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When Bad Things Happen to Good Mothers: Rethinking Motherhood Through the Single Mother Image in American Films from the 1930s to the 1970s

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When Bad Things Happen to Good Mothers: Rethinking Motherhood Through the Single

Mother Image in American Films from the 1930s to the 1970s

by

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Emerald.

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ABSTRACT

The single-mother figure shows up in myriad American film genres, and my thesis explores three of these genres, maternal melodrama, film noir, and horror. I argue there is a melodramatic mode that carries over from maternal melodrama to film noir and horror. This mode emphasizes emotional excess. In maternal melodrama, the emotional excess is pity. For film noir, the emotion is anxiety, and in horror, it is repulsion. Even though each genre has its own emotional excess, maternal melodrama still speaks to these other genres through its maternal sacrifice, non-heteronormative families and misreading of proper gender performances. For this reason, I intentionally begin with classic maternal melodrama, wherein conventional gender roles, heteronormative familial structures, and mother-daughter separation are standard features. In *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), Stella misreads what “proper” femininity looks like. As a result, she believes she is “bad” for her daughter, Laurel, and makes the heart-wrenching decision to sacrifice Laurel to a traditional nuclear family.

The other films I chose extend *Stella Dallas*’ interest in gender roles, kinship structures, and mother-daughter separation but also subtly change the maternal melodrama’s relationship to heart-wrenching sacrifice. In each of three chapters, I explore Michael Curtiz’s film noir *Mildred Pierce* (1945), Douglas Sirk’s melodrama *Imitation of Life* (1959) and William Friedkin’s horror film *The Exorcist* (1973). After

examining the standard features of maternal melodrama in *Stella Dallas*, I begin to explore them in other genres that focus on one of the three ideas more predominantly. These ideas are gender roles, kinship structures, mother-daughter separation. This does not mean that each film is limited to only one idea. All of the films address gender performance, familial structure, and mother-child separation, but I let each film take the lead on one of the three ideas. In *Mildred Pierce*, I explore gender performance. Mildred performs masculinity and femininity depending on whether she is in the public or private sphere. *Imitation of Life* takes the lead on alternative kinship. The film illustrates how two single mothers create a economically viable non-heteronormative interracial family. I conclude with *The Exorcist* and the possibility that the mother and child do not need to separate like Stella and Laurel. *The Exorcist* challenges what has long been considered a necessary process. This is the only film that successfully keeps mother and child united.

I believe this project draws attention to the lack of analysis of single mothers in American film, but more importantly, it makes us rethink motherhood. The single mother privileges a certain approach to gender performance, familial structure, and mother-child separation that feminist theory and film studies have overlooked. This approach includes a masculine gender performance to perform as a father, disrupting the heteronormative familial structure to make it work for them, and mothers maintaining a relationship with their adolescent daughters.

INTRODUCTION:

Theorizing Single Mothers in American Film

A while back, my daughter and I watched a movie about a single mother and her daughter. The mother and daughter were forcibly separated through a series of misfortunes. My daughter asked me, “Why do bad things happen to single moms in movies?” Her question provoked me to take a closer look at the representation of single mothers in American films and at my own position as a single mother. What my daughter was responding to was a misrepresentation of her own home life that was reflected back to her. These “bad things” were the societal responses to masculine/feminine performances by single mothers, non-heteronormative familial structures, and separations between mothers and daughters. I argue that these configurations are not as bad as they might first appear. In fact, I think the “bad” can be transformed into something better by taking these ideas of gender performance, family structures, and mother-child separation and rethinking, reconstructing, what they mean to motherhood.

The academic community has few readings of, or responses to, cinematic representations of single motherhood. This is my motivation to research a topic that was close to home, my home to be exact. By analyzing cinematic and cultural representations of mothers and daughters in American films, I believe we can start to rethink maternal experiences and possibilities, not only in cinema, but also in everyday life. The image of

the single mother also engages and frequently transforms theoretical studies of gender performance, kinship structures, and the alleged necessity of mother-child separation.

This project explores single mothers and their daughters in Michael Curtiz's film noir *Mildred Pierce* (1945), Douglas Sirk's melodrama *Imitation of Life* (1959) and William Friedkin's horror film *The Exorcist* (1973). The themes I identify run throughout these works, but I will allow each film to take the lead on one particular theme. *Mildred Pierce* delves into the deep anxiety surrounding a mother's feminine *and* masculine gender performances in post-World War II America. *Imitation of Life* takes us out of the city and into a deceptively idyllic suburb in the 1950s, where the heteronormative family model is reconsidered. Finally, *The Exorcist* examines a mother's worst horror, losing her child. Throughout this project, I keep the present maternal experience in mind even as I examine films retroactively.

Each film represents and reflects something significant about the historical moment within which it was produced. *Mildred Pierce* is a gritty film noir that explores some of the anxieties of working mothers in post-World War II America. The film depicts a single mother protagonist as a threat and her daughter as an even bigger threat to society. *Imitation of Life* pushes motherhood back into the domestic maternal melodrama for the 1950s. This is significant because it comes at a moment when mainstream ideology would have had us believe that women belong in the home. *The Exorcist* is a product of the tumultuous time in which it was created. The film explores uncertainty about gender roles within the home during the 1970s when more mothers were working and fathers

were dealing with their own gender identity crisis in the wake of the women's liberation movement.

As my film selections make evident, single mothers show up in many film genres, even if motherhood in film has been academically and theoretically confined to maternal melodramas. I use maternal melodrama as a lens for looking at the other genres, especially its major themes. One of the biggest of these themes is mother-daughter separation. This manifests differently in other genres, but I believe that beginning with a classic maternal melodrama might reveal more about gender performance and familial structures as well. Therefore, I want to briefly examine maternal melodrama as a mode.

