculinity all too quickly, Cholly directs feelings of hatred, not onto the white men, but onto the black girl:

Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke. He was, in time, to discover that hatred of white men—but not now. Not in impotence but later, when the hatred could find sweet expression. For now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight. (150-51)
Cholly’s “impotence,” noted twice in this passage, suggests that he is feminized in a society where femininity is equated with helplessness and primed into thinking that venting his anger on weaker people like Darlene and later Pecola is acceptable. What Morrison herself calls the “rape” of Cholly is important in seeing his thwarted sexual awakening as well as how he mistakenly cultivates his hatred of the black female (215). Just as it is no wonder why he doesn’t know how to be a good father—for he never had one himself—it is also understandable why he doesn’t comprehend sex—for his first time ends in complete humiliation.

In a demoralized, or as Morrison puts it, a “godlike,” state, Cholly meets Pauline, who is hanging over a fence scratching herself with her deformed foot (160). Morrison writes, “it was Pauline, or rather marrying her, that did for him what the flashlight did not do” (160). In linking married life with the flashlight, Morrison connects the fragments of Cholly’s life, and suggests that marriage at first holds the potential to right the wrongs he has suffered. Yet, Cholly, who has learned that violence and sexuality go together, not surprisingly is confused by how to express love.

By the time the reader gets to the end of Cholly’s chapter, which strategically concludes with the rape of Pecola, it is clear that the father-daughter incest completes the puzzle that is Cholly’s traumatic life. The incest is not just an eruption of the “dreaded funk” but a reenactment of his experience with Darlene as well as a connection to his first meeting with Pauline. “By the time you get [to the rape scene] it’s almost irrelevant,” Morrison comments, “because I want you to look at [Cholly] and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain. By that time, his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left” (qtd. in Stein 38). One of the most difficult parts of the scene, and the
entire novel, is that, like Ellison, Morrison hints that the father’s actions are misguided manifestations of love. In recognizing how much his daughter resembles his wife, Cholly is filled with feelings of tenderness. The word tender or a form thereof litters the two-and-a-half-page scene along with a litany of questions in which Cholly wonders what he can do to be a better father. Phyllis Klotman observes that the rape may very well be the only expression of love that Pecola receives. The rendition of incest is filtered through a third-person narrator that closely adheres to the consciousness and experience of Cholly, leaving Pecola silenced throughout the scene, uttering only one sound—“a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat” (163). As in Invisible Man, the reader is invited to focus on Cholly’s perspective and make the connections between his traumatic experiences and those of his daughter. The narrative positions readers to see the wounded and wounding Cholly.

“SEETHEDOG”: Soaphead Church

After Cholly’s chapter Morrison immediately turns her gaze to another father figure, the last main influence on Pecola’s life before she goes mad and the one who, some have argued, makes Cholly’s actions pale in comparison. Juxtaposed between Cholly’s chapter and Pecola’s is a section from the perspective of Soaphead Church, “an old man who loved things,” who is said to have dabbled in the “budding field of psychiatry” and who is as strange as his name (164, 170). The narrator explains that no one remembered where the “Church” came from; they assumed it was from his days as a guest preacher. Everyone, however, knew that the “Soaphead” part was in reference to his embodied funk: “the tight, curly hair that took on and held a sheen and wave when
pomaded with soap lather. A sort of primitive process” (167). A “cinnamon-eyed West Indian with lightly browned skin,” Soaphead is a self-proclaimed psychic and hoodoo spiritualist (167). The first mention of him comes before Cholly’s chapter, when the reader hears about his reputation for molesting young girls. When Pecola’s friend and Claudia’s sister, Frieda MacTeer, is inappropriately touched by the MacTeer’s boarder, Mr. Henry, Claudia questions what exactly Mr. Henry did to Frieda, asking if he “picked” at her, “like Soaphead Church” (99). With the proliferation of perverse father figures—Cholly, Soaphead, and Mr. Henry—Morrison further illustrates that the sexual violation of young females is an extensive problem.8

Just as with Cholly, Morrison provides Soaphead’s history, allowing readers to understand his motives and perhaps even his perverse sexual pleasures with little girls. While some have argued that Soaphead “is introduced too late in the novel to seem a necessary part of the plot” (Stein 46), his entry at this juncture is critical to Morrison’s critique of colonialism. Gurleen Grewal mentions that the connection Morrison makes between capitalism and colonialism has been glossed over by many critics, who instead focus on her critique of white and black communities that have bought into white standards of beauty and behavior. Grewal positions Soaphead as central to Morrison’s decolonizing vision: he “is much more than a mere function of plot, more than an agent who will grant Pecola her blue eyes and who will substitute as the dog in the Dick-and-Jane primer” (27).

8 See James Mayo’s “Morrison’s The Bluest Eye” (The Explicator 60.4 Summer 2002: 231-34) for a convincing argument that Claudia is molested by Soaphead.
Through the interracial and racially-conscious character of Soaphead, Morrison extends her critique of white supremacy beyond the United States to include its effects on British colonized islands in the West Indies, where some were deluded into thinking that incest and inbreeding with the whiter members of their family were preferable in the quest to lighten up their lines and get rid of the funkiness. Proud of their diverse bloodlines, Soaphead’s family claims a “Sir Whitcomb,” a “decaying British noble,” as their patriarch and are grateful to him for introducing the white strain into the family in the early 1800s (167). In an effort to maintain their white traits, “some distant and some not so distant relatives married each other” (168).

Advancing Morrison’s critique of colonialism, the Soaphead section also shows why Pecola is left at the end of her story in a psychotic state, attempting to bear witness to her own tale. In the 20-page section written from the limited third-person perspective of Soaphead, we gain some understanding of why Pecola would seek him, of all people, and why he is unable to bear witness to her traumatic story. In one of the novel’s more poignant scenes, rivaled in emotional content only by the incest scene, a pregnant Pecola asks Soaphead to grant her wish for blue eyes, her desperate desire for beauty. Morrison explains her choice in having Pecola go to this particular man for help:

with Soaphead, I wanted, needed someone to give the child her blue eyes. Now she was asking for something that was just awful—she wanted to have blue eyes and she wanted to be Shirley Temple, I mean, she wanted to do that white trip because of the society in which she lived and, very importantly, because of the black people who helped her want to be that. […] I had to have someone—her mother, of course, made her want that in
the first place—who would give her the blue eyes...wholly convinced that
if black people were more like white people they would be better off. (qtd.
in Rosenberg 444)

Before the meeting where Soaphead ostensibly gives Pecola blue eyes, Morrison devotes many pages to providing his lineage and detailing the colonial legacy that he and his family have internalized. Just like Pecola, Soaphead’s family, the Whitcombs, are committed to the idea that white is right, and, as Morrison puts it, if they were more like white people, they would fare better. Through the characterization of Soaphead, she exposes how the imposition of white Western standards of beauty, education, privilege, and religion prevent the development of a black identity that embraces African culture.

The narrator says that Soaphead received a “fine education,” which, in this case, means that he has been primed into believing and wanting “to prove beyond a doubt De Gobineau’s hypothesis that ‘all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it’” (164, 168). Recalling the Nazi genocide, occurring at the same time the book is set, Soaphead’s beliefs call attention to the irony that the U. S. fails to see its own eugenics movement and allegiance to racial purity and preference for blonde-haired, blue-eyed people. Morrison exposes the education that Soaphead receives, lessons that promote whiteness and encourage him to separate himself “in body, mind, and spirit from all that suggested Africa” (167). Passed off as a “civilized” endeavor, his education leads him and his family to uncivilized actions.

Internalizing white standards to the point of near paralysis, Soaphead attempts to sever
the connection between body and mind. However, as he later explains in his letter to God, he is unsuccessful when it comes to the bodies of little girls.

Soaphead thinks he has transcended stereotypes of black masculinity as he learns to value self-cleansing and tries to repress his embodied blackness, but much like Cholly, his misguided actions lead him to identify with the oppressor. In using the bodies of young girls, Soaphead and Cholly reenact a dominant/passive hierarchal structure. Emulating the whiteness of the ruling class, Soaphead imitates its exploitative nature. He excels in most of his efforts to rid himself of the funkiness and repress bodily desire, an easy task as he distains human contact and is disgusted by flesh on flesh, body odor, breathe odor, earwax, blackheads, blisters, and lost teeth (166). By his logic, his attention is naturally drawn to those he finds least offensive and most passive—little girls. Morrison ironically notes, “his patronage of little girls smacked of innocence,” and “He was what one might call a very clean old man” (166, 167).

Not surprisingly, Soaphead, who exhibits psychopathic behavior and considers molesting young girls clean acts, experiences delusions of grandeur, thinking himself capable of doing the works of God. Advertised as a “Reader, Advisor, and Interpreter of Dreams,” he believes he has the ability to perform small miracles (165). When Pecola ventures into his back-room apartment asking for blue eyes, “He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty” (174). In asking for blue eyes, Pecola attempts to share and gain mastery of her story of violation. Her request can be read as a plea for him to bear witness to her story of trauma, which Soaphead attempts to do. Here, as nowhere else, he wishes he could perform miracles. In language evocative of the range of emotions Cholly
experiences during the encounter with Darlene and later the rape scene with his daughter, Morrison writes,

A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him—money, love, revenge—this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles. Never before had he really wanted the true and holy power—only the power to make others believe he had it. It seemed so sad, so frivolous, that mere mortality, not judgment, kept him from it. (174)

Some find Soaphead despicable in using Pecola to poison the dog he wishes would “hurry up and die” (171). Even if racism and colonialism bear down on Soaphead, they contend he should assume some of the blame for his actions since he is complicit in them. But Morrison shows that Soaphead too is a victim of an unjust society, and suggests that the “love” he gives to Pecola is authentic, though, as she qualifies at the novel’s end, no “better than the lover” (206).

Toward the end of his letter to God, Soaphead claims that he “looked at that ugly little black girl, and…loved her” (182). Unlike Mr. Yacobowski, who tries so hard not to see or touch Pecola, Soaphead acknowledges her existence and claims to have loved her. Just as in the incest scene, Morrison makes her reader question the concept of love and wonder if Soaphead’s actions were motivated by compassion. Certain she has been given
the bluest eyes, Pecola seems to think that what Soaphead did for her was a loving, humane act. Briefer and seemingly less traumatic than Cholly’s history, Soaphead’s nevertheless indicates how pedophilia is a part of patriarchal culture: he has been a victim of racism and domestic colonialism. Without suggesting that what these father figures do to female children is right, Morrison reveals the history of her male characters to explain how interrelated are the forces of racism and rape.

Despite his family ties and the formal education that has led him to deny his African roots, Soaphead admits that the white traits he and his family so eagerly display are their worst. At the beginning of his letter to God he implies that he knows he has been led astray:

We in this colony took as our own the most dramatic, and the most obvious, of our white masters’ characteristics, which were, of course, their worst. In retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics most gratifying to sustain and least troublesome to maintain. Consequently we were not royal but snobbish, not aristocratic but class-conscious; we believed authority was cruelty to our inferiors, and education was being at school. We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom. (177)

Soaphead goes on to chastise God for leaving it to him to help a girl like Pecola, and for making little girls desirable and seductive, but his words suggest that he understands that the white characteristics he has devoted his life to emulating may be his most terrible traits. He also shows awareness that the authority he demonstrates in his professional life as community healer is nothing but a pretense, like the feigned power of the ruling white
class, which is predicated on keeping racially-othered and economically-deprived people subservient. However, in the rest of his letter Soaphead retreats to his delusions, which seem easier to confront than the stark reality of his existence.⁹ He proceeds to undermine his assertions and emerges as a deeply troubled, culturally displaced man who, like Cholly, has been denied love and therefore does not know how to love. As Pecola administers the potion Soaphead concocted for Bob the dog, she, and perhaps Soaphead, are really convinced that a miracle has been performed. However the reader can see that just as Bob has been sacrificed so has another piece of Soaphead’s humanity, and, perhaps more importantly, Pecola’s sanity.

“PlayJanePlay”: Pecola Breedlove

Concerned with both father’s and daughter’s traumatic experiences, Morrison has commented on her mixed feelings about writing the novel. She provides insight into her uneven treatment of the masculine and feminine sensibility, specifically in her ability to capture the voices of Cholly and Pauline:

When I wrote that section on Cholly in The Bluest Eye, I thought it would be very hard for me because I didn’t know that as intimately as I knew Pauline. And I thought, well, let me get started on this ’cause I’m going to have a tough time trying to really feel that kind of thing. But it’s the only time I’ve ever written anything in my life when it all came at once. I wrote

⁹ Pecola, too, seems to retreat into madness because reality is too painful. As bell hooks writes in Black Looks: Race and Representation, “Like Pecola, in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, black folks turn away from reality because the pain of awareness is so great” (6).
it straight through. And it took me a long time, maybe eight or nine hours the first time, not stopping at all.

When I got to Pauline, whom I knew so well, I could not do it. I could not make it. I didn’t know what to write or how. And I sort of copped out anyway in the book because I used two voices, hers and the author’s. (qtd. in Stepto 386-87)

Besides her dissatisfaction with Pauline’s chapter, Morrison admits that she was disappointed with her rendering of, or failure to render, Pecola’s perspective. Identifying the book’s main flaw as “the silence at its center: the void that is Pecola’s ‘unbeing,’” Morrison writes, “It should have had a shape—like the emptiness left by a boom or a cry. It required a sophistication unavailable to me, and some deft manipulation of the voices around her. She is not seen by herself until she hallucinates a self. And the fact of her hallucination becomes a kind of outside-the-book conversation” (215).

Many critics too have argued that it is problematic that Pecola remains undeveloped and is invisible and silent in her own story. Bouson is particularly troubled by the incest scene, which “is the emotional center of the novel and yet it is oddly muted as the narrative proliferates, telling stories—including the tragic and sympathetic stories of Pauline, the complicit mother, and Cholly, the violating father—around the empty center of the text, the ‘void’ of the silenced and backgrounded incest victim” (28).

Even

10 However, some critics, such as Madelon Sprengnether, have praised Morrison’s ability to render Cholly’s thoughts, claiming that her ability to step out of her gender is what makes the book a work of genius:

Among Morrison’s many achievements as a writer, one of her bravest, to my mind, is her characterization of Cholly Breedlove, who rapes and impregnates his eleven-year-old daughter Pecola. While a lesser writer
Awkward notes the similarities between Pecola and Matty Lou, both of whom occupy “silent, asocial positions in their respective communities” (201). But he adds that, unlike Ellison, Morrison “explicitly details Pecola’s tragic and painful journey” (201).

Pecola’s voice is unfortunately muted during the incest scene, as she utters no words and makes one ambiguous action—gripping Cholly’s wrists; it is never quite clear if she does so out of disgust to push him off of her or out of desire to hold him there. Also, a fourth of the novel is told from a third-person perspective of the male characters, Cholly and Soaphead, with consecutive pages detailing these men’s traumatic experiences. The reader is privy to Cholly’s conflicted emotions and unanswered and unanswerable questions. We are then provided with the history of Soaphead where we learn more about a man who has been victimized by an imperialist, racist, classist, and sexist society, leaving him unable to bear witness to Pecola’s story. Had Morrison ended with his chapter, I too would have been disappointed and read the novel as another form of objectifying and victimizing the daughter figure by privileging the male perspective.

Unlike Ellison but like Fitzgerald, Morrison’s work contains the female’s voice, an entire chapter in which Pecola attempts to author her story of trauma, which is framed by Claudia’s narrative. At the time Pecola breaks her silence, no one is there to bear witness, but, by piecing together vague conversations and community gossip, Claudia

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might have concentrated solely on Pecola’s plight, which is achingly grim, Morrison chooses to enter into Cholly’s mentality in such a way that we cannot help perceiving this father-daughter tragedy as mutual. (qtd. in Doane and Hodges 39)

Doane and Hodges counter, “For Sprengnether and others writing in the 1990s, a ‘lesser writer’ might have ‘concentrated on Pecola’s plight’ as if this were easier than representing the father’s point of view” (40).
testifies and bears witness to Pecola’s traumatic story. As the psychological costs of Pecola’s “beauty” become apparent, access into her thoughts and voice—albeit divided voice—are nonetheless present at the end of the text. Just as she had granted perspective to Cholly and Soaphead, who are otherwise invisible men, Morrison also gives voice to Pecola and, as Fitzgerald had done, presents a realistic portrayal of a female character suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder brought on by father-daughter incest. In the dialogue between Pecola and what one may consider an imaginary friend, the reader finds out that the incest happened more than once (at least twice), Sammy ran away, Pecola no longer attends school, and Pecola has finally gotten, or thinks she’s gotten, what she wanted all along—the bluest eyes.11 Significantly, we learn all this information from Pecola herself.

In this 12-page section, Morrison offers a realistic depiction of a trauma victim who has dissociated her traumatic experiences as perhaps a self-preservation mechanism. Typical of many incest victims, Pecola faints after the first rape. Much like her hallucination, Pecola’s loss of consciousness lends support to what many trauma theorists think happens as a result of a traumatic event: “Pecola’s fainting depicts not only the somatic reactions that occur in extreme states of shame—which include physiological responses such as ‘fainting, dizziness, rigidity of all the muscles’—but also the physical and mental paralysis experienced by the trauma victim” (Bouson 43). Morrison represents Pecola’s response with almost clinical precision, anticipating recent discussions about the social and political context of family trauma.

11 Morrison titles her novel *The Bluest Eye*, not *Eyes*, perhaps playing with the homophone for “I,” the singular perspective and suggesting that bluest means saddest.
Pecola’s chapter provides information about her present state and also her past experiences, perhaps the most important being, a second incestuous experience. In the conversation, the imaginary friend ponders Cholly’s sexual power over Pauline, which quickly turns into a question about how Pecola let Cholly sexually violate her. When asking why she didn’t tell her mother, the friend states, “I don’t mean about the first time. I mean about the second time, when you were sleeping on the couch” (200). Instead of denying the incest, Pecola corrects her friend: “I wasn’t sleeping! I was reading!” (200). Another question is posed: “So that’s why you didn’t tell her about the second time?” (200). Pecola admits, “She wouldn’t have believed me then either” (200). Although Pecola rushes on to other topics (Sammy, her blue eyes), the reader may have a difficult time overlooking Pecola’s disclosure. Unlike the details of that Saturday afternoon when Cholly “staggered home reeling drunk,” Morrison withholds details of the second offense (161). Aside from suggesting that Cholly is a repeat offender, she leaves it to the reader to judge him. Through her narrative withholding, she draws on her readers to decide the moral repercussions of incest happening more than once, which may lead to rethinking our previous assessments of Cholly.

Keeping within Pecola’s character, Morrison does not give Pecola the language to describe the second time to her imaginary friend, thus remaining unable to work through her trauma. As we’ve seen throughout most of the book, notably during the first incest scene, Pecola is a character who lives outside of language. Morrison explains in her Afterword that Pecola “does not have the vocabulary to understand the violence or its context” (214). When we get to her chapter, it should come as no surprise that the exchange she has with herself is at times incoherent. Morrison’s experimental Pecola
chapter, as Awkward and others observe, gives new meaning to W. E. B. DuBois’s theory of double consciousness, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (qtd. in Bouson 14). Like Cholly and Soaphead, Pecola looks at herself through the eyes of white society and those in her community who have internalized white society’s standards and is left questioning if her eyes are blue enough, forever asking for acceptance. She is unable to tell her story and fails to find her voice in madness; the best she can do is struggle to reconcile her dissociated other into a whole. By the novel’s end she becomes almost as indecipherable as the third rendition of the unpunctuated, indistinguishable primer paragraph that opens the novel.

Clearly Morrison did not set out to put the pieces of Pecola’s life together—that’s evident from the narrative’s disjointed form. Instead, she wanted to engage the reader and show who contributed to the collapse of Pecola in a way that did not “dehumanize the characters who trashed” her (211). Morrison leaves the difficult task of connecting the pieces of Pecola’s life to her reader as she suggests that it takes more than a musician, more than a writer—beyond the scope of any one artist—for the parts of Pecola’s existence to become coherent.

As disappointing as the silent and silenced Pecola may be for some readers, the fact that Claudia tells Pecola’s story suggests a glimmer of hope. For this reason Grewal, Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, and I don’t read *The Bluest Eye* as a complete tragedy. Demetrakopoulos states, “there is a redemption in the fact that this story of incest has been told finally from a female point of view, told so well, and, I believe for the first time in human history in this depth and completeness” (66). *The Bluest Eye*, as Barbara
Christian notes, is also the story of Claudia, Pecola’s childhood friend who develops an individual voice as she attempts to understand “why she survived and Pecola did not” (Tirrell 13). Awkward and other critics have observed that “Morrison has specifically given to Claudia the resources and strengths which Pecola lacks” (Bennett 133). As our main first-person narrator, Claudia attempts to understand the complexity of the issues surrounding father-daughter incest and struggles to figure out whether Cholly is a villain, victim, or both.

Claudia understands that the deaths of Pecola’s baby and Cholly are perhaps the most humane outcome.\(^{12}\) She is most concerned however with her friend’s life and how these events could happen to someone so much like herself. However, as Claudia realizes, there is a significant difference between Pecola and Claudia and her sister—Claudia and Frieda come from a loving, supportive family. By the end, Claudia assumes some of the responsibility for Pecola’s demise. She sums up Pecola’s life with the sentence, “A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (204). By this point she realizes that Pecola’s madness was caused by more than the fatal love of her father; the entire community had a hand in raping Pecola. In a powerful confession, reminiscent of Soaphead’s honest passage about his white characteristics, she admits,

> All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of

\(^{12}\) Like Ellison who tells us (twice) that “the end is in the beginning” (6, 571), Morrison’s book can be “seen to open with its close” in that Morrison provides the plot details on the first two pages of her work (in some cases, the plot is given away on the book’s cover) (214). But unlike Ellison who has the Trueblood name live on, Morrison kills off baby and Cholly, suggesting an end to the Breedlove line.
us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood aside her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. (205)

After revealing just how much the community depended on Pecola to make themselves look and feel better, Claudia explains that Pecola leaves the community and retreats into madness.

If Claudia reaches any conclusions about the incest, it is that Cholly loved his daughter. She reasons “He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her” (206). Her words complicate traditional views of father-daughter incest. Likewise, we’ll never know how Cholly’s touch was received by Pecola. Morrison has said that she couldn’t focus exclusively on Pecola because it was too depressing. In her Afterword, she explains that she thought the novelty “would be in having this story of female violation revealed from the vantage point of the victims or could-be victims of rape—the persons no one inquired of (certainly not in 1965): the girls themselves” (214). And since Pecola does not possess the language to author her story, “gullible, vulnerable girlfriends, looking back as the knowing adults they pretended to be in the beginning, would have to do that for her, and would have to fill those silences with their own reflective lives” (214). Doing perhaps the next best
thing in having Claudia be the main narrator, Morrison’s novel suggests that the shift in
the discourse of incest was on the horizon.

Some white feminists, as we’ll see in the next chapter, found courage after
reading *The Bluest Eye* to author their own stories of sexual violence and many have used
“accounts of incest to articulate a history of subjugation”; many others purposely
revisited the novel in an attempt to fill the void that is the daughter’s perspective (qtd. in
Scott 97). *The Bluest Eye* is a pivotal feminist book, but Morrison’s relationship with
second-wave feminism has been ambivalent. Although politics are an undeniable part of
her aesthetics, Morrison has questioned if it is possible to be a black feminist (qtd. in
Lester 48). Despite targeting “the concept of patriarchy” as “the enemy,” “patriarchy in
medicine, patriarchy in school, or in literature,” she has stated that her novels are not
feminist in that she doesn’t write “ist” novels (qtd. in Suggs 35, qtd. in Jaffrey 140).

Acknowledging that she employs women’s sensibilities when she writes,
Morrison insists that her novels are irrevocably black. According to Carolyn Denard, she
“is…concerned with celebrating the unique feminine cultural values that black women
have developed in spite of and often because of their oppression” (172). Morrison has
said in an early interview that she writes for black women with male perspectives as part
of her feminist sensibility (qtd. in Russell 46). Undeniably, issues of race, gender, class,
and nation mark the landscape of her work, which seeks to give power to historically
silenced figures. An artist fully committed to works that are aesthetically powerful and
politically involved, she writes beautifully and truthfully about the social and political
dimensions of father-daughter incest. In exposing the traumas of incest, imperialism, and
racism, she suggests that they are interwoven threads of oppression. Composed of many
perspectives, *The Bluest Eye* is a brilliant synthesis that features the voice of the female victim and could-be victim as it signifies on Ellison’s work, testifies to the traumatic experiences of black characters, and bears witness to the insidious trauma of paternal incest.

**References**


Chapter V—Getting out from under “Daddy’s Meanness”:

White Trash Trauma in Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*

“[W]hat if the ‘object’ started to speak?”

Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (135)

“Behind the story I tell is the one I don’t. Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear. Behind my carefully buttoned collar is my nakedness, the struggle to find clean clothes, food, meaning, and money. Behind sex is rage, behind anger is love, behind this moment is silence, years of silence.”

Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (39)

Claiming Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston as major influences in the development of her feminist voice, Dorothy Allison has commented on how struck she was by *The Bluest Eye*: “Besides James Baldwin, nothing ever hit me as hard as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*…it was about incest, about that terror, and it was about suicide” (Pratt 30). The novel resonated with Allison because of the “speech,” “rhythms,” “language,” and, most familiarly, the emphasis on the working class (Pratt 31). “It didn’t read to me black,” Allison said; “It read to me working class” (Pratt 31). In Pecola’s story of shame, social contempt, and sexual violation, Allison saw her own. And like *The Bluest Eye*, which broke ground by being the first novel to have a little black girl as a protagonist, Allison’s 1992 *Bastard Out of Carolina* charts the coming-of-age of a character little seen in literature—a girl from “white-trash” origins. Allison’s novel shares
with Morrison’s the breaking of a cultural silence surrounding child abuse as it shows what can happen when a father internalizes class hatred and unleashes his frustrations on his daughter. This semiautobiographical novel marks a significant departure from Morrison’s, Ellison’s, and Fitzgerald’s accounts of father-daughter incest in that the story of sexual violation is told entirely from the perspective of the female victim herself.¹ In this harrowing, “more bitter than sweet Bildungsroman,” protagonist Ruth Anne “Bone” Boatwright authors a story that illuminates the insidious trauma surrounding the domestic violence which culminates in a graphic rape scene at the novel’s end (Kenan 815). Detailing Bone’s coming-to-speech, Allison enables the traumatized subject to claim narrative as a way of working through trauma.

Allison has said that in Bastard Out of Carolina she set out to do two things: “to put in print everything [she] understood that happens in a violent family where incest is taking place” (Skin 54) and to tell “the complicated, painful story of how [her] mama had, and had not, saved [her] as a girl” (Skin 34). Her book is one of the first to explore the role of the mother in father-daughter incest, as she tries to come to terms with how the mother’s action or inaction further traumatized the daughter. However, instead of portraying “Mama” Anney Boatwright as a collusive mother, Allison reflects on why the mother doesn’t leave her abusive husband and finally chooses him over her daughter. Following Allison’s lead, in this chapter I examine the traumas experienced by several figures in the narrative: Daddy Glen Waddell, “Mama” Anney Boatwright, and Bone herself, all of whom are marked by classism and institutional misogyny. In recreating

¹ “If the book had been autobiographical,” says Allison, “it would have been a lot meaner” (qtd. in Garrett 3).
Bone’s family, Allison exposes how the unequal power relations of patriarchy and capitalism enable father-daughter incest. I also examine how Aunt Raylene, who assumes the maternal role by the novel’s end, helps Bone transition from victim to survivor.

Like Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*, Allison’s first novel was ten years in the making. She had published with feminist, lesbian, and gay newspapers, periodicals, and presses for almost two decades, but the publication of *Bastard* moved her work to a mainstream press and readership. The novel that had begun as a poem in 1974 was bid on by two female editors; no male editors were interested. Carol De Santi at Dutton got the contract and gave Allison a $37,000 advance, a significant sum considering Allison had $200 to her name before publishing the book. It received flattering reviews in *The New York Times Book Review*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Village Voice*. It was even discussed favorably in Katie Roiphe’s “Making the Incest Scene,” an otherwise scathing attack on writers of incest narratives. Although it was mainly received as a novel written in the tradition of Southern regionalist fiction that told the story of working-class families, many reviewers also emphasized the issue of sexual abuse. The novel garnered the attention of the group Allison calls the “big boys” of literature and received many accolades (Sandell 222). It was a finalist for the 1992 National Book Award; it won the Ferro Grimly prize, the ALA Award for Lesbian and Gay Writing, and the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for fiction. It became a best seller and spawned an award-winning (although for Allison, disappointing) film. Allison, the first in her family to graduate from high school, also reached another milestone: her first novel established her as a major contemporary American author credited with altering the literary landscape.
Providing an insider’s view of poor-white experience and father-daughter incest, *Bastard* speaks previously unspoken truths about culturally-marginalized figures. As it tells the tale of the damage done to Bone, the female incest victim who is disempowered by age, gender, and class, *Bastard* also reveals the psychological trauma, stemming from systems of oppression, that causes perpetrators to exploit and abuse more vulnerable members of society, such as female children. One difficulty for early critics was how to talk about poor white culture and father-daughter incest without reinforcing stereotypes of poor southerners as sexually-pervasive, promiscuous, dirty, drunk, criminally-minded, lazy, and stupid. In other words, how does one address these topics without suggesting that incest and inbreeding happen only in poor rural families? Allison herself has even said in jest, “What’s a South Carolina virgin? ’At’s a ten-year-old can run fast” (*Trash* 12). J. Brooks Bouson observes that the novel “ends up legitimating, at least in part, the popular view that white-trash culture is a central site of social pathology and abjection” (36). Allison admits that to a degree her novel does reinforce standard images of white trash culture, saying “Some of that stuff is true” (Hollibaugh 16). Without making excuses for the behavior of her family members, Allison contextualizes the material realities of economic oppression and the romanticized view of heterosexuality to show how these forces can lead to vulnerability which, in Glen’s case, leads to violence, and, in Anney’s case, leads to her turning a blind eye to the abuse. Allison suggests, much as Morrison had, that violence can be learned from domination as these metaphorically-emasculated, socially-impotent fathers come to resemble their oppressors. Kenneth Millard points out that *Bastard* “is at pains to delineate the social factors that condition” these characters’ lives (161, emphasis added).
Since its publication critics have discussed how the novel both confirms and transcends stereotypes of poor-white southerners. Provoking a steady stream of literary analysis, *Bastard* has been approached from diverse lenses. Critics over the last two decades have commented on its postmodern sensibility, narrative strategies and storytelling, southern locale, depictions of class, gender, sexuality, race, and region, the character of Shannon Pearle, Bone’s friend or, as some have argued, her alter ego, Bone’s fantasies and vivid descriptions of masturbation, the curious undertones of Bone’s budding lesbianism, and Allison’s genre-bending. Chapters on the novel have appeared in at least five books published in the twenty-first century: John N. Duvall’s *Race and White Identity in Southern Fiction*, Bouson’s *Embodied Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women’s Writings*, Laura Di Prete’s “*Foreign Bodies*: Trauma, Corporeality, and Textuality in Contemporary American Culture*, Deborah Horvitz’s *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women’s Fiction*, and Gillian Harkins’s *Everybody’s Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America*. In *Class Definitions: On the Lives and Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros, and Dorothy Allison*, Michelle M. Tokarczyk discusses how socioeconomic class shapes these writers and their works. The first (and to date only) collection of essays exclusively on Allison was published in 2004: *Critical Essays on the Works of American Author Dorothy Allison*, edited by Christine Blouch and Laurie Vickroy, contains eight essays on Allison’s work, three of which focus entirely on *Bastard*. 
Autobiographical Traces: “Not biography and yet not lies”

Perceptive critics pointed out, and Allison candidly acknowledged, that Bone is a thinly-veiled Dorothy Allison. Many essays have focused on the book’s autobiographical traces and the effects of subverting clear genre distinctions between fiction and autobiography. Allison, who labors to humanize without idealizing her characters, patterned Bone’s family after her own: her aunts and uncles are modeled after Allison’s mother’s family, for example. Portraying her flawed characters realistically, she has said that she is driven by compassion and a desire to get at why these people are the way they are, including Glen. Acknowledging the stereotypes that have been foisted on her and her loved ones, Allison has stated,

I show you my aunts in their drunken rages, my uncles in their meanness. And that’s exactly who we are said to be. That’s what white trash is all about. We’re all supposed to be drunks standing in our yards with our broken-down cars and our dirty babies. Some of that stuff is true. But to write about it I had to find a way to pull the reader in and show you those people as larger than that contemptible myth. And show you why those men drink, why those women hate themselves and get old and can’t protect themselves or their children. Show you human beings instead of fold-up, mean, cardboard figures. (Hollibaugh 16)

Allison’s story resists representing her people as case studies. “One temptation,” Allison has said, “is to make the Boatwrights something off Tobacco Road. Just dirt poor slutty horrible, you know, stealing and wenching and all that bullshit” (qtd. in Graff 46). In the novel most of the uncles do think they have the right to stay drunk from sunset on Friday
until dawn on Monday, “chain-smoke, drive jacked-up cars, talk dirty, display frightening tempers, work in mills and diners, and frequently spend time in jail”; they also are members, however, of a close-knit family who genuinely love each other (McDonald 18). For example, even though Bone notes that her uncles go to jail as early and often as some people go to school, these same uncles make gifts, such as coin purses, hair barrettes, and key tags, for their nieces during their stints at the county farm.

Bone’s parents are based on Allison’s own. Glen, who enters the story toward the end of the first chapter, reincarnates Allison’s stepfather. Although not much is documented about him, Allison has revealed that he raped her from the time she was five years old: “The man raped me. It’s the truth. It’s a fact. I was five, and he was eight months married to my mother” (Two or Three Things 39). The scene in Chapter Four in which Glen molests Bone in the hospital parking lot while Anney has a miscarriage is based on actual events. In an interview with Marilyn Strong, Allison confided that her stepfather gave her gonorrhea when she was twelve, which left her sterile (96). Most likely, he also sexually violated her sisters, although she has said she doesn’t have any right to tell their stories (Graff 47). To this day, he lives in denial, claiming he never touched her: “When contacted by San Francisco Focus, Allison’s stepfather denied he ever physically or sexually abused her. ‘Everything she says against me is untrue. I never touched her at all. I did everything I possibly could for that girl all my life’” (Strong 62). Despite the fact that her stepfather has called her a liar, she is sensitive and even sympathetic to Glen’s character. Insisting that “the first rule of writing is to love your characters,” “Even the one you hate. You have to get inside them,” Allison was asked if she loved the Daddy Glen character. She said, “Of course. I had to make somebody I
could almost understand” (Strong 97). Remarkably, she writes from a place of compassion as she humanizes Glen and shifts the responsibility for father-daughter incest away from the indictment of any one individual.

“The woman that I made Bone’s mother, Anney, was so much of my own mother,” Allison has said (qtd. in Hollibaugh 16). The first chapter, which details the circumstances surrounding Bone’s violent birth—a drunk driving accident, an unconscious teenage mother, and the word illegitimate stamped on her birth certificate—happened to Allison, whose mother was a grade-school drop-out, working as a waitress, and one month past fifteen when she gave birth (Skin 15). Literally unconscious during the birth of her daughter, Allison’s mother remained metaphorically unconscious to her daughter’s abuse and refused to bear witness to her trauma. Allison says that for all of her mother’s life, “She could not say the words—incest, violence, betrayal. She couldn’t say: I knew he was fucking you. She could only say: I never meant for those things to happen. She’d say ‘those things.’ And she’d say: I know you’ll never be able to forgive me” (qtd. in Hollibaugh 16). Not surprisingly, Allison’s mother is unable to put the experience to words, which suggests that, even though she knew what was happening, naming the incest was impossible for her. However, Allison seems to understand why her mother was so evasive, and, through writing Bastard, she arguably comes to forgive her for ignoring her daughter’s abuse.

Allison remarks the obsessive-compulsive need for heterosexual validation to which her mother, aunts, and many other women fall prey. Aware of the harshness of South Carolina’s laws in the 1950s regarding unwed mothers (the state went so far as to enact “a substitute parent law” that denied “aid to children whose mothers had even a
casual, short term relationship with a man”), she notes that many women in her culture wished to marry in order to escape the ingrained shame of class prejudice (Irving 102). “I think the shame [my mother] felt was one of the reasons she stayed with my stepfather. She wanted to be respectable,” Allison comments (Strong 95). She also notes the hold that her stepfather had on her mother, with marriage reinforcing his claims to patriarchal privilege as he assumes the role of head of the family: “My stepfather broke her, broke her in a way that she couldn’t imagine life without him” (qtd. in Jetter 56). Still living with Allison’s abusive stepfather, her mother died at just fifty-six after suffering from cancer for thirty of those years. Tokarczyk identifies that “In her final days, Allison’s mother apologized to her for the abuse she had endured; trying to explain that she never wanted their lives to be so horrifying, that she always hoped things would get better” (168).2 Acknowledging her mother’s love for herself and her sisters, Allison says she “fought desperately to get us through our childhood intact, but she failed utterly” (qtd. in Strong 64). To show the strength of Bone and focus on the complexity of Anney’s character and why she failed, Allison explains: “I had to forgive my mother, really forgive her in order to show a child who couldn’t forgive her” (qtd. in Hollibaugh 16). Dramatizing her stepfather’s violence and her mother’s neglect, Allison refuses easy dichotomies of victim and perpetrator. It becomes clear that she is not out to seek revenge but that “forgiving rather than hating marks Allison’s aesthetic” (Tokarczyk 192).

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2 For a fuller account of her last days with her mother, see “Skin, Where She Touches Me,” in Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature.
Putting into Print Father-Daughter Incest: Glen’s Trauma

If the events Allison writes about so movingly actually happened, why does she turn to fiction to recount them? She anticipates this question in saying that “The element of fiction” provided “the necessary distance” (qtd. in Garrett 3). Her statement is in line with what critical theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Ronald Granofsky have argued with respect to trauma: “literary symbolism allows for a ‘safe’ confrontation with a traumatic experience” (qtd. in Di Prete 5). If Allison fictionalized her account for personal reasons, her timing was also apt: in the early nineties when the novel was published, mainstream presses were starting to publish novels about incest and sexual trauma in what would come to be seen as a publishing explosion. Allison thus spearheaded a trend. In fictionalizing her story, she was also able to draw out the broader cultural implications of a personal story, conveying a keen sense of ethical and political urgency.

Like Morrison and Ellison, Allison is concerned with how a classist society contributes to the problem of father-daughter incest. And like them, she is concerned with depicting her father figure as something other than a villain. In her first-person account, told retrospectively by Bone from the ages of seven to thirteen, Allison asks what causes some fathers to commit incest. In the case of Glen Waddell, his pathology takes the form of paternal incest because of the pressures of trying to compensate for what his father sees as his failures in a capitalistic and patriarchal society. Strikingly, Glen does not come from the poor white class: his family is comfortably and consciously middle class, part of a patriarchal southern culture that prides itself on property ownership. His father, Mr. Bodine Waddell, owns Sunshine Dairy; the oldest brother, Daryl, is a lawyer; and the
other brother, James, a dentist. Their wives are housewives, enjoying the luxury of not having to work outside the house and frowning on women who do. In contrast to the men in his family, Glen works in menial, low-paying jobs. When, at seventeen, he first meets Anney, he is a truck driver. Pointed out by Bone, “Skinny, nervous little Glen Waddell didn’t seem like he would amount to much, driving a truck for the furnace works, and shaking a little every time he tried to look a man in the eye” (10-11). The precocious Bone increasingly understands that Glen’s insecurities stem from his inability to live up to his father’s middle-class standards. To compensate, Glen does what his society has taught him to do; he turns to women to reassert a masculinity defined as domination.

Glen chooses Anney, and in a scene in which we clearly see what Gayle Rubin calls “the exchange of women” at work, the reader also witnesses Glen’s ulterior motives for pursuing a Boatwright woman. From the beginning we know that Glen is attracted not just to Anney but to her brothers’ bad-boy reputation. In a troubling scene, Anney’s brother Earle brings Glen to the White Horse Café where she works so they can meet. Earle makes sure the meeting takes place after an appropriate lapse of time since the death of Anney’s late husband (and the father of Bone’s sister Reese). Earle’s ownership of Anney is illustrated when, seeing Glen glare at his baby sister who is “no bigger than a girl,” Earle gets “hot-angry” and tells Glen to watch himself (11). Even more unsettling is Glen’s reaction: he determines to marry Anney for a number of not-so-noble reasons. Marriage, he (like Cholly Breedlove) thinks, will provide access to patriarchal privilege,

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3 See Rubin’s landmark 1975 essay, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in which she offers a feminist rereading of the exchange of women that considers its consequences for women, the object of masculine exchange. She argues that the heteropatriarchal construction assures male ownership rights over females.
and marrying into a family less fortunate than the Waddells is an act of rebellion that allows Glen to disgrace his family. Further, the union will secure Glen’s ties to the legend of the Boatwright boys, who are feared and even oddly respected by the rest of the community for their bad tempers and violent ways. Like Morrison, whose narrative strategies spotlight Cholly’s thoughts, Allison also portrays the perpetrator’s perspective: “He would have her, he told himself. He would marry Black Earle’s baby sister, marry the whole Boatwright legend, shame his daddy and shock his brothers. He would carry a knife in his pocket and kill any man who dared to touch her” (13). Glen’s regressive dependency on the Boatwrights shows his internalization of the ideals of a sexist, elitist, patriarchal society. Flexing his masculinity, he comes to see himself as the rightful owner of the female bodies of his new family members.