Ben Singer writes about examining melodrama as a mode in his chapter, "Meanings of Melodrama," in *Melodrama and Modernity*. He writes, "Rather than looking for a single essence or foundation, I prefer to analyze melodrama as a 'cluster concept,' that is, to view melodrama as a term whose meaning varies from case to case in relation to different configurations of a range of basic features or constitutive factors" (44). Among these features are pathos and overwrought emotions, which Singer believes are most closely linked to maternal melodrama. In this text, he underscores the "sensationalism" of melodrama, including its interest in pathos, overwrought emotion, and spectacle and bodily thrills. The most common sensation in melodrama is pity, but I argue, these melodramatic sensations can carry over to film noir as anxiety and horror as repulsion. Each genre's sensation asks the spectator to rethink the cinematic issue at hand, not just in the film, but in society as well. For instance, in maternal melodrama the sensation of pity makes the spectator feel the societal tragedy of the mother and daughter losing each

other. The anxiety in film noir relates to the film's narrative as well as the spectator's anxiousness about changing gender roles and women's entrance into the public sphere. The repulsion of the horror genre invites the spectator to reconsider what is proper gender performance in the home by presenting the extreme narrative situations within the film. This means that while the spectator experiences certain cinematic sensations, he/she is opening up to new possibilities in gender performance, non-heteronormative families, and mother-daughter separation.

Even though each genre has its own emotional excess, maternal melodrama still speaks to these other genres through its representations of gender performance, non-heteronormative family structures, and maternal sacrifice. For this reason, I intentionally use a classic maternal melodrama to set up the theories that will carry throughout my cinematic analysis, wherein conventional gender roles, heteronormative familial structures, and mother-daughter separation are standard features. *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) is one of the go-to films for anyone studying film and motherhood. Stella misreads perceived proper gender performances, her position as a single mother is looked down upon by the rest of the community, and she eventually gives up her daughter. Of the scholarly literature written about *Stella Dallas*, her societal position as a single mother has yet to be theorized and analyzed.

In *Stella Dallas*, a lower class woman, Stella, ambitiously tries to improve her class status by marrying Stephen, a man who was once wealthy but has lost his fortune. After she gives birth to her daughter, Laurel, Stephen abandons them. He meets another woman, Helen, who comes from an elite background. The majority of the film's

narrative is centered around a teenaged Laurel and her mother's attempts to give her daughter the material comforts the former never had. Laurel's father comes back and abruptly wedges himself between Laurel and Stella. He wants Laurel to live with him and Helen, where she can have anything money can buy. With ease, he offers Laurel what Stella has struggled to provide her. Despite the temptations of a high-class life, Laurel remains loyal to her mother, but while on vacation with her mother at a high-society resort, Laurel meets a wealthy boy. All is well until he sees Stella.

The moment where Laurel's boyfriend sees Stella, Laurel sees her mother differently and this changes the relationship between Stella and Laurel. Laurel sits down at a soda shop counter with her upper-class boyfriend and friends. Stella struts into the shop donning clanky, cheap jewelry, furs, bows and bells. Her tragicomic "performance" of upper-class femininity is immediately recognized as a social misstep by the spectator as well as Laurel's friends. They spot Stella in a mirror behind the counter. Someone laughingly says she looks like a Christmas tree. Laurel looks into the mirror to see who they are talking about and is horrified to see it is her mother. The incident starts to pull Stella and Laurel apart. It causes Stella to question her ability to mother because of the way the upper-class judges her. She realizes that she has not performed as an upper-class woman as well as she thinks.

It becomes apparent to Stella that she is preventing her daughter from having a successful future as an upper-class wife and mother. Stella permanently gives up her daughter to Stephen so Laurel can be with the boy she loves and succeed where Stella perceives she has failed. Stella cannot offer Laurel a heteronormative family like

Stephen can, and she believes that she cannot lead Laurel into the public sphere as well as Stephen can. Stella performs for Laurel as she pushes her away and tells Laurel that she wants to be “something else besides a mother.” She does not want to sacrifice Laurel, but she believes she needs to perform the sacrificial mother so that Laurel can learn how to perform as an upper-class woman like Helen, Stephen’s wife.

The film ends with Stella standing outside in the rain, watching her daughter through a window as Laurel marries into a life of which Stella will always remain on the outside. In “‘Something Else Besides a Mother’: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama,” Linda Williams explores female spectatorship for *Stella Dallas*. She writes that Stella provides a voyeuristic experience for what occurs when women try to be “something else besides a mother.” Williams writes, “The scene depicts the resolution of the film: that moment when the good hearted, ambitious, working-class floozy, Stella, sacrifices her only connection to her daughter in order to propel her into an upper-class world of surrogate family unity”(308). The film suggests to its female spectators that they choose to be a mother or something else, but not successfully both, despite how unjust this choice is for Stella and all mothers.

What is missing from Williams’ analysis is that single mothers are put in positions where they need to become “something else *and* a mother.” This “something else and mother” includes ambition in the public sphere and creating a family structure that does not fit the norm. I think this is an unexamined aspect of this film and other maternal melodramas. Stella reveals something that could produce a new structure by destabilizing

the old way of examining motherhood and by exploring the “and” of the maternal experience.