By providing glimpses into Glen’s relationship with his father, Allison exposes the insidious trauma he experiences, blurring any clear distinction between victim and victimizer. Statements about Glen’s need for love abound in the novel. Although well aware of his black-sheep, “bastard,” status in his own family, Glen continues to brag about the Waddells and visits his family “at least once every other month” (99). He always promises Anney and the girls that they won’t stay long, but a young Bone knows that “he would not have the nerve to leave before his father had delivered his lecture on all the things Glen had done wrong in his long life of failure and disappointment” (99). After Anney tells Bone, “‘Your daddy wants his daddy to be proud of him….It about breaks my heart. He should just as soon whistle for the moon,’” Bone notes the change in Glen’s demeanor:
It was true. Around his father, Glen became unsure of himself and too
careful. He broke out in a sweat, and his eyes kept flickering back to his
daddy’s face as if he had to keep watching or miss the thing he needed
most to see. He would pull at his pants like a little boy and drop his head if
anyone asked him a question. (99)

Furthermore, Anney tells her sister Ruth, “‘I an’t never seen a boy wanted his daddy’s
love so much and had so little of it. All Glen really needs is to know himself loved, to get
out from under his daddy’s meanness’” (132). Foregrounding issues of classism, Anney
is quick to identify Glen’s father as the cause of his insecurities and later as a way to
justify what he does to her daughter.

Glen fails as a son, husband, and father. Unable to meet his family’s expectations,
he struggles financially. He has married beneath his class, cannot hold a steady job,
cannot make good on the rent, and, on at least one occasion, cannot feed his family. In a
memorable scene, Anney resorts to feeding her daughters soda crackers and ketchup with
salt and pepper after Glen is laid off from yet another job. The scene ends with what the
reader assumes is Anney leaving the house to prostitute herself. Added to Glen’s list of
disappointments is his inability to achieve the myth of fatherhood and produce children
of his own. When Glen Jr. dies in childbirth, his failures in a capitalistic and patriarchal
society collide. Perhaps not coincidentally, Glen Jr. dies the same time that Glen first
molests Bone in the hospital parking lot. Juxtaposing these two traumatic events, Allison
suggests that the death of Glen’s son is retribution for taking the virginity of a girl who is
now legally his daughter. Unable to father his own son and carry on the Waddell name,
Glen cannot even afford to buy a burial site. According to Bone, not having enough
money to buy a plot for his son marks the turning point when Glen’s grief turns to rage. From that day, Glen becomes obsessed with patriarchal independence, making the family move away from Anney’s family and ultimately embarking on numerous moves in which, as Bone notes, “We lived in no one house more than eight months” (64). Like Cholly, Glen moves his family to the socially-disgraced level of “outdoors.”

Despite her sympathetic portrayal of her stepfather, Bone does not excuse his abuse of her as she starts to see the truth of what her mother has said all along—that Glen suffers from the abuse of his own father. She sees firsthand how tightly intertwined poverty and abuse are, but she also shows an awareness that Glen assumes the role of oppressor. After he goes to work for his father earning less than the other routemen, Bone comments on how insecure Glen feels around his father: “I looked down into the pot of potatoes, remembering the last time we had gone out to the Waddells’, the way Daddy Glen had stuttered when his father spoke to him. That old man was horrible, and working for him must be hell, even I knew that” (207). She knows that Glen is victimized by his father and that he is no stranger to the hunger and rage she feels while in the company of the more privileged. Yet she also begins to understand that despite what Glen has suffered because of his father’s hatefulfulness, his history of abuse should not permit him to victimize her. Bone whispers, “I don’t care if his daddy does treat him bad. I don’t care why he’s so mean” (209). By the novel’s end, she painfully understands the difference between the Waddells’ abuse of Glen and Glen’s abuse of Bone—the Waddells attack Glen verbally; his abuse of Bone is emotional, physical, and sexual.
Why Anney Was Not Able to Save Bone: Anney’s Trauma

At the heart of Bastard is the story of Anney Boatwright, who is sixteen years old when she becomes a mother, making the novel as much about Anney’s coming-of-age as Bone’s. Anney’s ideals of what a woman should be like are very much shaped by her sisters’ beliefs, enlarging Allison’s vision to criticize the Boatwright women and constructions of femininity in general. Glen isn’t the only one to internalize patriarchal and capitalistic norms: Anney, along with most of her sisters, has bought into the standards as well. As Morrison comments on the tragic results of internalizing white value systems, Allison critiques the Boatwright women’s dependency on heteropatriarchal practices. In a culture in which women are old at twenty-five and men never mature, Allison has said that women are born to suffer: “Even in this book with these strong women they all believe that suffering it what they are supposed to do. And they pass it on to their children” (qtd. in Hollibaugh 16). If Pauline and Cholly breed insecurity and self-doubt in Pecola and Sammy, so do the Boatwrights breed suffering and uncertainty into their children.

Anney is unable to see how shame has controlled her relation to her own body and is consumed with her daughter’s illegitimacy, a stamp of shame she wishes to erase. Since Anney goes into labor after being knocked unconscious as a result of a drunk-driving accident, she is unable to provide a name for her baby daughter. And since Bone’s Aunt Ruth and Granny could not write very legibly, Bone’s first name wound up being spelled three different ways: “Ann, Anne, and Anna” (3). However, Anney is more troubled by the fact that there is no man to give Bone a last name, as Granny ran him out of town “for messing with her daughter” (3). Despite her efforts to make it appear that
Bone is not fatherless in a patriarchal culture, Anney fails and is left with two babies and three copies of Bone’s birth certificate—all by the age of nineteen. To compensate, Anney agrees to marry Glen, with one of her first thoughts of him being that he would “make a good daddy” (13). Blinded by her desires for a respectable, legal familial relation, her actions backfire and one of the novel’s ironies is that her marriage to Glen, which she thinks will protect her and her girls from class prejudice, actually makes it easier for the abuse and incest to happen. The union between Glen and Anney grants Glen legal right to Bone’s body.

The dangerous privilege of male entitlement only escalates throughout the novel, unhindered by Anney. For many readers, Anney emerges as a woman who unquestionably embraces Glen’s possessiveness, thereby revictimizing her daughter. For example, after Glen’s routine bathroom beatings of Bone, Anney questions—not Glen’s actions or motivations—but rather what Bone had done to make Glen so angry: “Oh, girl. Oh, honey. Baby, what did you do? What did you do?” (107) and again, “‘Why, honey? Why did you have to act like that?’” (234). Likewise, Bone notes, “When Daddy Glen beat me there was always a reason, and Mama would stand right outside the bathroom door. Afterward she would cry and wash my face and tell me not to be so stubborn, not to make him mad” (110). Anney at one point says that she should buy Bone vitamins because she can’t understand how her daughter is always bruising herself; however, it seems likely that Anney knows what is happening and is complicit in Bone’s abuse.

But not until the very end of the book does Bone chastise her mother for failing to intervene. Instead of blaming her for a series of bad choices, which some readers might
do, Allison reveals the lack of freedom Anney has in making choices and the factors that prevent her from exposing the familial secret of child abuse and leaving her abusive husband. Bone recognizes that her mother is a product of “a patriarchal system that rewarded settled women with a small dose of respectability and, most importantly, threatened them with more hardship if they became single” (Tokarczyk 168). The stigma against being a single mother may explain why Anney, who does move out temporarily, is ultimately unable to leave Glen, even after she witnesses the rape of her daughter with her own eyes.

As we see in the novel, Anney is not the only one to long for heterosexual validation. Most of the Boatwright women have internalized patriarchal ideals to devastating effects. For example, after Bone’s Aunt Alma discovers her husband has been cheating, she separates from him—but only for a while: “when the baby got sick and the boys started running around at night, she gave it up and moved back in with him” (91). Alma eventually excuses Wade’s behavior, claiming, “I guess he an’t no worse than any other man” (91). From observing the heterosexual relationships of her family members, Bone learns at a young age the unequal power dynamics in which men are granted certain freedoms, as she puts it, “could do anything,” while women grow old, mothering the men they marry (23). Bone comments on the stark differences between the females and the males in her family:

My aunts treated my uncles like overgrown boys—rambunctious teenagers whose antics were more to be joked about than worried over—and they seemed to think of themselves that way too. They looked young, even Nevil, who’d had his teeth knocked out, while the aunts—Ruth, Raylene,
Alma, and even Mama—seemed old, worn-down, and slow, born to mother, nurse, and clean up after the men. (23)

By observing her aunts, Bone learns that the female body “was born to be worked to death, used up, and thrown away” (206). Anney’s appearance is emphasized throughout the novel, as her beauty wanes during her marriage to Glen. The men at the diner who once talked about how pretty Anney is start to talk about how pretty she had been (120). Similarly and not coincidentally, when Alma separates from Wade, she looks “better than ever”: “Her face was smooth and relaxed, her skirt loose on her soft hips” (86). But when she goes back to him, she assumes her tired, haggard looks. Repudiating a sentimental view of poverty, Allison shows how these women literally embody their hardships. She also gestures toward a larger truth: healthy heterosexual relationships are impossible when masculinity and femininity are constituted in and through structures of oppression.

Allison illustrates how Western standards of female beauty weigh on the women, who instruct Bone on how important looks really are. Aunt Alma tells her that “love had more to do with how pretty a body was than anyone would ever admit” (32). Her sentiments are echoed by her sister Ruth, who thought that a woman’s ultimate validation came through bearing children for her husband: “Being pregnant was proof that some man thought you were pretty sometime, and the more babies she got, the more she knew she was worth something” (230-31). Anney says she wanted to cry and hit Ruth when she told her that, but Anney, as Bone begins to understand, has also internalized standards of oppression and wants the love of a man, at all costs. Bone remains unsure throughout the story about “love for a man not already part of the family,” and is indoctrinated into a culture that celebrates beauty and marriage (32). It is therefore no surprise when, as her
abuse escalates, she wishes to be beautiful and questions “why couldn’t I be pretty? I wanted to be more like the girls in the storybooks, princesses with pale skin and tender hearts” (206). Echoes of Pecola Breedlove are heard as Bone starts to internalize unattainable standards of beauty and to convince herself that no part of her is beautiful and that is why Daddy Glen is so hateful towards her.

Even Ruth, who glimpses that all the signs of abuse are there and who speaks with the wisdom of a dying woman, is so committed to patriarchal norms that even in her final days, she still excuses male behavior. In a poignant scene Bone attempts to break her silence and tell Ruth about the abuse. Bone blurts out, “‘Daddy Glen hates me’” (122). Ruth agrees that “‘Glen don’t like you much,’” and that he’s jealous of Bone’s relationship with Anney (123). However, like Anney and her other sisters who infantilize men, Ruth quickly excuses Glen’s behavior, claiming that it’s typical: “‘There’s a way he’s just a little boy himself, wanting more of your mama than you, wanting to be her baby more than her husband. And that an’t so rare, I’ll tell you’” (123). “‘Men,’” she continues, “‘are just little boys climbing up on titty whenever they can. Your mama knows it as well as I do. We all do’” (123). After explaining the ways of men to Bone, it is no wonder that when Ruth presses the question about Glen touching Bone, she denies the abuse. Ruth hesitatingly questions, “‘has Daddy Glen ever…well…touched you?’” (124). While placing her hand on Bone’s parted legs, Ruth, who had been so forthright in her explanation about men, tiptoes around the issue and blushingly asks, “‘Down here, honey. Has he ever hurt you down there?’” (124). Unsurprisingly, Bone whispers no, which she repeats and then attempts to end the conversation by reducing Glen’s abuse to normal disciplining: “‘He just looks at me hard. Grabs me sometimes. Shakes me’” (124).
With Ruth’s euphemistic description and flushed cheeks, it seems that even if Bone had been ready to tell the truth, her family was not ready to listen.

Unlike Ruth and Anney who, for almost the entire novel, are unable to bear witness to Bone’s trauma, Bone tells her mother’s story of insidious trauma, leading Leigh Gilmore to describe the book as a daughter’s autobiography with her mother’s biography at its core (61). Bone shares with the reader the fact that her mother weeps for the love of a man. After Reese’s father, Lyle Parsons, is killed, Bone comments on her mother’s hunger for love: “No one knew that she cried in the night for Lyle and her lost happiness, that under that biscuit-crust exterior she was all butter grief and hunger, that more than anything else in the world she wanted someone strong to love her like she loved her girls” (10). Likewise Bone notes the cries of her mother the time after she and Glen temporarily break up after Bone’s bruises are exposed to the family: “Mama lay on the couch, and cried so quietly I could just barely hear her through the closed door. I curled up on the far side of the bed and listened to the small sounds of her weeping until I fell asleep” (251). Because of her devoted longing for a man who will validate her daughter’s legal status as well as her own social standing, Anney dismisses the protests of her family members who try, unsuccessfully, to warn her against marrying Glen. Great Aunt Maybelle voices her distrust of Glen; Uncle Beau doesn’t like him because he doesn’t trust a man who doesn’t drink. Even Granny expresses her concerns about Anney marrying Glen: “‘That boy’s got something wrong with him….He’s always looking at me out the sides of his eyes like some old junkyard dog waiting to steal a bone. And you know Anney’s the bone he wants’” (37). At this point, even the wise Granny fails to see
that Bone is the bone he wants. However, the family’s protests fall on deaf ears as Anney already has her heart set on remarrying and staying wed.

**Bone’s Transition from Victim to Survivor**

There comes a day, however, when Anney can no longer ignore her daughter’s abuse: the horrific rape scene placed at the end is a turning point for not just Anney, but also for Bone, who, unlike Pecola and Matty Lou, finds her voice and starts to hold her parents accountable for their actions. Regarding the placement of the scene Minrose Gwin says, “Because the actual rape does not occur until the end of the novel, we, like her, stay on edge, each time expecting it to happen” (434). The traumatic encounters leading up to the rape show how Bone has been conditioned to victimhood, coming to see herself as less than human and deserving of the inevitable rape. Although her alienation, sense of shame, and emotional disconnection are prominent during the scene in which her stepfather rapes her, the novel charts Bone’s descent into victimhood. The psychological and emotional abuse she has previously endured are suggested in Allison’s comment that “The sexual abuse is actually the least destructive part of it” (qtd. in Strong 96). This insidious trauma may be more damaging than what is literally done to her body. After suffering much pain at the hands of her stepfather, Bone is confronted by Glen in a passage that shows his despair transforming into indescribable violence but also, and quite significantly, Bone’s grief turning to healing as she resists subjugation.

“The afternoon Daddy Glen showed up,” completes Bone’s indoctrination into a patriarchal culture as it conveys father-daughter incest as an expression of patriarchy, a systematic organization of regulated power in which women are oppressed by men (280).
Allison’s is the first book in this study to devote many pages—twelve consecutive pages—to detailing the traumatizing rape of the confused and terror-stricken twelve-year-old Bone. Like Trueblood’s tale, the scene starts innocently enough with Bone at her Aunt Alma’s house playing with her puppies and making peanut butter sandwiches to take with her on a picnic. At this point in the novel, Bone, along with her mother and sister, are living with Aunt Alma because Aunt Raylene discovered the domestic abuse, calling it to the attention of the entire family. As a healing Bone is giggling at the puppies, Glen’s Ford pulls up unannounced.

Bone, who is accustomed to retreating into silence, stands up to her father in this scene, challenging Glen with her words. Much like we’ve seen in the Trueblood narrative and the Warren account, the father focuses on the daughter’s sexual development, trying to make her assume some of the blame. Glen remarks on Bone’s coming-of-age status and later accuses her of incestuous desire. Reinforcing heterosexism, Glen says, “You’re getting bigger…Gonna be ready to start dating boys any day now. Getting married, maybe, starting your own family….Breaking some man’s heart just ’cause you can” (280-81). Quickly Glen’s interest turns to anger when he demands that Bone reunite their family by telling her mother that “it’s all right” (281). A significant change occurs in Bone when she whispers to Glen the following words: “No....I don’t want to live with you no more. Mama can go home to you. I told her she could, but I can’t. I won’t” (281).

Realizing that Bone now has the courage to “face the patriarchal authority which Glen represents” and is even able to attack him with language, Glen is deeply wounded by Bone’s words, which cause him to utter an incredulous one-word, “Won’t?” (281) (Woo 699). Contradicting what he had just said about Bone growing into womanhood
and demonstrating his adherence to patriarchy, he now challenges her, “‘You’re not even thirteen years old, girl. You don’t say what you do. I’m your daddy. I say what you do’” (282). But Bone, who is becoming more confident in her voice, repeats “‘No’” three times, adding to the third denial, “‘I’d rather die than go back to living with you’” (282).

She then tells Glen “‘No. I don’t want to talk. I want you to leave’” (282). Bone, who had held her secret for so long, too afraid to lose her mother’s love, who “would work as hard as he did to make sure she never knew,” finally has the fortitude to say the words that both she and Glen fear the most (118): “‘I’ll tell Mama’” (282).

However, Bone doesn’t have to tell Mama anything since Anney is there to see Bone’s rape. Unlike Trueblood, whose account of incest was coded in dream-like imagery, Bone divulges details, making the reader share in her pain and despair. As he violently enters her body, Glen casts her as the seductress saying, “‘You’ve always wanted it. Don’t tell me you don’t….I’ll give you what you really want’” (285). Glen then “reared up, supporting his weight on [her] shoulder while his hips drove his sex into [her] like a sword” (285). A bleeding, cursing Bone passes out briefly, and like Pecola, awakens to the sight of her mother. The outcome for Bone is just as upsetting as it was for Pecola, who tells her imaginary friend that her mother refused to believe the incest had occurred. As in *The Bluest Eye*, the rape scene does not end with the mother comforting her daughter. Instead, Anney mothers Glen.

“Is it more traumatic for [Bone] to experience Daddy Glen’s physical violence or to watch her mother comfort him,” asks Ann Cvetkovich (346). This is a question Allison clearly struggles with. The reader knows that Bone mainly keeps quiet about the abuse because she fears losing her mother’s love. Like Glen, who resembles the oppressors who
keep him in a subservient state, Bone had come to identify as a victim who assumed all fault. But during the rape scene she starts to care less about her mother: “I had always been afraid to scream, afraid to fight. I had always felt like it was my fault, but now it didn’t matter. I didn’t care anymore what might happen. I wouldn’t hold still anymore” (282). In an equally powerful confession, she admits, “I’d said I could never hate her, but I hated her now for the way she held him, the way she stood there crying over him” (291). In her anger, Bone asks, “Could she love me and still hold him like that?” taking another step from victim to survivor as she begins to doubt not just her mother’s love but her own need for that love (291).

There is some question about categorizing what happens between Trueblood and Matty Lou, and even between Cholly and Pecola, but there is no doubt in Bastard that Bone is both raped and traumatized. The rape is the climax of the story, yet Allison painstakingly details Bone’s efforts to combat the abuse she experiences. From chapters Nine to Seventeen, as Vincent King points out, the narrative becomes less concerned with Glen’s abuse and more focused on Bone’s search for identity.

**Masturbation, Lesbianism, and Narration**

A striking feature of the novel is Allison’s emphasis on Bone’s masturbatory fantasies. In addition to illustrating Bone’s dissociation, this internal splitting or division of body and mind, a response we also saw with Pecola, the novel suggests that for Bone masturbation is therapeutic: it allows her to work through trauma by reclaiming a body that has suffered many forms of injury. Allison is able to write about incest without desexualizing the female body and denying her sexual desires. Bone’s masturbatory
repetition simultaneously acts out the trauma and creates authority and agency for herself. She notes the paradoxical situation—she is both “ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten” but empowered in her ability to defeat her stepfather: “it was only in my fantasies with people watching me that I was able to defy Daddy Glen” (113). In her fantasies, the people watching parallel Pecola’s imaginary friend in that they bear witness to Bone’s trauma and show how divided personalities may be beneficial—at least temporarily—for those who are enduring severe trauma. Bone is at times unable to separate her sexual desire from the experience of being abused, and Allison has been criticized for her controversial linking of childhood sexual abuse with practices of sadomasochism. But Bone works through, and at times seemingly masters, her sexual abuse by repeating it in fantasy. Through masturbation she is able to recreate the punishment so that she pleasurable relives the event and phantasmatically controls it.

In addition to masturbating to thoughts of her father, having orgasms to images of fire, she also fantasizes about her mother. In the novel’s final masturbation passage, she thinks of being a baby leaning against her mother’s hip:

I dreamed I was a baby again, five or younger, leaning against Mama’s hip, her hands on my shoulders. She was talking, her voice above me like a whisper between stars. Everything was dim and safe. Everything was warm and quiet. She held me and I felt loved. She held me and I knew who I was. When I put my hand down between my legs, it was not a sin. It was like her murmur, like music, like a prayer in the dark. It was meant to be, and it was a good thing. (253)
Bone’s age in her dream is significant in that Glen’s abuse started when she was five. However, Glen is not a part of this fantasy. Longing for the comfort her mother fails to provide, Bone uses masturbation as a way to reconnect with her mother. Tanya Horeck finds the abandonment by Anney to be more traumatic than the violation by Daddy Glen and argues that Bone’s masturbatory fantasies are staged less in response to Glen than to her mother. In this final fantasy Anney certainly provides for Bone in a way she never did in real life, and makes good on the promise she once made to her young daughter—that she “’wouldn’t let nothing happen to my little girl’” (142). Allison has said that “The huge issue for any incest survivor is learning to enjoy sex,” and having Bone masturbate throughout the course of the novel suggests that the healing process must engage the body (qtd. in Jetter 57). Bone moves from passivity to activity by learning to enjoy her body and turn the senseless abuse into gratifying acts.