After all, the tragedy in the film’s story is that the spectator can recognize Stella’s ability to mother well and that her separation from Laurel did not need to happen. Stella has provided for Laurel both materially and emotionally, yet Stella still believes her daughter needs something more that a single mother cannot offer. This is partly due to Stella’s own desire for class and heteronormativity. The story, however, leaves us wanting Stella and Laurel to re-unite and thus challenges us with our own desire to have something else besides the heteronormative structure. The sensation this film engages is pity. The spectator views this film and feels sorry for Stella’s unfortunate situation. We recognize the tragedy and long for this story to have an alternate ending that does not require Stella and Laurel to give each other up.

This alternate ending for which we long is one that would encourage Stella’s community to accept her eccentric performances, recognize her non-heteronormative family, and keeps the bond between mother and daughter together. Pity is used to rethink these ideas outside of the film’s narrative. The film depicts a mother who puts her daughter’s needs before her own by using her resources to provide Laurel with opportunities like going on a class trip. Despite her singleness, she has raised a thoughtful daughter. Laurel considers her mother’s feelings. Laurel is careful about what she shares with her mother about her visits to her father so that she does not hurt her feelings. She cares for her mother as her mother has cared for her.

Despite her daughter's desire, Stella severs the bond between them. Stella chose to stay outside in the rain during Laurel's wedding. She is placed in a marginalized position partly because of her singleness. In "The Moving Image: Pathos and the Maternal," Mary Ann Doane examines *Stella Dallas*. She theorizes the marginalization of motherhood and how that positions maternal melodrama as a film genre. By marginalization, Doane means motherhood is perceived to be less important than the tasks belonging to the paternal. What I find interesting is that the film she examines has a *single* mother, though Doane never mentions it. I think Doane is missing a crucial part of Stella's maternal experience and her marginalization by passing over her singleness.

This marginalization needs a close examination because single mothers must be, to some degree, part of the patriarchal world. Thus, Stella's "singleness" needs to be explored as part of her marginalized maternal and cultural experience. In her discussion about Stella's marginalized maternal experience Doane states, "Stella does not commit a social error, she is that social error"(287). Her suggestion that Stella *is* the social error can directly relate to her position as single mother. I believe her singleness and gender performance might be considered threatening because they exist outside the heteronormative structure. Stella manages to challenge our beliefs in what a mother should look and act like because the spectator can sense that her story did not need to end in tragedy. We, the spectator, long for an alternate ending, one that challenges the heteronormative structure by keeping Stella and Laurel together. Her singleness challenges cultural boundaries about how we might think about motherhood in general.

Stella Dallas' marginalization could speak to the "too much" of Stella's femininity. The film illustrates a mother who misreads socially acceptable performances of femininity by wearing too much jewelry, ruffles, make-up, etc. Stella's misrecognition is what severs the bond between her and Laurel, but that should not determine her ability to mother. As this project progresses, I will show how misrecognitions of "proper" gender performances can actually be interpreted as transformations in how we think about performativity in single mothers and motherhood in general.

Stella Dallas's position as a single mother makes her believe she needs to perform high class in order to give her Laurel more class mobility. Her high class performance connects to theoretical ideas concerning gender performance. Judith Butler explores theoretical ideas about gender in her book *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* She looks at power through the ways in which gender roles are performed and assigned. Butler does not mean to imply that there are no limitations or power struggles in gender identification. She wants to argue that there are positive possibilities for negotiating gender identities in a power structure. Stella speaks to these ideas because of her marginalized gender performances. What I would like to add to Butler's theory is the idea that single mothers are in a unique position to play around with their gender performances because they necessarily occupy the public and private spheres and play both mother and father to their children. They have limitations but still need to work with and beyond heteronormative structure. When Stella gives up her daughter due to her performance, the spectator feels pity. The pity we experience as spectators causes us to rethink the gender performances of mothers because the spectator wishes that Stella did

not suffer social and class marginalization just because she wears too many ruffles. This becomes more explicit in a film like *Mildred Pierce*, where she is able to occupy both the public and private spheres because of her masculine and feminine performances.

Mildred Pierce explores a single mother's double performativity. She performs masculinity when she is in the public sphere and femininity when in the domestic sphere. The film is also a double genre, film noir and maternal melodrama. The double genre reflects Mildred's double gender performance. This duplicity also has historical significance. The post-World War II mother had been occupying the public sphere during wartime, and once the war was over, women were being asked to return to the domestic sphere. The convergence of the two genres are representative of the way single mothers may have been perceived during post-World War II American culture. Single mothers had no choice but to occupy both the public and private spheres. Unlike Stella, Mildred is able to improve her class status and become economically viable through her non-heteronormative performance. She needs to perform to have her and her business taken seriously. Her success in the business world challenges how we might think a mother needs to perform in order to be successful. Both Stella and Mildred perform in order to make their daughters' qualities of living better, but their non-traditional performances lead to non-traditional families. Mildred's family is marginalized by her successful masculine performance in the business world and Stella's family is marginalized by her failed performance of high-class femininity.¹

¹ Michael Renov, *The Double Bind of the Post-War Woman* 225-231

In a particularly heartbreaking scene from *Stella Dallas*, Stella throws a birthday party for Laurel, but one by one, the guests send their regrets until only Stella and Laurel are left. These regrets are a response to how the community feels about Stella as a mother and how she conducts herself in the public sphere. The party guests do not want to legitimize her household by attending. Their disapproving attitudes towards her home can be looked at as a marginalization that actually challenges how we think a home should look, because the spectator wants the guests to approve by showing up to the party. Again, the film makes the spectator feel pity. The spectator feels that the guests are wrong in their judgements of her family. They feel angry and heartbroken along with the characters. The experience, for the spectator, of living through Stella makes us feel her struggles and wish that they were validated by their community. Their marginalization and our sense of pity challenges the boundaries of how we think about the heteronormative model for family life.