Along with the potential to heal herself through masturbatory fantasies, another saving grace for Bone is the character of Aunt Raylene who, as we learn in the last chapter, is a lesbian. Unlike her sisters, Aunt Raylene does not adhere to patriarchal practices such as marriage and pregnancy; nor does she feel less of a person for being born into poverty: “For all she was a Boatwright woman, there were ways Raylene had always been different from her sisters. She was quieter, more private, living alone with her dogs and fishing lines, and seemingly happy that way” (178). In stark contrast to her sisters, Raylene has rented the same house for most of her adult life. Commenting further on her peculiar ways, cousin Butch tells Bone that “Raylene had worked for the carnival like a man, cutting off her hair and dressing in overalls. She’d called herself Ray” (179). In one of the novel’s final disclosures, Raylene confesses to Bone that she ran off to the
carnival, “‘yeah, but not for no man’” (263). She seems to understand Anney’s dilemma in having to choose between husband and daughter because Raylene had made the woman she loved choose between herself and the woman’s child. Significantly, Raylene is the one who finds the bruises on Bone and makes the abuse known to the rest of the family. Unlike her mother and other aunts who inundate Bone with not-so-subliminal messages about how to grow up to be a housewife and mother, Raylene instills a sense that heteropatriarchal ideologies can be resisted. She teaches Bone to question a system that defines women as selfless wives who mother their husbands sometimes at the neglect of their children. The fact that Raylene is a positive lesbian model may suggest that Bone will indeed learn to reject the “Daddy Glens” of the world and get out from under her “daddy’s meanness” (296, 132).

Allison drops subtle hints about Bone’s budding lesbianism throughout the novel; however, the lesbian theme is understated in *Bastard*, becoming more prominent, but still ambiguous, in the final chapter.⁴ In the concluding scene, as she delivers Bone’s birth certificate “blank, unmarked, un stamped,” freeing Bone of the bastard status, Anney leaves her daughter in the care of Raylene (309). The irony is that she gains legitimacy through disinheritance—in addition to having no father, Bone is now left without her birth mother. As Bone rests her head on Raylene’s shoulder, she thinks of her mother:

⁴ For example, Allison writes, “Some days I would grind my teeth, wishing I had been born a boy” (23); “You’re a Boatwright, Bone, even if you are the strangest girl-child we got” (Earle to Bone 27); “But that’s because you got a man-type part of you” (Butch to Bone 54); “I wished I was a boy so I could run faster, stay away more, or even hit him back” (109); “I liked being one of the women with my aunts, liked feeling a part of something nasty and strong and separate from my big rough boy-cousins and the whole world of spitting, growling, overbearing males” (91).
Who had Mama been, what had she wanted to be or to do before I was born? Once I was born, her hopes had turned, and I had climbed up her life like a flower reaching for the sun. Fourteen and terrified, fifteen and a mother, just past twenty-one when she married Glen. Her life had folded into mine. What would I be like when I was fifteen, twenty, thirty? Would I be as strong as she had been, as hungry for love, as desperate, determined, and ashamed? (309)

Instead of questioning why Anney doesn’t leave Glen, Bone here probes a slightly different question—what makes her stay—as she seems to have some understanding that her mother is a part of a misogynist and classist society that “makes Anney value having a husband above caring for her daughter” (Woo 696). However, instead of final judgment Bone offers honest questions, much as Cholly does in *The Bluest Eye*, about her mother as well as her own emerging identity. As Bone draws Raylene closer to her, she notes that she knows who she is going to be: “I was who I was going to be, someone like [Raylene], like Mama, a Boatwright woman” (309).

Although uncertain if Bone’s sexuality will be formed in reaction to her mother’s heterosexual subordination or her aunt’s greater autonomy, it is clear that in tracing her heritage through the women in her family, Bone is becoming comfortable with her “bastard” status, imagining a life that challenges the patriarchal order in which femininity is oftentimes traumatizing. Allison’s final sentence, “I wrapped my fingers in Raylene’s and watched the night close in around us,” suggests that Allison enables queer possibilities for her protagonist (309). Raylene may function as “a displaced marker of Bone’s queer sexuality, if not her incipient lesbianism” (Cvetkovich 350). The image
Allison leaves us with—Bone tilting her head to lean on Raylene’s shoulder, trusting her and her love—may indicate that lesbianism offers Bone an alternative to the dangers of heterosexuality and a way out of the cycle of abuse.

There are reasons why Allison leaves lesbianism “tantalizingly vague” in Bastard (Cvetkovich 350). An out lesbian who has written explicitly about sex in other works, Allison has said that “being a lesbian is part of why I survived,” but she did not set out to write the lesbian Bildungsroman in Bastard (qtd. in Strong 97). She states, “The book is not about growing up queer successfully, and I got the real strong impression from talking to people was, what they hoped I would write would be the lesbian biography” (qtd. in Hollibaugh 16). Perhaps Allison leaves Bone’s sexuality ambiguous because she did not want to link incest and lesbianism and thereby imply that lesbianism is the only recourse to father-daughter incest. As she’s said, if that were the case, we’d have a lot more lesbians (Two or Three Things 45). Bone’s ambiguous sexuality can be problematic if thinking in dichotomies, but as the novel powerfully shows, binaries like victim/victimizer can be deceptive.

An important lesson Raylene teaches Bone is to author a different version of her story, one that turns senseless violence into meaningful artwork. Literally collecting trash out of the river she lives near, Raylene illustrates to Bone the transformative power of the individual. Bastard Out of Carolina is a story of childhood sexual abuse, but it is also a story of survival, and the role played by narrative in Bone’s and Allison’s healing is significant. For Bone, storytelling has always been a part of her life and she has witnessed how it has the power to alter reality. She explains, “All the Boatwrights told stories, it was one of the things we were known for, and what one cousin swore was
gospel, another swore just as fiercely was an unqualified lie” (53). Granny, an avid storyteller, seems to be the one most guilty of failing to distinguish fact from fiction:

She would lean back in her chair and start reeling out story and memory, making no distinction between what she knew to be true and what she had only heard told. The tales she told me in her rough, drawling whisper were lilting songs, ballads of family, love, and disappointment. Everything seemed to come back to grief and blood, and everybody seemed legendary. (26)

This reconstruction of reality mesmerizes young Bone, who learns that tragedy can be rewritten as legend. Even Glen recognizes the power of storytelling and views Granny’s stories as threats to his patriarchal control. Glen dismisses Granny, instructing Bone and Reese to stop listening to her. “‘Your granny is the worst kind of liar,’” Glen exclaims; “‘That old woman wouldn’t tell the truth if she knew it’” (52). In place of Granny’s stories, Glen tells the girls about the Waddell family as he claims them as his own: “‘I’ll tell you what’s true. You’re mine now’” (52).

However, from the time of the rape on, Bone has no intention of allowing Glen to author her story. The stories of grief and blood that Granny tells resonate with Bone’s own reality. Well into her abuse, Bone starts to tell frightening stories of “boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered, babies cooked in pots of boiling beans, vampires and soldiers and long razor-sharp knives. Witches cut off the heads of children and grown-ups. Gangs of women rode in on motorcycles and set fire to people’s houses. The ground opened and green-black lizard tongues shot up to pull people down” (119). These stories can be read as a cry for help, but they also suggest that in creating fictional stories, Bone
is learning to gain critical distance from her trauma and to reconstruct reality. At a crucial moment during the rape scene, in which Bone’s innocence is irrevocably damaged, she studies Glen’s face with the intention of turning it into a story of her identity. As she stares into his eyes, she likens his face to “a road map, a route to be memorized, a way to get back to who I really was” (288). Focusing on this critical part of the scene, Tania Friedel comments on how important narration is for Bone, and by implication, for incest victims in their transition to survivor:

[Bone] is aware that in order to fully overcome this traumatic experience she will have to be able to tell a story of it to herself, fit it into a mental scheme….By fixing Daddy Glen’s face, and all the shame and trauma it signifies for her, in her memory, Bone will be able to assimilate it all into narrative language, a story she can tell herself about herself that she will be able to use to transform emerging feelings of shame into a source of empowerment. (36-37)

Despite the enormity of the obstacles she faces, Bone knows that reinventing herself through narration and by putting a different ending on her story than the one her stepfather wants will aid her in authoring her own story and taking back a part of herself.

In her fictional *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which is not entirely fictive, Allison reconstructs her own story of abuse, giving Bone the strength that she claims she didn’t possess at that age. She makes Bone get angry at thirteen, which Allison thinks will save Bone, unlike Allison, who did not get angry until she was in her twenties (Megan 73). Effectively rewriting her own story, Allison is pleased with the ending of her book in which Bone begins to claim a sense of herself and “goes to live with somebody who will
teach her not to give her life away to a man who won’t value it” (qtd. in Strong 95).

Through storytelling, Allison is able to counter the physical and economic domination of a patriarchal society that at one point crippled herself and her protagonist.

Even though Allison is optimistic about the healing potential of fiction, which to her describes a better world than the one she knew, some of her critics are more skeptical. Harkins explains that there is a catch to telling one’s story of incest—Allison is granted agency but it is by telling the story of a violated feminine sexual innocence. Similarly, Horvitz questions how one can preserve memories of horrific brutality without repeating them (“Sadism Demands a Story”). Acutely aware of the pain it took to author her story, Allison insists that writing is redeeming. To her, it is a form of resistance and a subversive way to uncover the class structure and the abuse that such inequities breed.

Storytelling became a strategy for Allison not only to comment on social oppression but also to make sense out of her own life.

Allison claims, “There was no meaning in what my stepfather did to me” (Skin 218). In effect, then, *Bastard Out of Carolina* can be read as making meaning out of a senseless experience. Through the act of storytelling Bone helps save herself; through the act of writing Allison learns to survive the trauma that she captures so powerfully in her first novel. While Allison says, “I can’t ascribe everything that has been problematic about my life simply and easily to the patriarchy, or to incest, or even to the invisible and much-denied class structure of our society,” she sheds light on these unequal power relations and helps us understand why father-daughter incest continues (*Skin* 15-16). Her work is transgressive in telling her story in her own words as it questions the legitimacy of patriarchal, legal family structures that do not protect children as they claim.
Transforming the disabling effect of traumatic experience to an empowering story of survivorship, she makes good on her promise to her readers to break their hearts and then heal them (Skin 212). Like the story of the impoverished Pecola Breedlove, in which Allison saw her own experience, the story of Bone inspired a generation of female authors to share their own stories of sexual violation. As we’ll see in the next chapter, some of these writers relinquish the label fiction in order to achieve a more effective representation of father-daughter incest.

References


Chapter VI—The Failure of Bearing Witness:

The Politics of Truth Telling and Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss: A Memoir*

When Dorothy Allison published her semiautobiographical account of father-daughter incest in her 1992 *Bastard Out of Carolina*, no one batted an eyelash. Her novel confirmed what most readers suspected—father-daughter incest is found in the homes of poor, southern, white-trash families who lack the rationality and morality necessary to control their impulses. Despite problematizing such pattern by having the abuse initiated by a man whose family is comfortably middle-class, Allison’s book was received as an “acceptable” tale of incest. In her novel, she foregrounds her childhood sexual abuse and suggests that violence was endemic to the South Carolina landscape in which she grew up and in which jokes about inbred white trash held some truth. The same cannot be said of Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss*, published five years after *Bastard*. A three-time novelist, Harrison had published a good part of the material she uses in *The Kiss*, including the father-daughter incest, as fiction in a book titled *Thicker Than Water* in 1991. However, when she published *The Kiss: A Memoir*, controversy ensued. This was not the semiautobiographical tale of Dorothy Allison growing up poor and being sexually abused by her stepfather. Nor was it the fictional first-person account of father-daughter incest authored by Harrison. Instead, it was the story of paternal incest told from the perspective of a member of the white, upper-middle class New York literati. Worst of all—it wasn’t just a story. Subtitling her work a memoir, Harrison stripped the account of its fictional cloak, baring her family’s deepest, darkest secrets. It was just too much for the reviewers to swallow.
Through writing *The Kiss*, Harrison engaged in what Suzette Henke calls “scriptotherapy”—“the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (xii). Judith Herman argues that transforming memory through writing can be helpful: she states that to successfully work through trauma one should convert traumatic memory, which merely and unconsciously repeats the past, into narrative memory, which narrates the past as past. Hence, she claims that the primary goal of therapy is “to put the story, including its imagery, into words” since the “physioneurosis induced by terror can apparently be reversed through the use of words” (*Trauma* 177, 183). The idea is that the authorial effort to reconstruct a story of psychological debilitation could offer potential for mental healing and begin to alleviate symptoms common to those suffering from PTSD. Writing, in these cases, becomes a protective space that encourages critical distance. Herman and Henke see much value in narrative recovery, meaning both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a trauma victim. However, Herman, along with Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, point out that there is another important piece to the healing process—having others bear witness to the trauma. As we’ll see in the case of *The Kiss*, many reviewers were unwilling to do that. Many in fact went so far as to insult not just Harrison’s book but also her person. What we then witness, in seeing the reviewers fail to attest to her story of incest, is another manifestation of the insidious traumas of heteropatriarchy which sent the message that at the turn of the century, talking about father-daughter incest was still taboo. In addition to what is revealed in the memoir, the ensuing controversy and the reviewers’ refusal to bear witness to Harrison’s trauma...
expose the tumultuous, abusive social network that continues to create, yet deny, father-daughter incest.

Aside from being a memoir, Harrison’s sparse book differs from the other works explored in this dissertation in significant ways. The incest for *Tender Is the Night*’s Nicole, *Invisible Man*’s Matty Lou (if there was in fact incest at all), *The Bluest Eye*’s Pecola, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*’s Bone occurred when the girls were children. Not so for Harrison. The incest did not begin for Harrison until her father, who had been cast out of her life when she was a toddler, waltzed back into her life when she was twenty years old, a week after her twentieth birthday, to be exact. Unlike the other daughters, Harrison did not grow up with her father or father figure. Her parents, who had met as teenaged virgins and had a shotgun wedding, were married for less than a year, divorcing before Harrison turned one. Before she is twenty, Harrison’s father visits his daughter only twice—once when she is five and the other time when she is ten. Instead of the abuse we see Bone endure, Harrison’s experience is more of an affair, an affair that has a four year run, not ending until her mother loses her battle with breast cancer. And, instead of documenting the father’s advances and focusing on his thoughts and words, as we read in *Invisible Man* and, to a lesser extent, in *The Bluest Eye*, Harrison’s memoir does not probe the father’s perspective, giving him little voice.¹ Even more telling, her father is not even granted a name—he remains nameless throughout the entire narrative.²

¹ Because the father is not granted much voice in the memoir, Gillian Harkins suggests that *The Kiss* follows the pattern of those texts labeled “postpatriarchal fiction” in which the father is portrayed as a peripheral figure (214).

² Then again, Harrison’s mother is never named and her own name, “K-K-K-Katie,” is mentioned only once in the memoir (10). Harrison’s grandfather chants the “talismanic ‘K-K-K-Katie’” to help her get to sleep after she becomes afraid of the dark from having
Unlike Fitzgerald, who includes letters written from Nicole to Dick, as we saw in Chapter 2, Harrison mentions that she saved her father’s letters, all “839 pages” of them, but she does not reproduce a single one (156). In place of her father’s point of view, her work grapples with the daughter’s role as collaborator, accomplice, and agent. For example, the book opens with the collusive “we”: “We meet in airports. We meet in cities where we’ve never been before. We meet where no one will recognize us” (3). The affair is portrayed more as a consensual matter than one of childhood exploitation, and the act of sex is elided. Nonetheless, *The Kiss* does not understate the horrors of incest. In “The New Face of Incest?: Race, Class, and the Controversy over Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss*,” Mako Yoshikawa points out, “it deserves credit for driving…home to us that incest is a traumatic event even if the victim is grown, even if her father is not someone she has long leaned upon” (368). Yoshikawa applauds Harrison’s brave work for expanding our definition of incest while still showing the abusive power it entails. Unfortunately, some of the reviewers did not concur: they cried that instead of deserving credit, the book deserved contempt.³

³ Despite attracting much negative attention from many reviewers and making for quite the literary event, the memoir did not provoke nearly as much scholarly debate. To date, one can still easily mine the scholarly articles and essays written on the work. Currently, there are no book-length studies devoted to *The Kiss: A Memoir* or to Kathryn Harrison. Two dissertations feature discussion on *The Kiss*: Mako Yoshikawa’s “Riddles and Revelations: Forms of Incest Telling in 20th-Century America” (2008) and Susan Gilmore Steiner’s “‘Dream Lovers’ and the False Dichotomies of Fact and Fiction: An Original Work of Fiction and Contextual Critical Essay” (1998).

Some of the scholarship does comment on the book’s critical reception. For example, in “After Lot’s Daughters: Kathryn Harrison and the Making of Memory,” Laura Frost argues that the reviewers were troubled mainly with Harrison’s violation of genre conventions. In “Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration,” Paul John 185
The debate stirred by Harrison’s book may be of greater significance than the book itself. Reviewers were deeply disturbed by Harrison’s memoir and in no uncertain terms told her to shut up. For example, at the end of Cynthia Crossen’s *Wall Street Journal* review patronizingly titled “Know Thy Father,” in which she criticizes memoirists and pities Harrison’s father, she dispenses what she calls “two wise but widely ignored words of advice for Ms. Harrison and her brethren: Hush up” (16). Reviewer Jonathan Yardley voices similar concerns to Crossen’s, wishing for the discussion of father-daughter incest to cease. He ends his scathing review in which he calls *The Kiss* “trash from first word to last,” with the sentences, “The temptation to go on and on about this book, piling one abusive paragraph upon another, is extreme, but must be resisted. Space is short in this newspaper. Let’s save it for something worth my words and your time” (“Daddy’s Girl Cashes In” 2). Strangely, not heeding his own advice, he goes on to write two more pieces about Harrison’s *The Kiss*. In the coyly titled “Dating Your Dad,” James Wolcott suggests that some secrets, evidently including father-daughter incest, should be kept secret. He writes, “Secrets are an integral part of privacy, a personal identifying mark or a family bond” (35). He goes on to quote the

Eakin maintains that one does not make front-page news for violating literary traditions. He claims that Harrison was condemned for the act of self-narration itself and for violating privacy—both her own and others’.


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narrator of Saul Bellow’s *The Bellarosa Connection*: “‘Deeply experienced people—this continually impresses me—will keep things to themselves’” (35). Wolcott’s nod to Bellow’s narrator is a not-so-disguised way of saying essentially what Crossen said—shut up already. Mary Gordon and Catharine Stimpson are indeed right to detect a dose of misogyny in the reviews and the responses they generated, one of which is titled “James Wolcott Smacks Kathryn Harrison in the Kisser” (qtd. in Begley 31).