Stella's performance in the public sphere is what leads to the party guests' cancellation. Her public performance leads to her non-heteronormative family being marginalized. The spectator pities Stella's family because we wish Laurel's friends would have come to her party and accept her mother and home. In another work by Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," she describes how gender formation is continuously being shaped by heteronormative culture. She believes that the best way to overcome the limitations of gender identity is to destabilize the way gender is categorized by dominant cultural ideologies. This idea can translate to rethinking familial structures.

Stella performs as a non-traditional mother. Her performance destabilizes cultural ideas about mothers. This also occurs in *Imitation of Life*.

Imitation of Life is a maternal melodrama about a white single mother, Lora, who meets a black single mother, Annie. They decide to live together to improve their dire economic circumstances. Lora is able to actively pursue her acting career, while Annie stays at home to perform domestic duties and care for their two girls. *Imitation of Life* is a significant study of single motherhood because of this alternative familial structure. An interracial household with two mothers and no father exists outside the heteronormative structure of 1950s American ideology. Their non-heteronormative family structure helps them move from lower-class to upper-class status. Annie enables this transition by performing as the wife. Yet when Lora gets engaged and decides to return home to play the wife, Annie dies. Her death separates her from her daughter who is not ready to give her up.

This brings us to my last theoretical concept, mother-daughter separation. For the spectator, Stella and Laurel's separation is viewed as unnecessary and tragic as well as Annie and Sarah Jane's. I believe that part of Stella's rationalization for giving up her daughter to Laurel's father is her doubt in her ability to guide Laurel out of the private sphere and into the public sphere. In Nancy Chodorow's book, *Reproduction of Mothering*, she examines why women are mothers in a post-industrial society where many mothers occupy the public sphere as well as the private. She writes, "Women's mothering reproduces itself cyclically. Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into

and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself”(7). What I find interesting about her book is her description of an adolescent girl needing a father to successfully enter into the public sphere. I do not want to simply argue that she is enforcing or advocating patriarchal ideas about the roles of mother, but I would like to add to her discussion that there are mothers who can lead their daughters into the public sphere as well as fathers. Single mothers are in a position to be both father and mother to their daughters. I believe these women can reproduce daughters who will become mothers that challenge gender roles, heteronormative familial structures, and the idea that mothers need to give up their daughters to the public and/or paternal.

Even as Laurel prepares for her wedding at the end of the film, she, and the spectator, want desperately to keep her mother close to her. Laurel hopes that Stella will come to her wedding, but Stella perceives her presence in her daughter’s life as a handicap to Laurel’s transition from lower class to higher class. This severing of ties between mothers and daughters is considered a natural separation in object-relation theory. Object-relation theory states that the mother and child must sacrifice one another to successfully enter into the public sphere through a paternal figure, but this is flawed and its weaknesses reveal themselves more prominently in the single-mother narrative who cannot give up their children to a paternal figure.

In *Imitation of Life*, the heteronormative family is restored by a mother and daughter separation, but in *The Exorcist*, the mother-daughter bond remains. The time between *Imitation of Life* and *The Exorcist* saw a shift in family structures. The domestic sphere was in chaos thanks to movements like women’s liberation. The nuclear family of the

1950s was exposed as a myth. *The Exorcist* occupies a time in American culture when there was a heightened need to figure out the changing familial roles of mothers and fathers. Single-mother households are one of these familial models that need to be “figured out.” This means that gender performance needs to be reconsidered for mothers as well as fathers. Unlike *Stella Dallas*, *Mildred Pierce*, and *Imitation of Life*, *The Exorcist* does not give the daughter to the paternal. In this film, the father is sacrificed in order to keep the mother and daughter together. *The Exorcist* unearths the changes within the American family.

This analysis of single mothers in film illustrates the way we can rethink not just the single-maternal experience, but motherhood in general. Single mothers are found in abundance in American films. I hope this work will call attention to gender performance, familial structures, and mother-daughter separation and how single mothers challenge these ideas. My selection of films illustrates how single mothers are able to perform as mother and father, single mothers can create functioning non-heteronormative homes, and single mothers are capable of leading their daughters into the public sphere. This work opens up these possibilities in thinking about single mothers in American culture that go beyond “bad” representations and reconstructs film and feminist theories to reimagine the single mother and her daughter’s experience.

CHAPTER ONE:

Double Duty: Rethinking Gender Performance and Single Mothers in Michael Curtiz's

Mildred Pierce

If gender is drag, and if it is an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate, then gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth. In effect, one way that gender gets naturalized is through being constructed as an inner psychic or physical necessity. And yet, it is always a surface sign, a signification on and with the public body that produces this illusion of an inner depth, necessity, or essence that is somehow magically, causally expressed. (Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1993), 317)

The 1945 Michael Curtiz film, *Mildred Pierce*, begins with a murder. It opens on an eerie night at a beach house. A gun is fired and Mildred's second husband, Monty, falls to his death. His last word, uttered in the utmost desperation, "Mildred," is incriminating and mystifying. Two bullets pierce a mirror behind the victim. An unidentifiable woman flees the murder scene. The first time we see Mildred, she appears threatening like a femme fatale, a deadly woman, in dark clothing, high heels, and a heavy fur coat. We, as spectators, are left to assume that Mildred committed the murder. Mildred has been constructed for us as a criminal. A police officer intervenes as Mildred is about to kill herself, further instigating

Mildred's guilt. This is the first of many times the "law" desires to intervene in this story.

The detectives are on a mission to figure out who killed Monty. They question everyone in Mildred's life, including her business partner, Ida, and her ex-husband, Burt. Mildred Pierce is an enigma to the detectives and to the spectator. We do not know how to categorize her. Is she innocent or guilty? What could drive her to murder? Something about her seems unsettling yet intriguing all at once. Mildred is finally called in for questioning by the detectives. She gets to tell her tale in her own words. The film's aesthetic changes drastically when it shifts from a detective story to Mildred's story. We are transported to the domestic world, where Mildred dons an apron while she cooks and cares for her children. This is a different woman from the presumable femme fatale the detectives have just called into question.

The aesthetic of Mildred's story, as she tells it to the detectives, does not belong to film noir, but to maternal melodrama. She is a devoted mother to her two daughters, Veda and Kay, and housewife to her husband, Burt. Idyllic life suddenly comes under attack when Burt leaves Mildred for another woman. Mildred becomes a single mother who must redefine her gender performance in order to support her family. This is the world that Mildred Pierce is struggling with. She occupies the world of the film noir because of her position in the public sphere as a career woman. She occupies the world of the maternal melodrama because of her position in the private sphere as a mother. She occupies both spheres like many mothers in post-World War II America. The result is a film that presents to the audience a woman who is transformed into a tragic femme fatale

figure. Mildred is put in a position by society and her own guilt to choose between her role as a mother and her role as a business woman, but she tries to have it all and by having it all, she risks and loses everything. Yet Mildred, the person and the film, is most interesting when she and it are explored as a woman and a genre that can be both without choosing. *Mildred Pierce* is both a detective story, a film noir, and a mother's story, a maternal melodrama.

The double genre is a reflection of Mildred's double gender performance. The film has characteristics of classic maternal melodrama from the 1930s and the 1940s film noir. This duplicity also has historical significance. Post-World War II mothers had been occupying the public sphere during wartime, and once the war was over, they were asked to return to the domestic sphere. The convergence of the two genres also is representative of the way single mothers may have been perceived during post-World War II American culture. Single mothers had no choice but to occupy both the public and private spheres. The film illustrates some of the cultural anxieties about having mothers work outside of the home. This could be because of the anxieties men had about competing with their wives for work when they returned from war.²

We, along with the detectives, are on a mission to figure Mildred out, but perhaps Mildred has more to offer if she is left partially enigmatic. *Mildred Pierce* has been analyzed as both a film noir and a maternal melodrama. Film theorists have traditionally tried to make it fit into one category or another. My goal is to examine the character and the film, Mildred, as duplicitous. I believe her position as a single mother allows her to

² Michael Renov, *The Double Bind of the Post-War Woman* 225-231

perform as masculine and feminine. These masculine and feminine traits are not only found within the character, but the film's genre choices as well. I will first examine the two genres, film noir and maternal melodrama. The film noir section will examine Mildred's role in the public sphere. The maternal melodrama section will examine her role in the domestic sphere. The convergence of these two genres are important to the exploration of Mildred's position as a single mother. She has no choice but to occupy both spheres.

This maternal position will also require a close examination of Mildred's daughter, Veda. Veda mirrors and opposes her mother throughout the film. The detectives are trying to figure out Veda as well as Mildred. *Mildred Pierce* is a film that has the potential to reconfigure the boundaries and categories used to define motherhood and gender performance. This chapter examines the possibilities in duplicitous gender performance by single mothers in that they perform a masculine version of career woman in the public sphere and a feminine version of mother in the private sphere.

Familial structures in the film noir genre are a reflection of cultural anxieties about families during the 1940s. Post World War II America wanted to hold on to the conservative familial structures that preceded men going off to war, yet these familial structures underwent a transformation while the fathers were away. It appears as though America was a nation of single mothers, who needed to be both mothers and career women. Still, there is an inclination to make Mildred either a businesswoman or a mother on the part of film scholars. Sylvia Harvey writes, "The astounding Mildred Pierce (*Mildred Pierce*, 1945), woman of the world, woman of business, and only

secondarily a mother, is a good example of th[e] disruption and displacement of the values of family life. The image of Mildred, in a masculine style of dress, holding her account books and looking away from her lover, typifies this kind of displacement”(25). Mildred might be seen as a source of confusion because of her attempt to be both a businesswoman and a mother. Perhaps that is why Harvey would like to argue that she is a businesswoman first.

I would like to argue that her position as a mother is not “secondary,” but is equally significant as businesswoman. Mildred is a single mother who must be both a career woman and a mother. Her business is like a second child to her. In fact, she does not fully embrace her business as a child until her youngest daughter, Kay, dies. Mildred as a mother and businesswoman creates a great anxiety and possibly terror within her community. The greatest of these anxieties is centered around what kind of daughter Mildred will offer up to the public sphere.

When husbands and fathers had to leave to go overseas during World War II, the state told wives and mothers that if they loved their men and their country, they should enter into the workforce. The 1940s produced a society of single mothers who had to find a balance between work and family. They needed to enter the public sphere while keeping a strong footing in the private sphere. But when the men returned from war, the message that women received was that if they loved their men and their country, they would return to the domestic sphere and let the men dominate the public sphere once again.³

³ Michael Renov, *The Double Bind of the Post-War Woman* 225-231

This time period that produced a new American film genre, the film noir. This genre is specifically interesting because of its atmosphere of paranoia. The feeling of paranoia is present in *Mildred Pierce*. The film opens with an outside shot of a beach house. It is night and the spectator is left in the dark both literally and figuratively. The use of a single-mother narrative would make sense for a 1940s film noir. This is a time of tumultuous social change. The single mother complicates the patriarchal order, which in post-war America, wanted to, once again, have a division of labor. Women were supposed to return home, but the single mother complicates the idea that a woman belongs in the home making her seem a bit devious and perfect for the film noir genre.