**The Memoir**

In part, these reviewers were lashing out at the genre of memoir, the ever-so-popular literary form of the 1990s that they felt was being overused and abused. It seems likely that the reviewers were tiring of the confessional, testimonial form of discourse that is at times self-absorbing and self-indulgent. For instance, Crossen reduces *The Kiss* to a book about “a woman who can’t get over herself” (16). Considered by some to be a narcissistic narrative of solipsism, the memoir, both the genre of and this particular memoir, is “a reflective and highly constructed representation of the self that engages with and draws on conventions of fiction and incorporates other cultural material” (Marshall 404, emphasis added). Therefore, it is a liberal discourse that challenges the fact/fiction dichotomy. Laura Frost explains that memoir is “the genre that most obviously raises questions of referentiality and authorial presence” (52). She further states that the memoir has recently been used to describe texts that “combine autobiography with more fantastic elements” (59-60). However, most reviewers of *The Kiss* took memoir to mean autobiography and charged Harrison with purposely misrepresenting events in the book. Tobias Wolff, a memoirist himself and sympathizer
with Harrison, argued that *The Kiss* was an easy target for reviewers to vent their frustrations with memoirs. He recognizes the literary merit of the genre, stating “I wanted to know how a man of flesh and blood, not of fiction, made sense of what had been done to him” (19). Instead of seeing Harrison’s memoir, like Wolff, as a cathartic release, a way of working through trauma, the reviewers found it devoid of art and an easy avenue for Harrison to cash in on her woes. For instance, Yardley’s second negative review implies that memoir is, to answer the question posed in his title, “‘The Kiss’ of Death for Literature.” Additionally, Crossen contends that “Memoirs are literature’s slipperiest slopes: They require neither the rigor of journalism nor the imagination of fiction” (16). Is this why, when Harrison published the same material (some of it word for word) as fiction, she was praised, but when she did as memoir, she was criticized?4

It doesn’t seem likely that it was just the genre of memoir that troubled these reviewers. In fact, in his response to Wolff’s charges that Yardley and company were really criticizing the genre of memoir, Yardley states that he “loves” memoirs, has even written in his 35-year-writing career what may be rightly labeled memoir (“Thanks for

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4 *Thicker Than Water* attracted favorable reviews. For example, *Washington Post*’s Sally Emerson praised the book for its compelling plot, “mesmeric writing,” and “the control with which the author moves back and forth through different time frames” (11). Similarly, *New York Times*’s reviewer Scott Spenser gave a glowing review, calling the novel “beautifully written” “unsparingly honest” (713). Questioning the truth in the novel, he ended his piece by wondering if we are “witnessing the beginning of a brilliant career or a bleeding soul’s attempt to bind itself in a tourniquet of words” (713). Some other perceptive reviewers commented on the thinly-veiled autobiographical references. Diana Dekker from the *Evening Post* stated that *Thicker Than Water* is “the story of Isabel—of Kathryn once, flimsily, removed” (29). Further commenting on Isabel/Kathryn, Michiko Kakutani from the *New York Times* wrote, “there is almost no authorial distance between Isabel and her creator, almost no indication that this is a novel we’re reading” (20). The positive reviews suggested that Harrison had arrived on the literary scene with her first novel. It wasn’t until she confirmed what the discerning reviewers of *Thicker Than Water* glimpsed that she became a publishing event.
the Memoirists” 2). Clearly it was something else that struck a nerve. In addition to the form that Harrison’s narrative took, they seemed to be distressed by its content. They were concerned with the taboo subject Harrison was so unflinchingly revealing. Put simply, they had a difficult time believing that the story of father-daughter incest was true. For example, in “Pants on Fire! Who Really Believes Kathryn Harrison’s Incest Tale?” Mary Eberstadt questions “why we should believe that this story is true” (31). Eberstadt cites the interview Harrison gave after the publication of Thicker Than Water, in which Harrison states that she had made it all up, that it was “completely a product of her imagination” (31). Eberstadt uses this as ammunition to cast doubt on the father-daughter incest described in The Kiss. Likewise, Yardley questions the validity of the events in Harrison’s memoir when he wonders if what Harrison describes actually happened (“Daddy’s Girl Cashes In”). Eberstadt’s and Yardley’s line of reasoning sounds eerily similar to that used by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, who discredit the truth of father-daughter incest, insisting that therapists plant false memories of incest in the minds of their female patients.5 Eberstadt and Yardley were not alone in their quest

5 The False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) was founded in 1992, one year after Harrison published Thicker Than Water and five years before The Kiss. A non-profit organization funded by membership dues and contributions from families and friends, FMSF was started by Pamela and Peter Freyd after their daughter accused them (wrongly they felt) of childhood sexual abuse. Advocating for parents who believe they have been falsely accused of abusing their children, FMSF’s initial group was composed of academics and professionals, and researchers in the fields of memory and clinical practice were sought out to form its advisory board. The goal of the organization spread from advocacy to attempting to address issues of memory. Describing itself as a scientific organization, FMSF engages in partisan political and social activity. In focusing on problems of memory, some of their activities have excused criminal behavior and reversed gains made by feminists and victims in gaining acknowledgement of incest. Although some reports of incest are the product of therapist-induced false memories and denial on the part of perpetrators is to be expected, the “witch hunt” is fraught with
for sniffing out the truth. Jeff Giles of *Newsweek* went so far as to track down Harrison’s father. In “The Father Won’t ‘Kiss’ and Tell,” (as in shame on Harrison for doing just that) Giles regretted to inform the public that Harrison’s father “never explicitly denied the affair” (81). Giles’s contribution shows the great lengths some were willing to go to, as late as 1997, to undermine the daughter’s story by letting the father have the last word. His actions expose the favoring of the father’s rights and suggest that heteropatriarchy is alive and well.

To further examine how the reviewers’ comments should be read as manifestations of insidious trauma, the following discussion will turn to textual analysis to illustrate how scenes from Harrison’s text refute charges leveled by the reviewers. I look at how, even though Harrison withholds details about the actual incest, the portrait she constructs of her father reveals him to be an insecure man longing for power. Similarly, Harrison’s mother is portrayed as a collusive mother who desires freedom from motherhood. Instead of indicting either parent, however, Harrison attempts to understand how her childhood emotional deprivation transformed into a sexually-abusive, adult relationship. What Harrison exposes in her memoir should make us question those who read the book/Harrison’s life as having a happy ending. It should also make us reconsider what the reviewers identified as the book’s failure.

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politics. And, as Elizabeth Wilson notes, “the incidence of incest is far, far greater than the incidence of false allegations” (37). See my introduction for further information on the politics of “false memory syndrome.”
The Incestuous Father

Not surprisingly, given the material I’ve already cited, most of the reviewers sympathized with Harrison’s father. Crossen excuses his behavior by stating that Harrison’s father is “so obviously sick that one’s natural revulsion is tempered by pity for the mentally ill” (16). Harrison’s father is known as a highly intelligent white man, armed with a Ph.D. and a camera. (Harrison’s father is a full-time minister and a part-time photographer.) He can “outwit most psychiatrists” (94). Plagued by his own pathologies, no doubt, Harrison’s father has succeeded in fooling not just psychiatrists, but also a second wife and children. But to write him off as a mental case would be another justification, rationalizing the pain he inflicts on his daughter. The reviewers also remarked that Harrison supplies no good reason why she, or any woman for that matter, would fall in love with a man whom she describes as physically unattractive. Although at one point she describes him as a “good-looking man,” she focuses on his obesity (“I have to stretch to get my arms around him”), bloodshot eyes, disconcertingly visible man breasts, and voluptuous, almost feminine, arms—which would make Harrison seem like the perverse one for being attracted to him (67). 6 They criticize her failure to furnish her father with a name, going so far as to wonder if she called him Dad in bed (Wolcott 34). They delight in the double entendres that result when talking about the book: “the story…then climaxes—sorry, no other word will do—with the reappearance of her father and his seduction of the not-unwilling her” (Yardley “Daddy’s Girl Cashes In” 2). And, most disturbingly, they feel almost let down by the lack of sex scenes, calling those subtle scenes more chaste and coy than revealing.

6 Strikingly, Harrison describes her father in feminine, almost maternal, terms.
It’s true that in place of graphic sex with her father, Harrison supplies condensed fragments of the events surrounding her traumatic experience. The chapter that opens, “It begins when I’m twenty,” in which readers expect to hear about the details of their ten-year reunion, ends with what readers are also likely to expect—forced penetration (32). But instead of reading about how her father took her virginity, we encounter a humiliating scene in which her mother takes Harrison to a gynecologist’s office to have her fitted for a diaphragm. The implication is that Harrison’s mother is trying to protect her daughter from a similar fate to her own—becoming a teenage mother. The doctor explains that she can’t be fitted for one unless her hymen is broken. He questions, “You don’t want to do that, do you?” (42). Briefly hesitating, Harrison’s mother says yes and watches as her college-bound daughter is stabbed with “a series of graduated green plastic penises” (42). Interestingly, it is her mother, not her father, who deflowers her, something that the critics were quick to note.

But, the event that affects Harrison the most lives up to the freakish foreshadowing of the book’s title—the kiss. At the end of their ten-year reunion, just as her father’s plane is boarding, he initiates a kiss that seemingly sets a spell in motion. Harrison describes the kiss: “As I pull away, feeling the resistance of his hand behind my head, how tightly he holds me to him, the kiss changes. It is no longer a chaste, closed-lipped kiss. My father pushes his tongue deep into my mouth: wet, insistent, exploring, then withdrawn” (68). Harrison at first tries to resist his kiss and escape his grasp, but she is unsuccessful, as she will be for the next four years. She does include a brief scene in which her father performs cunnilingus in his mother’s house (“he opens my legs and puts his tongue between them” is the extent of the description), but the initial airport kiss
seems to haunt her the most. Couched in fairy-tale language, Harrison describes the kiss’s
long-term effects:

In years to come, I’ll think of the kiss as a kind of transforming sting, like
that of a scorpion: a narcotic that spreads from my mouth to my brain. The
kiss is the point at which I begin, slowly, inexorably, to fall asleep, to
surrender volition, to become paralyzed. It’s the drug my father
administers in order that he might consume me. That I might desire to be
consumed. (70)

Despite the emphasis that Harrison places on the kiss, the reviewers had rather little to
say about the initiating traumatic event. Wolcott does mention it, but he makes light of
the situation by calling it “a Roto-Rooter tongue probe” (33). It seems as if the reviewers
subscribed to the theory that a kiss is just a kiss, even when it comes from one’s father.
However, it should be noted that the kiss, not necessarily her father at this point, wields
much power over the twenty-year-old Harrison, who has been denied love most of her
life. Instead of being a kiss of enchantment, it is one of disenchantment; instead of
awakening a sleeping beauty, it puts Harrison in the depths of sleep, and judging from the
hypnotic, trance-like, somnambulistic writing style, pits from which Harrison has not
fully emerged.

But if the kiss blinds Harrison to the incest, which allows it to go on for four
years, the kiss opens her father’s bloodshot eyes even wider than they were when he first
met her after those ten years. When he first lays eyes on his grown-up daughter,
Harrison’s father instructs her not to move, “Just let me look at you” (51). And look he
does, in a way that no one had ever looked at her before. Musing about her father’s eyes,
Harrison describes them as “intelligent,” “enraptured,” “luminous,” “stricken,” “brilliant,” and of course, “spellbound” and “spellbinding” (62-63). They turn on his daughter with “absolute attention,” something that her mother’s eyes, eyes that are always closed, fail to do (62). Finally, it seems that Harrison has been awarded the attention she felt she never got—even after years of playing the good daughter, being high school valedictorian, acing Latin exams, petitioning to take unusually high course loads in college.

The gaze that Harrison refers to throughout her memoir is penetrating. Just as we’ve seen in *The Bluest Eye* with Pecola, Harrison yearns for someone to acknowledge her existence, to see her into being. As much as Pecola wants to be pretty, Harrison wants to be seen. Like Pecola who goes to Soaphead Church for blue eyes, Harrison takes matters into her own hands, evident in one of the memoir’s most gruesome scenes, which clearly shows her longing for attention. The scene plays out as follows. Five years after Harrison’s mother moves out, leaving Harrison in the care of her grandparents, her grandmother’s Persian cat has a litter of kittens. Harrison is promised whichever kitten she wants but the catch is she can’t touch them until they’re old enough to open their eyes. An impatient Harrison kneels by their box every day until she can no longer stand it. One day she pries the kittens’ eyes open. Harrison writes, “I laid one in my lap and, with one thumb on the upper lid, the other on the lower, I carefully pulled its eyes open, separating one delicate membrane of flesh from the other” (90). She performs this procedure on all five of the kittens. A day later their eyes are swollen shut and when Harrison tries to clean the yellow crust away, a worm of pus shoots out. Finally telling
her grandmother that she thinks there is something wrong with the kittens’ eyes, she cannot bring herself to explain what happened.

The scene with the kittens can be read a microcosm of the entire memoir. The closed-eyed kittens represent Harrison’s mother, who is usually sleeping, and even Harrison’s father before he reunites with his daughter. Harrison wrongly assumes that because she is out of sight for him, she is also out of mind. The violation of the kittens’ eyes is comparable to the sexual and emotional violation Harrison experiences at the hands of her father. It also stands for the revenge of her mother that Harrison accomplishes via the father-daughter incest. Harrison’s inability to wait for the kittens’ eyes to naturally open mirrors her inability to resist the temptation of her father. Not telling the truth to her grandmother can be interpreted as a failure to speak out. Eberstadt finds this scene to be “the single most emetic passage in all the book” (31). Instead of recognizing the conflicted emotions that the scene conveys, however, Eberstadt suggests that this scene illustrates how corrupt Harrison is—a kitten tormentor who keeps feelings of guilt at bay to continue doing disgusting things. Undoubtedly, this is a terrible scene that shows a darker side of Harrison. But one may wonder why Eberstadt finds this scene more disturbing than the airport kiss scene, or any of the other scenes in the book in which Harrison’s father exerts control over her and her body, such as the one in which he makes her pose naked for him. Like Glen from *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Harrison’s father exerts control over his daughter, evident in more than one scene. Using language evocative of Glen’s, Harrison’s father says that he will show her who she is, a task accomplished by making her meet his parents. The meeting of the paternal grandparents includes her grandfather placing his hand on her thigh and her father performing oral sex.
on her in her grandmother’s house. Despite all of these grotesque scenes, Eberstadt conspicuously singles out the kitten scene, in which Harrison is clearly the perpetrator, as the “emetic” one.

In the wake of the memoir’s promotion and publication, the assaults on Harrison seemed endless and vacillated between criticizing her writing to attacking her person. Adding insult to injury, in “Doing Daddy Down,” Elizabeth Powers questions if Harrison is well read, particularly in Greek mythology and Freudian theory. She writes, “Like many contemporary authors, Harrison does not appear to be very well or very deeply read: it is hard to tell from this memoir whether she is even familiar with the Oedipus story” (39). Does one need to be well versed in the Oedipus myth to write a father-daughter incest memoir? A deeper reading, however, suggests that Harrison is well acquainted with the Oedipus story. She evokes the mythic precursors of Oedipus Rex and Tiresias, not just to emphasize the themes of sight and blindness, but also to expose the “phallacies” of Freud’s Oedipus complex. Perhaps it is Powers who is guilty of a superficial reading. Before Harrison begins the sexual affair with her father, she desires her mother, undermining Freud’s theory that the child desires the opposite-sex parent and wishes to eliminate the same-sex parent. In the alternative storyline Harrison offers, the daughter first falls in love and stays in love with the same-sex parent. Ultimately, Harrison’s story is about her mother, and the father-daughter incest has everything to do with her mother. Harrison’s mother, who knows of the affair, speaks the truth when she says to her daughter, “‘You know,’ ‘this isn’t about you. It’s about me’” (98).
The Collusive Mother

The reviewers were outraged and offended by what Harrison disclosed about her minister-father; however, they had very little to say about what she revealed about her mother, who at first glance embodies the textbook definition of the collusive mother. In Father-Daughter Incest, Herman provides the portrait of the mother of paternal incestuous families as depicted in popular men’s magazines, which is disappointingly similar to that in the psychiatric literature. Neither source holds back on saying what is wrong with the mother. She is typically sexually unavailable to her husband, emotionally distant from her daughter, and rendered powerless in her family. Although the professional authors would not be so blunt as stating she’s “no good in bed,” their language—“frigid, hostile, unloving women”—“barely disguises the same judgment” (qtd. in Herman 43). Since the father has lost access to the mother as his normative sexual partner, her “frigidity” is blamed for causing the incestuous relationship to develop. Because of her powerlessness, devaluation, and economic dependence in the traditional, male-dominated family structure, the mother is unable to protect her daughter. Ironically, from the perspective of popular culture and even some of the professionals in the field of psychiatry, father-daughter incest is thought to illustrate the extreme failure of maternal protectiveness.

Far from denying anger at her mother’s vulnerability, Harrison struggles throughout her narrative to understand her mother rather than simply to blame her for being a cold and negligent parent. Like Anney Boatwright of Bastard Out of Carolina, Harrison’s mother has her adolescence taken from her as a result of teenage pregnancy. Both women are dependent upon the attention of men and react with ambivalence toward
what they perceive to be the degrading and dispiriting role of mother. Yet, despite feeling unmothered, the daughters unconditionally love their mothers and cannot forsake them. Like Allison, Harrison devotes her book to her mother: “Beloved, 1942-1985.” Both books are written after their mothers die of cancer. Harrison makes clear that her mother was in a powerless position most of her life, but her weakness is most poignantly shown, not so much in her inability to combat her husband’s domination as her own parents’ oppression. The main reason that Harrison’s parents divorce is because Harrison’s maternal grandparents find her father not good enough for their daughter, a judgment that has almost everything to do with class and ethnicity. Harrison explains that her mother and father became parents at seventeen, “without money, with no more than high school educations” (16). As she says, they were still children themselves and unfit for the kind of responsibility that followed. Harrison’s grandfather is most concerned with how her father will financially provide for the family, doubting his ability to support them. Without a college degree, Harrison’s father takes a job as an encyclopedia salesman, selling at least one set of dark-red *Britannicas*—but to Harrison’s grandparents. Commenting on the class division between her parents, Harrison outlines her father’s humble origins that make him susceptible to her grandparents’ contempt: “German immigrant ancestors, the miscegenation of his Native American grandmother, not one but two missionary grandfathers, his own parents’ broken marriage, not to mention their relatively modest circumstances” (23). His inferior status is further highlighted in its contrast to that of her wealthy Jewish grandparents, who were born in London and lived

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7 Harrison’s *Thicker Than Water* is even more explicitly about her mother, particularly about her mother’s long and painful death. The father-daughter incest is present in the novel, but it does not factor into the storyline until the last fourth of the book.
all over the world. Not only is Harrison’s father’s financial situation a factor, but so too is his religion. He is a non-Jew and a preacher. Harrison’s father admires, if not fears, the grandparents’ “entitled European condescension, their wealth and property and the solid history implied by antiques that were passed down, not acquired” (23-24). Harrison’s grandparents drive home the point to their daughter that a life with Harrison’s father, a life as “a preacher’s wife,” would be a fate worse than death—one of poverty.

The decision for Harrison’s parents to divorce comes not from either of them, but from Harrison’s grandfather, who tells Harrison’s father in no uncertain terms that it is over between him and his daughter. Exempting him from financial responsibility, such as child support, Harrison’s grandfather also excuses Harrison’s father from being a father, not letting him hold his daughter and forbidding him to visit. In her grandparents’ house, her father’s “name is never spoken, his existence is not acknowledged” (5). Her grandmother goes so far as to cut his face out of every picture, thereby erasing his being. The emasculation of Harrison’s father is not limited to Harrison’s maternal side. It is compounded by the treatment he receives from his own parents. We (and Harrison) know very little about Harrison’s paternal grandfather. But the three things we learn are disconcerting. Harrison’s paternal grandfather was so handsome in his youth that women he didn’t even know followed him down streets. Once, in an attempt to tag along with his father, Harrison’s father ran into a parking meter and knocked himself out because, instead of paying attention, he was watching the women watch his father. Additionally, we learn that Harrison’s grandfather shot a man in his yard for looking at his wife. And, finally, Harrison tells us that her grandfather is slowly dying of prostate cancer because he refuses treatment, evidently preferring death to the loss of his testicles. Harrison sums
it up succinctly when she says, “So this is the way my father understands his father, and thus his own manhood: mythic sexual appeal, violent sexual jealousy, and fatal sexual vanity” (121). It seems that Harrison’s father is still very much that little boy trying to follow his father but falling miserably short.

Likewise, the influence on his mother’s side is just as troubling. Raised by his missionary grandmother while his mother worked as a secretary, Harrison’s father felt overpowered by his maternal grandmother who insisted that he become a preacher. He does become a man of God, but Harrison’s father resents his grandmother and the servitude she imposes on him. Harrison explains that he resents “the castration implied by the robes he’s forced to wear (he calls them skirts)” (126, emphasis added). Like Cholly Breedlove of The Bluest Eye, who redirects his hatred from the white men to Darlene, Harrison’s father quickly targets other women—Harrison’s mother and grandmother, who took away his wife and daughter, and his own mother, whom he thinks failed to protect him from her mother. This may explain, without excusing, why he feels it necessary to violate his daughter in his mother’s house. Reflecting on the experience, a mature Harrison realizes that the setting has to do with power: “He needs to do it at his mother’s house. He needs the power granted by her presence, and he needs to thwart that power” (128). Harrison’s father proceeds to take what he thinks was denied him—as if Harrison was his to take.

As much as Harrison’s father wanted to be part of her life, her mother wanted not to be, and her negligence is allowed by her own parents. Like Anney of Bastard, Harrison’s mother remains willfully unconscious of the affair, absenting herself from the situation. Both mothers literally move away from their daughters. Harrison’s mother is a
far cry from what a traditional, idealized mother should be. In fact, her actions can be seen as rebelling against not just her own parents, but also against typical feminine and maternal roles. While in her parents’ house, Harrison’s mother sleeps whenever she can, preferring unconsciousness to living her life and being a mother. When Harrison is six years old, her mother moves out, leaving her daughter in the care of Harrison’s grandparents. In her attempt at an independent life, Harrison’s mother moves into a nearby apartment, telling her family what street it is on, but neither house number nor phone number is furnished. Years later, Harrison understands that her mother wished to be free from the burdens of motherhood: “she does not want to be summoned by fevers or nightmares or lost teeth” (14). In short, she wants what her parents grant her ex-husband—the freedom from the duty to care for her daughter.