The film uses detectives as a way to interpret Mildred's story for us, the spectator. They are there to bring "order" to what appears to them as "chaos." The law /detectives are there to enforce the patriarchal familial model and the paternal. The detective states he knew who the killer was all along and that Mildred was a key that only needed to be turned for everything to fall back into place and return to order. This return to order means that Mildred must give up her position in the public sphere to return back to the home where she presumably belongs.

Film noir is a gritty paranoid genre that usually deals with some sort of crime. It makes use of German Expressionism in its lighting and technique in order to create a dark mood. *Mildred Pierce* uses of elongated shadows to give the feeling that there is something scary lurking just around the corner. This is illustrated in a scene where Mildred lures her business associate and admirer, Wally, to the beach house to frame him for the murder. Wally is trapped in the house and there are shadows lurking everywhere

he turns. The spectator feels Wally's anxiety and paranoia of not knowing what might be just around the corner. This fear and paranoia could be a societal reaction to Mildred's ability to mother and run a business. Mildred is put into a position where she must have an economically viable job and be a mother at the same time. Her duplicity causes fear in those who might prefer to have mothers easily definable and the use of film noir techniques illustrates this. *Mildred Pierce* is rich in its use of duplicities. Restaurants, shadows, and mirrors all serve as a reflection to Mildred.

Mildred is left with the harsh reality that she needs to find a way to provide for her daughter. She has little work experience outside of the home and the only job available to her is waitressing in a diner. This is her way into the public sphere. As she works in the diner, she learns about running an efficient business and decides to open her own restaurant. The restaurant, "Mildred's," is a culmination of the person, Mildred. She needs to enter into the business world to support her family. She uses her knowledge of the domestic world to make that transition. Mildred and her business make great vehicles for exploring the duplicity of being gendered masculine and feminine. Her business is only a success when she allows the boundaries of public and private sphere to mingle with each other. The single mother needs to retain the role of mother while taking on the new role of father.

The difficulty of this situation comes from society, where there is a need to recategorize and create boundaries. Judith Butler writes about creating new gender boundaries in her article "Imitation and Gender Subordination." She is writing about homosexuality in a heterosexual cultural, but I believe some of her ideas can relate to the

single-mother experience and can be useful in examining Mildred's masculine / feminine performances. Butler writes, "I'm permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble. In fact, if the category were to offer no trouble, it would cease to be interesting to me: it is precisely the *pleasure* produced by the instability of those categories"(308). What Butler seems to be saying is that categories, to some extent, are a necessary evil in society, but she believes it is still important to trouble these boundaries and that destabilizing societal categories can be a pleasurable process and is just as necessary as the boundaries themselves. I believe Mildred is a character who "troubles" categories. Her presence is both feminine and masculine. She is both a mother and a businesswoman. She unsettles the heteronormative structure. I, following Butler, believe that this is what makes her interesting as a single mother. The film positions her as an enigmatic femme fatale who needs to be figured out and forced back into a recognizable and socially acceptable category. This need for categorization extends to her daughter Veda.

Veda is like a shadow, representing Mildred's dark double. She is the true femme fatale of this story and her position as a deadly woman calls into question Mildred's ability to mother well. Veda uses those close to her for her own selfish gains. She tricks a boy from a rich family into believing she is pregnant so she can blackmail the family. She is willing to spend all of her mother's money but belittles her mother for working hard. She is ungrateful and always wants more than what she has been given. Veda steals her mother's husband, Monty, and then murders him. Mildred still wants to protect

her. But by the end of the story Mildred and Veda become so intertwined with each other that it will take the law to untangle and separate the two. This intertwined relationship is represented in the *mise-en-scène*'s use of the mirror through the film. The mirror creates doubles. The use of the mirror as *mise-en-scène*, mother-daughter separation, and emotional excess point to the film's other generic mode, maternal melodrama.

Veda reflects Mildred's private sphere to society. Mildred has been criticized for being too nurturing and too distant. She can be seen as sacrificing too much for her daughter on the one hand. On the other hand, she is criticized for not being involved enough because she is a prosperous businesswoman. There does not seem to be a consensus amongst theorists as to whether or not Mildred is a "good enough mother." D.W. Winnicott explains what good enough mother means, "There is no possibility whatever for an infant to proceed from the pleasure principle to the reality principle or towards and beyond primary identification, unless there is a good-enough mother. The good enough "mother" (not necessarily the infant's own mother) is one who makes active adaptation to the infant's needs, an active adaptation that gradually lessens"(13). What Winnicott seems to be saying is that a good enough mother needs to let go of her child to some extent so that the child can develop her own identity that is separate from her mother's. If we take this idea of what makes a good enough mother, then most mothers, including Stella, in maternal melodramas can be considered good enough mothers. But what about Mildred?

Mildred tries to loosen her bond with her daughter and even goes away, yet she returns home to Veda. She tries to make Veda survive on her own. Veda becomes a

singer at a bar to make a living. When Mildred discovers what Veda has been working in a sleazy bar, she wants to save her from demeaning herself instead of letting her struggle on her own. Mildred buys a lavish home and marries Monty as a way to bring Veda back to her. She makes Veda too comfortable and she becomes dependent on her mother. Veda takes her mother's money and lover and her identity becomes intertwined with Mildred's. This results in Mildred and Veda seeming dangerously close and Mildred's ability to mother well is called into question by the law. Perhaps the crime the detectives wish to investigate is not the murder of Monty, but how Veda turned out to be a femme fatale. The mother becomes the primary suspect. Her duplicity as a mother is under investigation. Both Mildred and Veda are implicated in the murder of Monty and this is represented with the mirror at the murder scene.