What do we make of all of this? Harrison neither fully blames her mother for poor parenting and negligence, nor does she excuse her mother for turning a blind eye to the abuse. She hints that her mother has been a victim of emotional abuse in her own family. Trying to get to the root of her childhood emotional deprivation and the resulting father-daughter incest, Harrison suggests how crucial yet fragile mother-daughter relationships are in heteropatriarchal societies. When the bond between mother and daughter is strong, it most efficiently wards off father-daughter incest; when it is weak, it makes the daughter most susceptible to sexual abuse. Rearing and nurturing children in a heteropatriarchal society falls on the mother, who is expected to be caring, attentive, and ready to place her child’s needs before her own. But, as Adrienne Rich explains in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, to properly perform these selfless tasks, to be a “good mother,” requires that the mother demonstrate a “strong sense of
This “strong sense of self-nurture,” however, is what oppression—whether heteropatriarchal or racial or economic—undermines, correctly observes Paula Bennett. Instead of passing on a healthy sense of self worth, the mother often transfers to her daughter her own sense of deprivation and helplessness. In Harrison’s case, she inherits sexual submissiveness and degradation from her mother. Because she cannot protect herself, such a mother cannot nurture or protect her daughter. In a heteropatriarchal society, mothers are seen as unworthy of children’s profoundest love and loyalty. That spot is reserved for fathers. Seeking in men—in this case, in her father—what her mother cannot provide results in competition. In this oppressive society, women are pitted against each other in an unnecessary rivalry.

Instead of—or in addition—presenting herself as a victim of father-daughter incest, Harrison suggests that she is out to get revenge, but despite what the reviewers claim, the revenge is more on her mother than on her father. Ironically, through the sexual affair with her father Harrison is able to “penetrate” her mother, to use her word. Harrison writes, “Through my father I have begun at last to penetrate my mother, to tear away the masks that divide us. And now, even as I draw closer to her to judge the level of her suspicions, she comes closer to me to monitor what she fears” (140). In other words, Harrison uses her father to finally get the attention she so craves from her mother.8 Likewise her father easily cultivates Harrison’s anger against her mother. Both daughter and father know what they are doing, though. When talking about love, Harrison and her father admit that they have “a subject more consuming than love: Her. Love’s object. My

8 In Thicker Than Water, Harrison is even more frank: “Of course I could never have hated my mother so much, enough to allow her husband to fuck me, had I not loved her so desperately. I would have done anything to get her attention” (238).
mother. His wife” (78). At once a triangle of three women—Harrison, her mother, and her grandmother—the structure that her father reconfigures, by usurping the grandmother’s position (probably getting her back for what her husband did to tear apart his family), is fully realized through the incest. They manipulate, play each other’s insecurities off of the other’s, and, at least for Harrison, question who is to blame.

Harrison claims that it takes kissing the bodies of two corpses—her maternal grandfather’s and not surprisingly, her mother’s—to break the spell cast by her father. Prior to her mother’s death, Harrison performs a symbolic castration to tell her mother that the affair with her father is over. Having clung to her long hair as a symbol of sexuality, Harrison explains that her father was as dedicated to her hair as she was, being the one to trim it for the past few years. However, when her mother is on her deathbed, Harrison ventures to the salon to have twenty-three inches severed, which she then offers to her mother in a gesture of surrender. Without saying anything, Harrison is confident that her mother will understand the meaning of her gift: “I tell my mother that my sexual life is severed as well. Discarding [my hair], I promise her that she can die knowing the affair between her husband and her daughter is finished” (196). The real release and acknowledgment, however, seem to come in the dream Harrison has of her mother, which she describes in the last two pages. Instead of the nightmares she usually has of her mother, this dream is tranquil. In it, she and her mother “look closely at each other” (206). Harrison ends her memoir with these sentences:

We look into each other’s eyes more deeply than we ever did in life, and for much longer. Our eyes don’t move or blink, they are no more than a few inches apart. As we look, all that we have ever felt but have never
said is manifest. Her youth and selfishness and misery, my youth and selfishness and misery. Our loneliness. The ways we betrayed each other.

In this dream, I feel that at last she knows me, and I her. I feel us stop hoping for a different daughter and a different mother. (206-07)

As her father’s influence fades into the background, Harrison is left with a dream of her mother. Illustrating her undying love for her mother, Harrison’s concluding words show how hurt mother and daughter were by the incest. In a moment of fantastic reconciliation, they reach an understanding of each other, something not accomplished in their lifetimes.

**Happily Ever After?**

In “Innocence Betrayed,” Susan Cheever argues, “The real shock is that this is a book with a happy ending” (11).Christopher Lehmann-Haupt takes this assertion a step further in “Life With Father: Incestuous and Soul-Deadening,” and contends Harrison’s mysterious healthy survival is the major flaw of the memoir. He assumes, as Lisa Alther notes, that if what Harrison claims to have happened really did transpire, then she should be too traumatized to tell the tale. Instead of remaining silent, Harrison goes on to write her story—in best-seller fashion, no less. Lehmann-Haupt’s assertion raises several questions. Did Harrison really survive the trauma? What does survival mean exactly? What is the proper form to use to tell a story of trauma, a story that entails complex linguistic challenges? Is there ever one? Or, should victims of father-daughter incest heed

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9 In “Lifting the Taboos on Incest,” Neville Meyers agrees that Harrison’s memoir, which is “impossible to put down once you start,” surprisingly has a happy ending (7).
the words of Crossen and “hush up”? And what happens when readers refuse to bear witness?

The fact that Harrison (like Claudia and Bone) goes on to author the book suggests that she has made progress in working through her trauma, at least enough to gain critical distance and put to words the events through the writing of it. Yet, questioned in the previous chapter, can one demonstrate agency when writing about a story of female violation? Moreover, can one represent memories of horrific experiences without repeating them? And, to borrow from Rosaria Champagne, can one ever be healed in a sick society? Harrison’s closing scene recounts a positive dream she had of her mother on February 7, 1995, in which she seems to reach some kind of closure, but this does not mean that Harrison is free from nightmares. Her entire memoir, like Pecola’s dissociated chapter toward the end of *The Bluest Eye*, is written from the perspective of someone suffering from PTSD. For example, on the very first page, she writes that “we are out of time as well as out of place” (3). Again, she comments on the timelessness of her experience in the middle of the memoir when she writes “a time out of real time” (101). Laub notes, “The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time” (69, emphasis added). Because the shattering experience results in a distorted memory, the chronology of Harrison’s memoir is appropriately nonlinear and recursive. Also Harrison’s use of the present tense signals that the trauma is ongoing, ever present, as Caruth argues, appearing in its belated symptoms.¹⁰

¹⁰ As Ruth Leys states, psychoanalysts Roy Grinker and John Spiegel viewed the use of the past tense as a potential sign of the patient’s newly-won ability to distance and narrate
In addition to feelings of dislocation and timelessness, Harrison experiences physical symptoms, symptoms all too common to those diagnosed with PTSD. Not surprisingly, Harrison experiences a split between body and mind when her father performs oral sex on her in his mother’s house. Harrison observes, “What he does feels neither good nor bad. It effects so complete a separation between mind and body that I don’t know what I feel. Across this divide, deep and unbridgeable, my body responds independently from my mind” (128). The divide Harrison speaks of may result from dissociation, which is a defense that happens during the traumatic event, or from repression, which is “an after-the-fact defense in which memory for the event is in some way impaired” (qtd. in Daly 144). Whether dissociating or repressing the memory of the sexual encounters, Harrison is not fully conscious of them. In a telling passage, Harrison reflects on her inability to recall her feelings during the sexual experience with her father despite the fact that she can remember exact details, such as the socks he wears, the lines surrounding his eyes, and the hair on his hands:

I arrive at the state promised by the narcotic kiss in the airport. In years to come, I won’t be able to remember even one instance of our lying together. I’ll have a composite, generic memory. I’ll know that he was always on top and that I always lay still, as still as if I had, in truth, fallen from a great height. I’ll remember such details as the color of the carpet in a particular motel room, or the kind of tree outside the window. That he always wore his socks and that I wore whatever I could. I’ll remember the trauma as past. By implication, Harrison’s use of the present tense would indicate defeat.
every tiny thing about him. I will be able to close my eyes and see the pattern of hair that grew on the backs of his hands, the mole on his cheek, the lines, each one of them, at the corners of his eyes. But I won’t be able to remember what it felt like. No matter how hard I try, pushing myself to inhabit my past, I’ll recoil from what will always seem impossible. (136-37, emphasis added)

Able to remember fine details surrounding the sexual affair, she is unable to recall her feelings, her affective response, which at least partly explains the restraint of the memoir’s style that many reviewers commented on.

But whereas her mind fails to supply these memories, her body keeps score. In other words, she has corporealized her feelings. Eberstadt notes that what we learn of Harrison is that she is very sick. Presenting her more as a hypochondriac than as someone suffering from PTSD, Eberstadt rattles off Harrison’s ailments: “(in alphabetical order only) amenorrhea, amnesia, anorexia, asthma, bulimia, dehydration, depression, insomnia, narcolepsy, pneumonia, rashes, and shingles” (31). Added to this list are “coughing fits, sore throats, an inability to breathe, suicidal longings, and acts of self-mutilation” (31). Eberstadt reminds us that this is quite a lot for a very short book. One may want to remind Eberstadt that this is more than a book—this was/is Harrison’s life. Harrison is well aware that her mental distress is manifested through her bodily symptoms. Not coincidentally, she comes down with shingles the summer her father visits. When she asks what would cause the chicken pox to become active after fifteen years of being dormant, her doctor responds, “Physical or emotional stress” (118). Not enough to prevent her trip to see her father, the shingles nevertheless alert Harrison of the
severity of their budding relationship. She realizes what clinicians Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, and others have maintained—“What a memory the body has, events recorded in our bones, our blood, our nerves” (118). Emotionally, Harrison “feel[es] nothing”; physically, the abuse takes its toll (170).

On at least one occasion Harrison compares her condition to that of soldiers injured in the war. When looking at the naked pictures her father takes of her in an attempt to show her “who she is,” Harrison observes that the expression on her face, “flat and dispossessed,” is “one I see years later in a museum exhibit of pictures taken of soldiers during the Civil War. Undressed and propped against walls or on crutches, the veterans reveal those places where bullets entered and, perhaps, exited” (159). Harrison’s comparison to soldiers wounded in battle is reminiscent of Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night, in which he discusses war soldiers and women sexually abused in civilian life. Taking Harrison’s cue, Giles describes the dispassionate prose of The Kiss as a style “that’s hard not to interpret as shell shock” (“A Father. A Daughter” 62). Interestingly, he uses the term shell shock instead of PTSD. Judging from Giles and from the other reviewers’ reactions, it seems that in the late 1990s accounts of father-daughter incest were not given the same credit as accounts of soldiers returning from war, and that it was once again acceptable to question, if not blame, the victim of incest.

An Unavoidable Book

Robert Coles, distinguished life-long advocate for the voiceless, child psychiatrist, Harvard professor, prolific writer, and author of The Moral Intelligence of Children, among others, originally wrote a blurb for The Kiss, praising it for its literary
achievement and for Harrison’s courage. However, when he found out that Harrison is the mother of two young children (as of 2000, three young children), he retracted his statements in a move reminiscent of Freud’s actions of 1896. According to Warren St. John of The New York Observer, Coles explains that “he had not realized Ms. Harrison had young children of her own who would have to cope with her public revelations” (9).

It seems that for Coles and others, because Harrison is a mother of young children, she should not publish a memoir of this sort. Withdrawing his endorsement, Coles may have had good reasons—he may have been attempting to protect Harrison’s children from intergenerational trauma. However, the implication of his retraction can also be seen as an attempt to protect Harrison’s children from adult sexuality, maintaining the myth of childhood sexual innocence. However, as we now know, father-daughter incest is quite

11 The endorsement read, “This book offers an account of a moral victory—the re-emergence of a thoughtful, disciplined, knowing sensibility” (http://kathrynharrison.com/thekiss.htm).

12 In “When a Kiss Ain’t Just a Kiss: Robert Coles, Blurbist, Repents,” Adam Begley provides a fuller explanation of the events, and his own role, in Coles’s “public repentance”:

The eminent Robert Coles, whose blurb, gushy as blurbs must be, blessed Ms. Harrison’s book, has recanted. I faxed him a copy of James Wolcott’s gleeful, hilarious and virulently nasty attack on The Kiss in The New Republic, which concludes with a slap at “psychologist and saint Robert Coles.” Mr. Coles read the article and admitted that he deserved Mr. Wolcott’s censure. “I accept the criticism,” said Dr. Coles. “I should be reprimanded.” (31)

Now seeing the book as inviting “misery and humiliation” upon Harrison’s children, Coles said, “‘My God, what are those children to think—what are they to think? And why would the mother of those children want to put that down so that all the families of the kids her children play with are going to know?’” (31). Begley further explains that Coles received the galleys of The Kiss when he was busy teaching a Harvard seminar in which Morrison’s The Bluest Eye is regularly assigned. Coles claims he got “swept up” in reading and discussing the book with his students that he wrote the blurb without factoring in the fact that Harrison’s book is based on real life and that she is a mother (31).
prevalent—one-in-five to one-in-three girls are victims, most before the tender age of ten. Coles’s concerns, along with Lehmann-Haupt’s assertion, beg the question: is silence really the answer?

For Harrison, silence was not an option. In an interview with the *New York Observer*, she told the reporter “I’ve been writing this book in my head for years” (qtd. in Giles “A Father. A Daughter” 62). By the time she sat down to put words to paper, she completed it in a mere four weeks. Similarly in an interview with the *Seattle Times*, Harrison admits that “rather than one I set out to write,” “*The Kiss* was a book I couldn’t avoid” (qtd. in Yoshikawa 374). Voicing no regrets about going autobiographical, she further explains, “It was a book that came out of a decade of thought. There was a point in my life as a writer and as a human being in which I reached a kind of clarity and an ability to be honest with myself about what my relationship with my father had been. And I knew as a human being and as a writer that it would be a real mistake to back away from that, and the only apparatus I have as a human being for understanding things is writing” (qtd. in Lewis 10). Publishing most of the material as fiction in *Thicker Than Water* evidently did not quite exorcize Harrison’s demons. In fact, Harrison, who had at one point said that it is easier to get at truth through fiction, revised her thinking and stated that after writing *Thicker Than Water*, she felt like she had betrayed her experience “which was so much more complicated and complicit” (qtd. in Gerrard 6). She needed, not necessarily to expose her father, but to face up to herself. In *The Kiss*, instead of telling what happened, as she does in *Thicker Than Water*, Harrison, like Claudia from *The Bluest Eye*, attempts to understand why it happened. She chose memoir as an avenue to tell the truth about what she had undergone as an attempt to work through her trauma.
But, as we have seen, most of the reviewers were unwilling to believe her and, therefore, refused to bear witness to her trauma.

Laub and Felman have written on the necessity of telling impossible narratives of trauma and having others bear witness to the event that had previously been unwitnessed. Felman states, “Because trauma cannot be simply remembered, it cannot simply be ‘confessed’: it must be testified to, in a struggle shared between a speaker and a listener to recover something the speaking subject is not—and cannot be—in possession of” (16). Likewise, in his chapter titled “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” Laub notes the struggle of telling one’s story of trauma and insists that the silences in the testimony are part of the story: “It is not merely…speech, but the very boundaries of silence which surround it, which attest, today as well as in the past, to this assertion of resistance” (62). The reviewers, however, were not sensitive to Harrison’s silences, questioning why she fails to provide specific dates, locations, names, and juicy details of the sex scenes. Moreover, Laub contends that to undo the entrapment a trauma victim feels, she must “re-externaliz[e] the event,” a feat that can be accomplished by articulating and transmitting the story (69). It’s true, as Walcott states, that it is one thing to write about the trauma; another matter publishing it. It seems that in addition to asserting aesthetic and psychological mastery over the trauma, Harrison’s published work becomes a testament to the therapeutic value of articulating painful experiences. Harrison’s decision to go public with her memoir, the transgressive act of publishing, suggests a political consciousness to break the taboo of talking about incest.

Father-daughter incest at first appeared as an individual problem, one father sexually violating one daughter. It is now recognized as a social phenomenon. Harrison’s
personal narration is linked to a larger social critique. If Harrison was not aware of the insidious ways heteropatriarchy works to dehumanize her and discredit her story, she certainly is after the reviews of *The Kiss*. Like Laub and Felman, Christine Shearer-Creeman and Carol L. Winkelmann have commented on the necessity to tell one’s impossible story of trauma, emphasizing the *political* importance for such telling. They write,

Trauma narratives epitomize in a painful way the fragmentary and uncertain status of all narrative in a postmodern world. This is not to suggest it is not critical to “tell one’s story.” One the contrary, the atrocious stories of male violence against women must come to voice in order for women to secure their full human rights. (11)

Giving voice to her story of incest, Harrison challenges the patriarchal and hierarchical discourses that seek to silence her.

Despite what Lehmann-Haupt says, Harrison’s memoir did not “fail” because she lived to tell about it, and went on to marry (a fellow novelist and deputy editor of *Harper’s*), have children, and establish her place as a successful writer; rather, it failed in the eyes of the reviewers because it did not integrate unspeakable acts into a narrative that meets conventional expectations—as Dorothy Allison’s did. The conventional expectations stipulate that a political critique of this kind can be neither too overt nor come from a white, middle- to upper-class, highly educated woman.\(^\text{13}\) This was a book that Harrison couldn’t avoid, but that the reviewers certainly wanted to. Why? In “When

\(^\text{13}\) See Elizabeth Wilson’s “Not in This House: Incest, Denial, and Doubt in the White Middle Class Family” for a discussion of the history of middle-class attitudes towards the sexual abuse of children and reasons why the denial of incest is so persistent.
the Daughter Tells Her Story: The Rhetorical Challenges of Disclosing Father-Daughter Incest,” Brenda Daly, who has herself authored a story about father-daughter incest, supplies an answer: “It is important to keep in mind, when reviewers and critics attack women who write trauma narratives, especially those disclosing father-daughter incest, that reviews or critical essays are sites of ideological struggle about control of, and representation of, women’s bodies” (158-59). The controversy over Harrison’s The Kiss speaks to this ideological struggle and to the politics of truth telling in that most of the reviewers who endorse heteropatriarchy felt threatened by Harrison’s truthful account of the horrors of this social order. They glimpsed the truth that we live in a society that allows and even encourages such violence and lashed out in fear of exposure.

When Bastard Out of Carolina met with success, Allison thought she must have done something wrong to garner such accolades. As the critics praised the book, and at year’s end selected it as a National Book Award finalist, instead of uncorking the champagne, Allison started throwing up (Jetter 57). With only $200 left to her name when she published Bastard, she said, “I saw myself as a living affront to a kind of literature that I despise. How could the people who were the pantheon of that literature think I did something right? I thought I must have screwed up bad” (qtd. in Jetter 57).

Allison loathes literature that adheres to a masculinist canon and echoes heteropatriarchal, racist, classist discourse. According to her, it is often written by men, judged by men, and passed off as universal.14 It repeats what has been said before, and in

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14 Both Allison and Harrison are young enough to have grown up with feminism. But, unlike Allison, who has been vocal about her endorsement of feminism, Harrison’s stance is not nearly as clear. In an interview with Patricia O’Connell, Harrison expresses her suspicion with any group, including feminists, “who are very sure only they know what’s
universalizing the experience it portrays, denies the humanity of those who dwell outside
of its gates. Tellingly, the gatekeepers of literature, many of whom perpetuate the order
of a racist, classist, heteropatriarchal society, were outraged by Harrison’s The Kiss: A
Memoir. What they identified as the failure of the book is perhaps its true success.
Expanding our conceptualization of father-daughter incest, exposing the violence
inherent in hierarchical discourses, and generating a negative climate of reception from
the patriarchal pantheon, Harrison’s memoir succeeds in breaking taboos by illuminating
what the insidious trauma of women looks like. The reviews reveal a truth perhaps
equally as unpleasant as the incest itself—our society is not ready to face up to the
implications that come with a female authoring her autobiographical story of father-
daughter incest.

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really going on” (33). However, the language she uses—incest is not the taboo; talking
about it is—echoes the language of feminists.


Chapter VII—*Lolita Revisited:*


“The desperate truth of Lolita’s story is not the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but the confiscation of one individual’s life by another. We don’t know what Lolita would have become if Humbert had not engulfed her. Yet the novel, the finished work, is hopeful, beautiful even, a defense not just of beauty but of life, ordinary everyday life, all the normal pleasures that Lolita...was deprived of.”


No study of literary representations of father-daughter incest would be complete without a discussion of one of the, if not the, most notorious book on the subject published in the twentieth century—Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Nabokov’s provocative tale, told from the perspective of forty-something-year-old Humbert Humbert about his desire for twelve-year-old Lolita, a girl who is forced against her will to endure a two-year, cross-country trip, in and out of cheap motels doing dirty things with the man who calls himself her stepfather, has raised eyebrows over the years and generated difficult questions about father-daughter incest. The novel’s critical reception and publication history are dizzying journeys in themselves. After being rejected by four American publishers, one of whom said that if he printed the book both he and Nabokov would go to jail, the novel was released in Paris in 1955 by Olympia Press, primarily a publisher of pornography. It would take another three years for *Lolita* to make its debut in the United States, published in 1958 by Putnam. Upon publication, *Lolita* elicited impassioned and
often opposing criticism. Graham Greene praised it as one of the best books of 1955; Lionel Trilling trumpeted the novel as a love story; Ellen Pifer heralded Nabokov as an ethical writer. Anticipating some of the later dissenting criticism, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt argued that *Lolita* is “a tale of misogyny dressed up in transparent finery” (qtd. in Schuman 133). As debates over child abuse and sexual violence against women and children started to gain public attention in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, feminist critics such as Nomi Tamir-Ghez and Linda Kauffman faulted the book for turning the rape of a young girl into an aesthetic experience and making art out of perversion. They criticized Nabokov for portraying the sexual exploitation of a pubescent girl as a joke, or, worse, a romance. No longer willing to be wooed by Humbert’s persuasive rhetoric and to overlook Lolita’s entrapment, these critics exposed the sexual politics at work in the novel and its initial reception, asking the critical question that resounds today—“Is there a woman in the text?” (Kauffman 131). And, Christine Clegg adds, at the turn of the century we have begun to ask, “why has it taken so long to find her?” (114).

Nabokov anticipated that the pendulum tracking the book’s reputation would swing. Confident in the immortality of his masterpiece, he predicted the day when some critic would cry that *Lolita* shows that he was really a moralist at heart: “In fact I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that…I was a rigid moralist kicking sin” (qtd. in Clegg 96). Pointing out that by the novel’s end a genuinely remorseful, lovesick Humbert rues the day when he captured Lolita, many recent critics have gone so far as to argue in favor of Nabokov’s feminist sympathies and claim *Lolita* as a proto-feminist.
narrative.¹ Nabokov would not have been amazed by this, but he may have been surprised to hear that one of his most ardent defenders at the dawn of the twenty-first century is a woman from Iran, whose memoir about reading Western classics in her secret, subversive, all-female student book club in her home country is entitled *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, making *Lolita* a synecdoche for all great Western literature and a model text for exposing all solipsists who deny their subjects humanity.

Although no stranger to revolution, Nabokov did not live to see his work imported into the lives of women in revolutionary Iran, “a world,” Nafisi notes, “unknown and presumably unknowable to Nabokov,” where the country’s cultural purists banned the work as a forbidden novel symbolizing Western decadence (22). But in this transcultural text about the story of Dolores Haze, better known as Lolita, Nafisi finds an ally in her war against the domination of women. Strikingly, Nafisi’s 2003 book, which functions simultaneously as personal memoir, literary analysis, and political commentary, employs *Lolita*, of all books, to expose the insidious trauma females in Iran experience on a daily basis. Essentially, Nafisi’s best-selling memoir tells the story of a female professor of English literature, who was educated in England and the United States (receiving a Ph.D. in English and American literature from the University of Oklahoma in the 1970s) and after resigning her post at an Iranian university, gathers seven of her most devoted

students to read and discuss *Lolita* and other great works of Western literature in what became Thursdays with Nafisi. Divided into four sections, “Lolita,” “Gatsby,” “James,” and “Austen,” the memoir spans the years 1978 to 1997 (from the beginning of the revolution until Nafisi’s emigration to the US), but the first section primarily centers on the two years of the book club, 1995-1997. The book recounts and bears witness to Nafisi’s painful experiences following the revolution in which Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s repressive regime rose to power. This chapter argues that Nafisi’s uncritical praise of *Lolita* is problematic, but her memoir succeeds in providing Western readers an insider’s view of the cruel patriarchal practices many Muslim women experience. Her memoir suggests that at the dawn of the century books about father-daughter incest were being imported not necessarily to comment on the act itself but to articulate a history of female subjugation in which incest is just *one* part of a larger network of oppression. I think Nafisi is right in that incest is one manifestation of political and social ills, but I find that her memoir easily lends itself to suggesting that the act itself and the insidious trauma surrounding it should be placed in a binary which too often leads to a hierarchy that, in this case, would privilege a discussion of insidious trauma at the expense of talking about the act of incest.

Nafisi’s memoir was heavily criticized for its alleged neoconservative and pro-military messages critics argued were not so cleverly occluded by the aesthetics of a book that was perhaps not coincidentally published not even two years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the same month that the US invaded Iran’s neighbor, Iraq. The criticism is a valid concern I take up in the second half of the chapter, but I am more interested in how Nafisi uses a book with an ambiguous message about father-daughter
incest to defend literature and to illustrate the insidious trauma she and many other Iranian women face. I include her work to see what it can tell us about transnational feminist discourse and reading father-daughter incest in the twentieth-first century. In the dissertation’s final chapter, I first explore how Nafisi reads—or, at times, misreads, *Lolita*, followed by a discussion of how I read it. She overlooks the ethical and literary ambiguities and contradictions embedded in *Lolita*. Unlike Nafisi, I contend that Nabokov chooses a narrative strategy that, at best, grants him the luxury of ambivalence about father-daughter incest and one that, at worst, celebrates the actions of Humbert Humbert as it glosses over how much this affair causes trauma to Lolita. Most of *Lolita*, Judith Herman correctly observes in *Father-Daughter Incest*, “is a brilliant apologia for an incestuous father” as the narrative obscures the suffering of the girl (37). The chapter then focuses on some influential critics’ comments and their implications, a discussion that echoes some of what we saw in the chapter on Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss*. It closes with a meditation on how Nafisi’s work returns our discussion to the value of the literary in representing and bearing witness to psychological trauma, particularly to the insidious trauma that is foreign to neither women of Iran nor to females living in the United States.

**Nafisi’s Reading of Lolita**

Nafisi’s 350-page memoir opens with a 77-page section devoted to *Lolita*, the book she claims best represents her experience in revolutionary Iran. Sensing that her perceived American, female, probably feminist, readers would be curious about her choice of text, she articulates the question that is on most of our minds: “Why *Lolita*?”
and “Why Lolita in Tehran?” (35). The first page of her memoir provides an answer: she explains that she goes against the advice she gives to her literature students about not turning works of fiction into carbon copies of real life and says that if she were to “choose a work of fiction that would most resonate with our lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it would not be The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie or even 1984 but perhaps Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading or better yet, Lolita” (3).

She reminds us in the following chapters that she and her seven female students are not Lolita and that the Ayatollah is not Humbert; however, she states that Lolita was “the most metaphorical of the situation in Iran” (Power 58). When asked, “Why was Lolita, in particular, such a crucial book for your class?” Nafisi responded:

I felt the regime was imposing its dream on us. As women, it confiscated our reality. It said, “Don’t be like this, be the way we think you should be.” In Humbert’s mind, Lolita had a precedent, a girl he meets when he’s younger—Annabel Leigh. Every girl he sees, he imposes his dream of Annabel on the reality of Lolita. The poignancy is that, as Humbert says, “Every night she had to run back to my arms, because she had nowhere else to go.” My girls, in the Islamic Republic, where else did they have to go? (qtd. in Power 58)

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2 Mitra Rastegar maintains that Nafisi writes for an American, not an Iranian, audience: “I have heard no reports that the memoir has been translated into Farsi or is widely available in Iran, although some copies are likely circulating. One journalist in Tehran found that almost no one had heard of the book, and of those who had, many were highly critical, saying, ’It has nothing to do with Iran,’ or that its portrayal was dated (Vick 2004)” (124).
Knowing what it feels like to be powerless in the face of male authority, Nafisi closely identifies with the novel because she has experienced how religious totalitarianism can confiscate individual identity and replace it with distorted views of its own imagination. The story of a girl who is reduced to a figment of someone else’s fantasy resonates so much with her own situation in war-torn Iran where adultery and prostitution warranted being stoned to death, women, under *Sharia* law, were considered to have half the worth of men, and nine-year-old girls, or, as Nafisi states, really “eight and a half lunar years,” were ripe for marriage (261).

As her “Lolita” section unravels, Nafisi proceeds to forge unexpected parallels between the book and her life in the religious patriarchy of the Islamic Republic in which Humbert Humbert is not unlike Ayatollah Khomeini and other representatives of the Islamic state and Lolita shares striking characteristics with the women in the book club. Just as Humbert overpowers Lolita, Nafisi views her country as hijacked by a minority of radical revolutionaries. Readily identifying with Nabokov’s lead female character, she celebrates the work for its vivid imagination that helped the women of this book club recreate a world beyond the confines of revolutionary Iran. Agreeing with Nafisi, Pifer maintains, “Careful attention to the text reveals the ways in which it is designed to reveal what the narrator attempts to conceal, or blindly ignores” (187). They contend that although Humbert is the most unreliable of narrators, Nabokov is a reliable author. Nafisi enthusiastically endorses Nabokov for motivating our condemnation for Humbert as well as our compassion for Lolita.

Nafisi is most concerned with the character of Lolita and her resistance to Humbert. Like Lolita, she and her students attempt to escape the repressive regime by
creating little pockets of their own freedom: they shed their mandatory veils and chadors and enter into lively conversation about Nabokov’s novel, which they unanimously find to be not about “the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but the confiscation of one individual’s life by another” (33). Nafisi and her students do not deny the sexual abuse of Lolita, which, they note, is rendered much more seriously and realistically than the murder of Quilty, but they subsume the incest under the larger crime of denying Lolita her individuality. Nafisi admits that as readers we at times sympathize with Humbert and are seduced by his poetic language; however, she and her students argue that Humbert does not succeed in winning over Lolita or his readers because he never possesses Lolita willingly “so that every act of lovemaking from then on becomes a crueler and more tainted act of rape” (43). They praise Nabokov for offering this subversive message. As hopeful as they are about Lolita’s glimpses of freedom and as optimistic as they are about Nabokov’s ability to expose brutal rulers, Nafisi acknowledges that Lolita is denied all of life’s normal pleasures and that we simply do not know much about her. To answer Clegg’s question about why it has taken so long for critics to find Lolita, it seems to have something to do with the fact that Nabokov has Humbert deceptively hide the “real” Lolita. Neither indifferent nor dismissive to the topic of child sexual abuse or how the narrative works to obscure Lolita’s trauma, Nafisi does not thoroughly comment on those aspects and concludes that the finished work is a beautiful defense of “ordinary everyday life” (33).

Despite that the majority of Lolita is rendered from Humbert’s perspective and that Nabokov elicits sympathy for his narrator (who, for most of the novel, is an unapologetic pedophile), Nafisi praises Nabokov for evoking “sympathy for Humbert’s
victims,” especially for the child Lolita (42). Arguing that Humbert’s rare insights provide brief access into Lolita’s character, Nafisi sees the “real” Lolita, the one free from Humbert’s imagination, as a “hurt, lonely girl, deprived of her childhood, orphaned and with no refuge” (43). Lolita’s small acts of rebellion and insubordination give the women of this book club hope that their trapped situation as women will come to pass. She and her students formed a special bond with Lolita because living in the Islamic Republic of Iran was not unlike the world Lolita was forced to inhabit. Nabokov’s genius, according to Nafisi, is in recreating a totalitarian society in which Humbert fashioned “an illusory world full of false promises” (23). Trying to reclaim the past and his childhood love, Humbert imposed his relentless fiction on Lolita. Parading as a normal stepfather to her, he commits crimes against humanity, which are all the more terrifying to Nafisi and her students who seem to know too well how barbarism can be garbed in civility.

Viewing Humbert as a villain because he lacked curiosity about others, especially about the one he claimed to have loved the most, they see Lolita as a double victim, unable to live a life apart from her cruel stepfather and author her life story. Sensitive to the omissions of Lolita in Lolita, Nafisi and her students recognize that absences can have more importance than presences. At the start of the memoir the now-expatriated Nafisi reflects on the images in two photographs: one with her students donning the government-mandated hijab (head scarves and black robes) and the other with the same women stripped of their coverings. After a brief description of the six women who comprise her book club, Manna, Mahshid, Yassi, Azin, Mitra, and Sanaz, Nafisi mentions Nassrin, who is not in the photographs, the one who “didn’t make it to the end” (5) and the one who, as we find out later, was probably most like Lolita because she was
sexually abused by her uncle when she was just eleven years old. Her tale would be incomplete, Nafisi states, without mention of those who did not remain with the group: “Their absences persist, like an acute pain that seems to have no physical source. This is Tehran for me: its absences were more real than its presences” (5). Nafisi’s words are an appropriate epigraph for her discussion of Lolita, in which, as Nafisi and her students observe, we don’t know much about the title character aside from what Humbert chooses to disclose about her. Lolita’s thoughts and feelings are seldom, if ever, shared, something that Nafisi attributes to Nabokov’s grand scheme of exposing the corruption of ideals and the tyranny under which Lolita, and many other women, suffer.

My Reading of Lolita

In place of Lolita’s voice, point of view, and traumatic suffering, Nabokov emphasizes Humbert Humbert’s hopelessly unreliable perspective. Nafisi reads the omissions as strategic moves on Nabokov’s part to expose the dangers of solipsism, but I’m not convinced he does so for such noble reasons. From the beginning of Lolita, he sets ethical traps for the reader. From the fictional John Ray Jr.’s opening statement in the Foreword to Nabokov’s tagged-on afterword and Humbert’s narrative as the meandering middle, Nabokov structures his work in such a way that the reader is invited to identify with Humbert.  

3 Jen Shelton points out that the Foreword conditions our response to the rest of the novel: it encourages readers “to overlook incest in the text as they ally themselves with the clever, sophisticated author against the forces of simplistic moralism which Ray represents” (273). This framing device makes readers more likely to side with Humbert and overlook incest and its disturbing implications.
well-educated, middle-class man, with good manners and a sharp tongue” (Tamir-Ghez 163). Like Harrison’s father, he can outsmart most psychologists. He is a master linguist, has a good sense of humor, and tells us on more than one occasion just how attractive he is. Contrary to what Nafisi asserts, Nabokov makes it easier to sympathize with Humbert, whom we know so much about, than with Lolita, who is virtually unknown to the reader, and the little bit of information he does share of her, reveals her to be “a most exasperating brat” (148).

I agree with Nafisi that life and fiction as well as protagonist and author cannot simply be conflated, but, neither, as Sarah Herbold argues, can they be clearly separated (75). Humbert, who, like Invisible Man’s Jim Trueblood, is something of a trickster figure and master storyteller, may be twisting the end of his tale in which he awakens to the pain he has caused Lolita as a get-out-of-jail card. We know that Humbert’s memoir, written while he’s imprisoned for fifty-six days, was at first intended to be read during his trial. Choosing to disclose the story exclusively from Humbert’s perspective, Nabokov has to fully enter into his imagination to construct the sordid business in the first place. In so doing, he humanizes his male protagonist as he provides access into the mind of a man plagued by overwhelming lust for little girls, whom he calls “nymphets” (16). The sorry situation Nabokov writes about is often more comic than tragic or traumatic. Exhibiting more glee than disgust throughout Lolita, he demonstrates a moral mobility writing about incest and solipsism in a less than serious tone as he provides more questions than answers, leaving readers to wonder if he secretly condones Humbert’s actions and, in turn, if Nafisi is too quick in her praise of Nabokov. Since Nabokov’s stance is unclear, it’s understandable why one may wholeheartedly endorse him for creating a moral
message about the dangers of solipsism and why another may just as fervently criticize him for denying his female character voice in what could be read as another form of victimization and illustration of insidious trauma.

The emphasis placed on Lolita’s body is one of the most troubling parts of the novel. Nafisi does not comment on the lengths that Nabokov goes to in order to embody Lolita, but she mentions many times throughout her memoir how emphasis is placed on the Iranian female body, especially on the veil that is intended to render women invisible yet ironically makes their presence ubiquitous. She insists that the major oppressive government policy is the constant surveillance of the female body and the threat of violence if the rules are not obeyed. Certainly Nafisi and her female students are no strangers to males obsessing over the female body, making it curious that she doesn’t discuss how details of Lolita’s body and the bodies of other “nymphets” are littered throughout the text in place of where their voices and thoughts might be. For example, Nabokov launches into almost scientific detail when describing the body of nymphets: “The bud-stage of breast development appears early (10.7 years) in the sequence of somatic changes accompanying pubescence. And the next maturational item available is the first appearance of pigmented pubic hair (11.2 years)” (20). One of the first items that catches Humbert’s eye as he scans the Haze household during his tour is “Lo’s” “limp wet things” hanging over the tub with “the question mark of a hair inside” (38). Clearly Humbert—if not Nabokov—is obsessed with the sexually maturing female body.4

4 Sexual attraction between middle-aged men and pubescent girls is a topic that Nabokov visited on many occasions in his body of work. Stacy Schiff, who wrote Véra Nabokov’s biography, states, “Vladimir was by no means Humbert, but he was the author of a fair number of works in which middle-aged men fidget under the spells cast by underaged
Nabokov has Humbert chart Lolita’s growth and development into what he thinks is dreaded womanhood: “hip girth, twenty-nine inches; thigh girth (just below the gluteal sulcus), seventeen; calf girth and neck circumference, eleven; chest circumference, twenty-seven; upper arm girth, eight; waist, twenty-three; stature, fifty-seven inches; weight, seventy-eight pounds; figure, linear; intelligence quotient, 121; vermiform appendix present, thank God” (107). Throughout the book, Humbert is concerned with Lolita’s hip movements in mounting (her bike, he tells us) and the tour of her thigh from exceeding seventeen and a half inches. The focus on the exact measurements of the female body raises disturbing questions. On the one hand, Nabokov may have been quite the researcher, scanning scientific textbooks that at that time had just begun to include such details about the human body and then mocking the generalizations he found in them. On the other hand, one may wonder if he is more concerned with the body of the female than with her voice and thoughts.

girls” (qtd. in Herbold 76). In addition to his infamous Lolita, a novel he often referred to as “my poor little girl” (qtd. in Shelton 291), he was preoccupied with this theme between the years 1935 and 1974, as Brandon Centerwall claims:

He first developed the theme of the secret pedophile in his novel Dar (The Gift) written 1935-37; expanded the theme into a novella Volshebnik (The Enchanter) in 1939; wrote the 300-page Lolita in 1949-54; drafted a full-length screenplay in 1960; single-handedly translated Lolita into Russian over a two year period (1965-67); and, after much copyright wrangling, reacquired the screenplay for revision and publication in 1974. (469)

In Nabokov’s interview with Playboy, two more works were added to the list: Invitation to a Beheading (in which a 12-year-old girl, Emmie, is erotically interested in a man twice her age) and Bend Sinister (in which the protagonist dreams that he is “surreptitiously enjoying Mariette [his maid] while she sat, wincing a little, in his lap during the rehearsal of a play in which she was supposed to be his daughter”). Also, his 1969 Ada, or Ardor, is described as “a love story troubled by incest” (supplementary pages of Lolita). Despite his claims that he didn’t “give a damn for incest one way or another” and didn’t even “know little girls very well,” Nabokov’s works offer a less doctrinaire view of the subject (Strong Opinions 123, 15-16).
Lolita’s voice, as Nafisi points out, is not completely absent and although her words are few and far between, they speak volumes and call attention to the fact that Humbert is holding her against her will. The few instances in which she is granted words, her voice reveals her to be the antithesis of what Humbert fantasizes her to be in his mind. She gets some stellar one-liners that mock Humbert, such as “What thing, Dad?” (112), and “You got a flat, mister?” (228). Before having sex with Lolita for the first time, an unusually tongue-tied Humbert fumbles for appropriate euphemisms to conceal their situation from her. Lolita, however, comes right out and says, “The word is incest” (119). Similarly, she refers to the Enchanted Hunters hotel, where they have sex three times the morning they first stay there, as “the hotel where you raped me” (202). And, Lolita threatens to turn Humbert in to the authorities in no uncertain terms: she yells, “You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you’ve done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty, dirty old man” (141). She shows that she knows of his transgressive behavior and wishes it to stop, evident when she asks Humbert, “how long did I think we were going to live in stuffy cabins, doing filthy things together and never behaving like ordinary people” (158). He admits to censoring parts of Lolita’s speech, claiming, “she said unprintable things” (205) and swore to him in “language that I never dreamed little girls could know, let alone use” (170). The result is that far too often Lolita’s words are omitted.

The problem is not that the reader does not receive any words from Lolita (she certainly fares better than Ellison’s Matty Lou), but for every one of her words, we get a hundred of Humbert’s. And, like Matty Lou, she remains under his narrative control as Nabokov gives free reign to his male protagonist and chooses to tell the story by having
us read his journal. In *Reading Lolita* Nafisi and her students are painfully aware that Lolita is a double victim—of her life and her life story. But wasn’t it Nabokov’s choice to deny Lolita self-representation, the ability to author her own story? Shouldn’t he share in some of the responsibility of making Lolita a double victim? As Nafisi herself admits in a later part of her memoir, a good novel is “democratic” in that it “shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice” (132).

Most disconcertingly Nafisi’s maintains that the novel is *not* about the rape of Lolita. She insists that *Lolita* is really about the “confiscation of one individual’s life by another” (33). Unlike Nafisi, I do not see the incest and confiscation as mutually exclusive and would argue that the novel is about both. To categorize the crimes of humanity in such a hierarchal structure is another form of victimizing the female figure, which Nafisi makes clear in other parts of her memoir, is not her intention. There is much truth in the sentence that follows Nafisi’s assertion about the novel’s content: “We don’t know what Lolita would have become if Humbert had not engulfed her” (33). We don’t know what Lolita could have been because we don’t know much about the “real” Lolita from the book that bears her made-up name. Leland de la Durantaye perceptively observes, “She is everywhere referred to, everywhere described, everywhere poetically loved, but as to her thoughts, and feelings, Humbert offers us scarcely a glimpse” (323). For these reasons it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess the extent of Lolita’s psychological trauma.