The mirror is a crucial part of this narrative; it moves Mildred out of the film noir world and into the classic maternal melodrama world. Mildred and Veda both reflect and repel each other's mirror images. The pierced mirror also foreshadows the inevitable separation of Mildred and Veda. Film theorists like Mary Ann Doane and Linda Williams have analyzed the mirrors and mothers in the classic maternal melodrama, *Stella Dallas*.

Both Mildred and Stella come from modest and economically deprived upbringings. They both wish to give their daughters opportunities and economic comforts they never had. They see a reflection of themselves when they look at their daughters. The use of a mirror as a metaphor has a very different feel in each of the films. The mirror reflects something pathetic about Stella's position as a single mother in *Stella Dallas*, but in *Mildred Pierce*, the mirror reflects anxiety about her position as a single

mother and what kind of daughter she offers up to the community. In a mirror scene in *Stella Dallas* in which Laurel, Stella's daughter, begins to see her mother differently after spending time with her father and his new family. Stella is applying facial cream to her face and Laurel stands behind and watches. Laurel describes how beautiful her father's new girlfriend is and Stella finds this threatening. The mirror begins to divide the mother and daughter even as it reflects the one to the other.

The mirror also divides and unites Mildred and Veda. To understand Mildred is to understand Veda. Yet both are shrouded in suspicion and uncertainty. In her article, "The Moving Image," Mary Ann Doane writes, "The mirror, site of identity and narcissism, initiates the disjunction between mother and daughter"(288). In the film, the mirror is used to connect mother and daughter to the murder of Monty, but it is this event that also leads to their permanent separation. The separation of Stella and Laurel feels tragic and unnecessary, but when the law separates Mildred from Veda there is a sense of relief and disappointment for the spectator. Relief and disappointment might seem like a contradiction, but we are happy that Mildred is finally freed of Veda at the same moment we wish Veda could have appreciate her mother. Yet the spectator has hope that Mildred might be able to nourish her other child, the restaurant, in Veda's absence. Despite the negativity of Mildred and Veda's separation, the spectator still hopes that Mildred's transformation in duplicity will remain even once Veda is gone.

At the heart of most classic melodramas is this struggle for mother and daughter to break away from one another. The mother usually sacrifices her daughter, or the daughter sacrifices the mother, so that the daughter can have a successful entrance into

society. Mildred occupies this world of maternal melodrama as well. She is caught in a bond with her daughter. Mildred will do anything for her daughter, even take the blame for her murder. She is a sacrificial and caring mother to her daughter, but they are separated at the end of the film. The patriarchal structure needs to break the mother and daughter bond order can be restored. In *Mildred Pierce*, the law becomes the paternal that severs the bond between mother and daughter. The need to put into order and categorize is what should be reconsidered.

The film's structure might be considered excessive, or too much, in its attempt to be both film noir and maternal melodrama. Yet this excess is what makes Mildred's duplicitous performance interesting and leads to transformative ways to look at single mothers. What is most frightening to the paternal order is the film's and Mildred's surplus. This surplus comes from her attempt to be both mother and father. She creates a counter-ideology just by existing. It seems what should be more important to analyze is not what, or who, Mildred lacks, but rather what she has in excess. She lacks a husband for the vast majority of the film. Mildred spent most of her life lacking in social comforts and wealth, too. Once her husband, Burt, leaves her and the girls, Mildred is forced to take on excessive responsibilities because of her lack of a husband. This excess leads to Mildred's excessively masculine performance, multitude of restaurants, and accumulation of wealth. In other words, Mildred's lack of a husband causes her to be or have "too much" in other areas of her life.

Mildred Pierce might also be described as being too much in that it is a film noir and a maternal melodrama. As Cook points out, that *Mildred Pierce* is an excess of being

both a “Woman’s Picture” and a “Man’s Film.” The film’s “Woman’s Picture” and “Man’s Film” is illustrated through Mildred’s ambiguous gender performance. Mildred, the character, partakes in a sexually ambiguous and excessive performance. She can be feminine at home and masculine in the work place. Since she is a single mother, she must perform as mother and father. Her performance might be seen as a split, as Cook, suggests, however I think this film could be examined without trying to separate masculine / feminine, film noir / maternal melodrama, etc. It seems as though film theorists have approached Mildred the same way the detectives in the film do. They try to separate her and put her in one category or another. Yet this film could provide more insight into single motherhood and motherhood in general if the duplicity were examined as creating new categories for mothers rather than trying to place her into an already existing category.

Traditionally, *Mildred Pierce* has been theorized as a woman who must choose between being a mother or career woman, but there is still room to interpret the film’s duplicitousness as way to create a family that counters what is considered normal in a positive way. The film structure itself does not choose between film noir and maternal melodrama, so why should Mildred have to choose between motherhood and a career? I believe her position as a single mother is overlooked by film theorists. If they examine this aspect of her motherhood then they would see that she lacks the luxury of being either one or the other.