Nabokov drops subtle hints that Lolita is suffering, passing statements that Nafisi cites as proof of Lolita’s trauma. For example, in her letter written to Humbert reproduced toward the novel’s end she says, “I have gone through much sadness and
hardship” (266). Also we learn that Lolita would prefer to live a life with a child pornographer, who does not love her, than with Humbert, who claims he so desperately does. Identifying the crux of the problem to be the perverse intimacy Lolita is forced to endure, Nafisi writes, “for two years, in dingy motels and byways, in his home or even in school, he forces her to consent to him. He prevents her from mixing with children her own age, watches over her so she never has boyfriends, frightens her into secrecy, bribes her with money for acts of sex, which he revokes when he has had his due” (44).

Humbert robs Lolita of the normal life of a girl her age.

The best piece of evidence that Lolita is suffering, which Nafisi points out, comes at the beginning of Part Two of Lolita when Nabokov writes, “and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment [Humbert] feigned sleep” (176). Nafisi comments on this disclosure, quoting Nabokov’s wife, Véra, with whom she and her class unanimously agreed. In her diary, Véra expresses her wish for some critic to listen to the cries of Lolita. Nafisi quotes,

Critics prefer to look for moral symbols, justification, condemnation, or explanation of HH’s predicament….I wish, though, somebody would notice the tender description of the child’s helplessness, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH, and her heartrending courage all along culminating in that squalid but essentially pure and healthy marriage, and her letter, and her dog. And that terrible expression on her face when she had been cheated by HH out of some little pleasure that had been promised. They all miss the fact that the ‘horrid little brat’ Lolita is essentially very good indeed—or she would not have straightened out after
being crushed so terribly, and found a decent life with poor Dick more to her liking than the other kind. (40; ellipsis in orig.)

Consistently advocating for the heroine’s humanity, Véra lamented that Lolita “cries every night, and the critics are deaf to her sobs” (qtd. in Pifer 197). Similarly, Nafisi’s student, Manna, criticizes some of Nabokov’s critics: “‘some critics seem to treat the text the same way Humbert treats Lolita: they only see themselves and what they want to see’” (50). There are, however, valid reasons for why many critics have neglected to comment on Lolita’s tears, the main one being that Humbert’s confession fails to report Lolita’s reaction until a hundred-some pages have gone by. Additionally, he mentions it in passing. It is very easy to gloss over what Nabokov places as almost a footnote in the adventures of Humbert Humbert. Nabokov’s lessons in close reading and rereadings can easily be lost on the hasty reader following in the footsteps of Humbert, a trap that Nabokov knowingly sets and for which he should therefore assume some of the responsibility.

Whereas it is easy to miss Lolita’s trauma, Nabokov makes it difficult to miss Humbert’s trauma, or, better yet, his feigned trauma. Humbert wants us to believe that his fixation with nymphets originates in the traumatic loss of his childhood sweetheart, Annabel Leigh, something that Nafisi seems to uncritically accept. Unlike some of the other vital information that Humbert withholds until the end of the book (such as his change-of-heart regarding his regret for what he had done to Lolita), he readily discloses the events with Annabel at the beginning. Nabokov’s choice to unravel the events in their chronological order allows Humbert to set up Annabel, the “precursor” to Lolita, as the noble cause of his trouble with nymphets (9). As we’ve already read, Nafisi takes
Humbert at his word: “In Humbert’s mind, Lolita had a precedent, a girl he meets when he’s younger—Annabel Leigh. Every girl he sees, he imposes his dream of Annabel on the reality of Lolita” (qtd. in Power 58). Nafisi suggests that his “nympholepsy” is the result of being traumatized by the death of his first love. She does not mention that Nabokov might be mocking Edgar Allen Poe’s “Annabel Lee” (which is often said to be inspired by his wife, a cousin of his and a mere 13 years old when she married the 26-year-old Edgar) and/or toying with the Freudian reader who would take stock in the psychological repercussions of traumatic loss.

Falling for Humbert’s claims to trauma may also blind the reader to what is the beginning of a vicious cycle in Nabokov’s work—the killing off of almost all of his female characters. In addition to Annabel, Humbert’s mother is said to have died when he was quite young. Nabokov tersely and parenthetically writes off the details as “(picnic, lightning)” (10). She is mentioned only one other time in Humbert’s narrative. There’s also Charlotte Haze, Lolita’s mother, who is killed off in fantastic fashion. More than just narrative interests (as Charlotte’s death allows Humbert to get closer to Lolita and sends the plot into motion) play into Nabokov’s decision to have Charlotte die early in the novel: Nabokov does not seem to like Charlotte Haze, who represents the capitalistic-consuming, overbearing housewife and mother. After Humbert plots a clever scheme to drown Charlotte at Hourglass Lake, he doesn’t go through with it. Instead, her death is even more gruesome: she is struck down by the Beale car, which, while trying to spare a neighborhood dog, conveniently for Humbert, kills Charlotte, who had just discovered his sexual desires for Lolita. In addition, both Humbert’s first wife, Valeria, and Lolita die in childbirth. Lolita’s daughter is stillborn. (The last two deaths we learn with a reread.)
And Nabokov even has Charlotte’s friend Jean Farlow die of cancer at the young age of thirty-three (104). All of these “traumatic losses” may lead one to wonder if the deaths of female characters in *Lolita* aren’t overkill.

As it becomes clear that theories of traumatic loss and childhood fixation do not alone explain Humbert’s situation, it seems likely that, as James Tweedie mentions, the main source of Humbert’s trauma “is the realization that Lolita maintains an identity outside his self-contained realm” (161). At the novel’s end, Humbert’s realizations about Lolita crystallize and there are a few instances in which he admits that in idolizing her, he has denied her humanity. For example, he acknowledges that he “did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate” (284). In a similar statement, Humbert assumes some guilt: “it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self” (287). He notes that “nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her” (283). Using the word *rape* for the first time, wishing that Lolita’s child be a boy instead of a girl (whom he used to long for in order to practice the art of being a granddad on), and stating that he took her childhood away, Humbert reveals regret over his actions. Realizing that Humbert’s awakening to Lolita’s suffering is critical to evaluating the ethical effects of the novel, this reader can’t help but wonder if Humbert’s realizations are, if not too little, then too late. Also, we’re not sure if Humbert’s change-of-heart is genuine and triggered by true repentance of a guilty conscience or is another one of the schemes he constructs out of fear for going to jail for harming Lolita. They are also undermined when he claims that Lolita failed to see him as a person: “I firmly decided to ignore what I could not help
perceiving, the fact that I was to her not a boy friend, not a glamour man, not a pal, not even a person at all, but just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn—to mention only mentionable matters” (283, emphasis added). Strikingly, he tries to pin on her what he has been guilty of for most of his narrative—denying her humanity by turning her into a figment of his imagination.

**Critics’ Reading of Nafisi’s Memoir: How Did They Ever Make a War of Lolita?**

Throughout *Lolita*, we witness Humbert’s efforts to contain Lolita, actions that resonate with Nafisi, who feels that the Ayatollah is imposing his warped views of what a woman should be onto the women of Iran. For most of her memoir, she reflects on the dire circumstances that define and confine the women of Tehran. In a passage often quoted by critics, Nafisi describes the world outside her home, where the girls take refuge and are free to express their individuality. She explains that before venturing outdoors, one of her students, Sanaz, has to re-veil herself for what she has been told is her own safety. Focusing on the regulation of the female body, Nafisi notes how Sanaz is transformed from a colorful individual to an anonymous veiled figure:

She says her good-byes and puts on her black robe and scarf over her orange shirt and jeans, coiling her scarf around her neck to cover her huge gold earrings. She directs wayward strands of hair under the scarf, puts her notes in her large bag, straps it on over her shoulder and walks out into the hall. She pauses a moment on top of the stairs to put on thin lacy black gloves to hide her nail polish. (26)
As Nafisi sees it, the robe and scarf are erasers of feminine identity. Her description of Sanaz illustrates the great lengths that she and other women must go to just to walk down a street. Nafisi’s words convey to her foreign readers that women in Iran are victims of overt and state-sanctioned violence.

Women like Sanaz are subjected to random arrests, segregated classes, and virginity searches. They can be penalized for any number of perceived indiscretions such as “running up the stairs when they were late for classes, for laughing in the hallways, for talking to members of the opposite sex,” wearing lipstick, showing a single strand of hair, eating a piece of fruit too seductively, growing their nails, listening to forbidden music, reading immoral books, and sometimes even for wearing pink socks (9, 26, 59, 76). The streets of Tehran and other Iranian roads are “patrolled by militia, who ride in white Toyota patrols, four gun-carrying men and women, sometimes followed by a minibus” (26). Nicknamed “the Blood of God,” these agents police the streets primarily to make sure that its female inhabitants “guard [their] veil” (26, 27)—“to make sure that women like Sanaz wear their veils properly, do not wear makeup, do not walk in public with men who are not their fathers, brothers, or husbands” (26). Iranian custom mandates that if a woman gets on a bus, she must enter through the rear door and sit in the back seats assigned to her. Mahshid, one of Nafisi’s students who had spent five years in prison because of her affiliation with an opposing religious organization, cuts to the reality of the insidious trauma: “everyday life does not have fewer horrors than prison” (13).

Many critics were disturbed, if not outright angered, with how Nafisi portrays Iran’s treatment of women. Criticizing her biased Western, liberal-humanist perspective, they faulted her for providing a dangerously oversimplified depiction of Iranian women.
as nothing but victims of an inherently misogynistic Islamic tradition. They felt her book worked within the dominant discursive practices in the West as it confirmed some of the stereotypes about Iran and Islam as a radical religious state of evil. Noting that a book about Iran is intrinsically political in an age of imperialism and militarism in which a “war on terror” was being fought against the “Axis of Evil,” many of Nafisi’s critics thought she should have been more careful in representing the complexity of the situation in Iran as well as more critical in her choice of texts since her inclusion of four Western authors can be viewed as conceding Western superiority and, by implication, legitimizing the need for outside military intervention.

The backlash that Nafisi’s book received was in ways just as heated as that of Kathryn Harrison’s memoir. The book that had enjoyed early accolades—selling one million copies; being translated into thirty-two languages; winning the 2004 Non-fiction Book of the Year Award from Booksense and the Persian Golden Lioness Award for literature; advancing to the number one spot on the New York Times Book Review list, where it stayed for a year and a half; in short, becoming an international sensation in which Nafisi’s book club was brought into the homes of readers around the globe—soon found itself under attack. The most outspoken of the critics was a fellow Iranian-born and US-educated scholar, Hamid Dabashi. The current-Columbia University professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature and staunch anti-war activist, Dabashi argued that Nafisi irresponsibly paints Islamic tradition as misogynistic and calls for foreign forces to rescue these damsels in distress. He claimed the memoir was “a key propaganda
tool at the disposal of the Bush administration,” as it justified outside military
intervention to “save Muslim women from the evil of their men” (“Native Informers”).

Quoting the postcolonial feminist Gayatri Spivak (with whom Bahramitash notes
Nafisi is unfamiliar as her memoir gives no indication that she has read any postcolonial
feminist literary critics) and drawing on the work of Edward Said, Dabashi contends that
Nafisi’s work features native orientalist discourse and illustrates the need for “white men
to save brown women from brown men” (qtd. in “Native Informers”). He arrives at this
conclusion after arguing that Nafisi reduces the complicated social history of Iran to a
single portrait of oppressed women forced to wear the veil, voices a “hatred of everything
Iranian,” unfairly edits the image taken for the cover of her memoir, disregards the
struggle for cultural diversity in the US academy, and hijacks and eroticizes the literary
scene of *Lolita*, celebrating “the most notorious case of pedophilia in modern literary
imagination” (“Native Informers”). He connects Nafisi to the US government’s

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5 Dabashi was not the only one angry with Nafisi’s portrayal of women in Iran. For other
hostile criticism, see Fatemeh Keshavarz’s *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*, Seyed Mohammed Marandi’s “Reading Azar Nafisi in Tehran,” and Roksana
Bahramitash’s “The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Oriental Feminism: Case
Studies of Two North American Bestsellers.”

6 In *Orientalism*, Said explores the methods through which the West constructed “the
Other” as barbaric and inferior. This discourse had been so influential that, as we saw in
the Morrison chapter with the character Soaphead, “the Other” internalizes these views.
Dabashi and others find Nafisi guilty of internalizing the colonizer’s views. They argue
that she writes from a native orientalist perspective, uncritically adopting the belief that
the West is superior. Marandi charges Nafisi for not being familiar with the works of Said
(186). She does, however, make a passing reference to Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* in
her memoir.

7 The image on the cover of Nafisi’s memoir is cropped from a larger image of girls
reading a newspaper to see the results of an election in which they have been active.
Fatemeh Keshevarz thinks that this cropped image purposely misleads Western readers
into thinking that Iranian women have no agency. Nafisi responds that she had very little
neoconservative movement to expand its military force. Comparing *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to “the most pestiferous colonial projects of the British in India,” Dabashi asserts that Nafisi functions as a colonialist (“Native Informers”). He finds no difference between Nafisi and the US soldier convicted of mistreating prisoners at Abu Ghraib, and thinks it is quite telling that Nafisi’s work is endorsed by Bernard Lewis, whom Dabashi claims is “the most diabolical anti-Muslim neo-con alive” (qtd. in “Reading Lolita at Columbia”).

Much less radical in their critiques than Dabashi, Amy DePaul, John Carlos Rowe, Anne Donadey, and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh recognize that Nafisi’s memoir does lend itself to conservative US ideological rescripting. Asking if *Reading Lolita* serves “the Bush administration’s designs on the Middle East, and in particular, the neoconservative agenda for US foreign relations,” DePaul answers with a qualified yes (77). Also seeing how Nafisi’s intention for publishing her memoir can be distorted, Rowe is skeptical of what he views as Nafisi’s “new” aesthetic reading of literature that purports to be disengaged from politics but is really a manifestation of macropolitical academic issues. In “Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*,” Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh write about the ironic and unfortunate use of the memoir to bolster US military operations of globalized capital. Surveying the historical and political context of revolutionary Tehran, Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh challenge the monolithic portrait of Muslim women in Nafisi’s work, concluding

say about the book’s cover but insisted against using her publisher’s original idea, which showed “a female in a headscarf reminiscent of the movie poster from the original film *Lolita*” because of its sexual innuendos (qtd. in DePaul 78).
the memoir comes dangerously close to confirming a set of stereotypes about Islam for readers who are already saturated with them: that it is a theocratic, evil religion that should be allowed no place in the public sphere; that it oppresses women; and finally, that it stands in stark contrast to the American way of life, thus justifying further foreign military intervention and U.S. political dominion over the world. (643-44)

The critics agreed that regardless of authorial intention, Nafisi’s work lends itself to being read as an appropriation of feminist rhetoric to fulfill the neoconservative agenda of a call to arms.

**The Value of the Literary in Empowering Women**

Focusing on what they perceived to be the book’s endorsement of US military intervention, many critics misconstrued Nafisi’s feminist messages and her efforts to unveil the insidious trauma many women in Iran experience. Nowhere in the memoir does Nafisi promote warfare as the answer to her problems in revolutionary Iran. In fact, she’s been vocal about saying that she does “not advocate regime change by use of violence or foreign intervention,” that she wants “the progressive forces in the world to empathize with the plight of the Iranian people” (qtd. in Kulbaga 518). In place of supporting war, *Reading Lolita* charts the intimate lives of selected Iranian women during the devastating rise of Islamism in Iran and how these women engaged with literary works to cope with the radical changes. In a land “that denied any merit to literary works,” Nafisi turns to reading literature and writing her memoir as means of self-preservation and as acts of survival (25). Like the other works discussed in this study, her
memoir illustrates how literature can be a privileged site for representing and working through psychological trauma.

Celebrating the transformative potential of fiction to illuminate the situation of herself and her female students, Nafisi credits Nabokov and other Western writers she deems as great for elucidating the human condition. She advocates an aesthetic appreciation of literature. For her, literature becomes a refuge from politics, which is ironic in that her book became the topic of a highly politicized debate about neoconservatives and pro-war propaganda. In pointing out the mistreatment of women in Iran and the hypocrisy of revolutionary Iranian ideology, her work was criticized for highlighting the divide between life in Iran and life in the US, a democratic country that promises liberty and the pursuit of happiness. However, it should be quite clear at the end of this study that the systems of oppression that thwart the humanity of its female citizens and keep them in a pre-victim state are not just problems in Iran. Bahramitash correctly points out, “the West is dominated as much by patriarchy in ideology and government as is the East” (226). Crimes against females know no boundaries.

Raising cultural awareness about what she and her students endured during their darkest days of the Iranian revolution and how books sustained them, Nafisi states, “If I turned to books, it was because they were the only sanctuary I knew, one I needed in order to survive, to protect some aspect of myself that was now in constant retreat” (170). Fiction became a way for her to reassert control over reality as it allowed her to create counter-realities. “Reality,” as Nabokov explains in his afterword to *Lolita*, is “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes” (312). Seeing the need to counter her current situation in Iran by escaping into the world of great novels, Nafisi insists that she
and her students fashion their own counter-realities. Great novels, she reminds us, heighten “your senses and sensitivity to the complexities of life and of individuals, and prevents you from the self-righteousness that sees morality in fixed formulas about good and evil” (133). Undoubtedly, their reading of *Lolita* and other works was informed by their own personal sorrows. The act of reading literature had liberating powers, helping her and her students imagine a world other than the one in which they lived. Like Henry James, reading and writing helped to psychologically keep “the war at bay” (213).

When studying *Lolita*, Nafisi and her students noted that the double-victim Lolita was “never given the chance to articulate [her] own story” (41). They told themselves they were in that class to prevent themselves from falling victim to the crime of having their life stories taken from them. Through authoring her story, Nafisi achieves what Humbert and Nabokov deny Lolita—the right of self-representation, something that this study suggests came with, and continues to be, a struggle in a patriarchal culture. In writing her memoir, she calls our attention to the trauma of Iranian people and offers an alternative solution to war—empathy. The social change that she champions does not come from violence, but from learning about the humanity of others, lessons, according to Nafisi, that are found in the great works of literature.

Calling our attention to the value of the literary and how books like *Lolita* can teach us more about the human condition, Nafisi includes toward the memoir’s end a powerful analogy between life in the Islamic Republic and the sexual domination and exploitation of females. I find this interesting because although she does not give as much attention to Lolita’s rape as I think it deserves, she employs the striking image of unwanted sex to convey total state domination and complete female victimhood.
Attempting to explain to her husband how she felt living in such a repressed culture, Nafisi likens it to “having sex with a man you loathe”:

Well, it’s like this: if you’re forced into having sex with someone you dislike, you make your mind blank—you pretend to be somewhere else, you tend to forget your body, you hate your body. That’s what we do over here. We are constantly pretending to be somewhere else—we either plan it or dream it. (329)

Nafisi sexualizes the experience of state power, suggesting that men’s sexual control of women’s bodies is fundamental to Iranian governmental policies, in particular, and patriarchy, in general. Sex, although one part of this process, is a central act of aggression.

The confiscation of ordinary life, which is accomplished through the insidious trauma of females, matters most to Nafisi. In addition to supporting what LaCapra, Caruth, and other trauma theorists argue about literature being a prime site for enabling new forms of representation and for giving voice to traumatic events, Nafisi’s work sends home the message that we need to reevaluate the definition of psychological trauma and what experiences should be included to validate the realities of females along with males of color and of lower socio-economic standing. Reading Lolita in addition to the five other works discussed in this dissertation should make us see how the current medical definition of psychological trauma does not account for the experiences of females, most of whom like Lolita, Harrison, Bone, Pecola, Matty Lou, and Nicole, have been conditioned into submissive roles before and after the father-daughter incest took place. These books help us see how insidious trauma is a more adequate conceptualization for
recognizing manifestations of trauma in a heteropatriarchal society saturated with sexism, racism, and classism.

Nafisi’s memoir, along with the other texts explored, show poignantly that the mistreatment of women is a human rights violation and a political crime in that, as Herman states, “they serve to perpetuate an unjust social order through terror” (“Crime” 136-37). As LaCapra proposes, the literary can aid us in developing an approach to the study of trauma and the posttraumatic that contextualizes the social and political forces that, in this case, prevent many females from enjoying life’s simple pleasures. Nafisi acknowledges, “The Islamic Republic took away everything I’d taken for granted” (qtd. in Power 58). In turn, she now has a deeper appreciation for “the feel of the wind on [your] skin,” “How lovely the sun feels on your hair,” and “How free you feel when you can lick ice cream in the streets” (58). Strikingly, the two things she says she feels most grateful for at the end of the twentieth century are not nature and sweets, but being a woman and being a writer. Nafisi’s memoir testifies to the fact that, even though we won’t see an end to father-daughter incest until patriarchy is dismantled and even though insidious trauma is still not validated in the medical definition of psychological trauma, literary works offer empowering avenues to clarify and transform our realities.

References