Although the law chooses for her, I think an alternative reading of the film suggests that her duplicity is a valid choice. In her article, “Woman’s Place: The Absent

Family of Film Noir,” Harvey writes, “This terrible absence of family relations allows for the production of the *seeds* of counter-ideologies. The absence or disfigurement of the family both calls attention to its own lack and to its own deformity, and may be seen to encourage the consideration of alternative institutions for the reproduction of social life. Despite the ritual punishment of acts of transgression, the vitality with which these acts are endowed produces an excess of meaning which cannot finally be contained. Narrative resolutions cannot recuperate their subversive significance”(31). What Harvey seems to suggest is that families that might at first appear to be negative might in fact be drawing attention to the possibilities of creating new kinds of families. Single mother families might at first glance seem to be negative, but single mothers like Mildred reveal that their duplicity is not negative, but provides a new way to be a mother. Mildred seems to be a place of counter-ideology. Although the film draws attention to her lack and excess and may make her family appear monstrous, she, and the film, call attention to worn out beliefs about mothers and families. Mildred is able to be successful when she does not try to fit into traditional family ideologies. Her real problems arise when she marries her second husband, Monty, and buys into patriarchal ideas about class by purchasing a home and other luxuries that she cannot afford.

Mildred is most successful when she is alone and duplicitous. This draws uncertainty to the presumably “happy” ending. The film ends with Mildred pulled away from her daughter, her business is taken away, and she must return back to the private sphere. The law / society might have put her back where they believe she belongs, but at the risk of her gender possibilities as a mother and businesswoman. The ending seems

more like a punishment rather than salvation. The true crime of the film is its attempt to cling to outworn boundaries and categories about mothers. It negates the potential of Mildred's duplicitous performance.

Like Stella Dallas, Mildred seems to have created a social error that needs correcting in the eyes of the law. Perhaps we could interpret the film as a cautionary tale for women who try to be something else *and* a mother. Mildred is stripped of her potential because she does not fit into the model of what a family and a mother should look and act like. The ending suggests that Mildred as mother, businesswoman, and masculine gender performance is a wrong that needed to be made right. This end is unsatisfactory because of the way the paternal law forces categorization onto Mildred and strips her of her power as a mother and a businesswoman. She performs at her best when she was a single mother, in control of her own private and public sphere. Her performativity is best when it is duplicitous.

CHAPTER TWO:

Playing House: Re-imagining Familial Structures in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*

In discussing *Imitation of Life* more than a decade after its release, Sirk compared his narrative strategy to classical Greek drama in which “there is no real solution of the predicament the people in the play are in, just the *deus ex machina*, which is now called ‘the happy end.’” Sirk’s capacity to articulate the nature of these social conditions that fashion our individual, familial, and social identities. He offers an ambiguous resolution, so we in the audience can take it in a variety of ways. (Thomas Schatz, “The Family Melodrama,” 1991, 166).

In Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959), the beginning credits show false gems / prisms falling like tears across the screen. They fill up the screen to lyrics repeating, “An imitation of life.” From the beginning, Sirk signals to the spectator that this film is about a family imitating. But what is being imitated? *Imitation of Life* is a maternal melodrama about a white struggling single mother, Lora, who meets a black struggling single mother, Annie. They decide to live together to improve their economic circumstances. Lora is able to actively pursue her acting career, while Annie stays at home to perform the domestic duties and care for their two girls, Susie and Sarah Jane. The film follows these women as their lives change dramatically over a decade. Lora and Annie *are* imitating a nuclear family, but does that cast suspicion on the validity of their family or the heteronormative family structure they are imitating? I believe this film is drawing attention to the latter. This is important because it suggests that *all* families, including patriarchal heteronormative ones, are a performance.

The beginning credits of false gems / prisms signals to the spectator that *Imitation of Life* is about a family performing as a heteronormative family. Sirk re-imagines the traditional nuclear family as an imitation and a myth. He draws our attention to the artifice of the familial structure through Lora's paternal performance and Annie's race and sacrificial mother performance. Annie and Lora realize that it would be advantageous to their situation if they lived together. Annie would take care of the domestic duties and the children, and Lora would be free to pursue a career in the public sphere. The women form a family with a mother and father. This relationship of the white single mother taking the paternal position, while the black single mother is in the subordinate maternal position has definite racial and gender implications that will be explored later in this chapter. For now, I would like to suggest that these women create a home that works for them. They are able to improve their class status and give their daughters more opportunities than they could have on their own. I believe this film speaks to the single-mother experience in the way it challenges what a family should look like.

Imitation of Life ends with a funeral. In the last scene, Sarah Jane clings to her mother's, Annie's, coffin and begs her mother to forgive her for rejecting her. This sad, yet powerful moment, is hastily pushed aside by the film's attempt to create a "happy ending" rather than open up new possibilities as a result of Sarah Jane's realization. Lora comes to comfort Sarah Jane. They, Lora, Sarah Jane, Susie, and Steve, Lora's fiance, drive off into the future as a heteronormative nuclear family. However, this ending

lessens the power of the rest of the film, in which Annie and Lora raise their daughters together outside of the nuclear family.

It seems as though Sirk would like to suggest that the traditional nuclear family is an imitation and a myth through his characters and cinematic style. Sirk draws our attention to the artifice of the heteronormative familial structure by drawing our attention to the artifice of his film, including overacting by the actresses and the use of Technicolor. Maternal melodrama is a great vehicle to draw our attention to performance in the domestic sphere, since it is the film genre most often associated with the domestic sphere. The 1950s witnessed a rebirth of the maternal melodrama and might be associated with the era's strong emphasis on what the American nuclear family should look like. speaks to its historical moment in which the suburban nuclear family was a relatively new invention. In her book, *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz explains how the 1950s family was a myth. She suggests that the idea of a nuclear family with a mother who stays at home and a father who goes to work was a historical fluke in comparison to familial structures in the past that had familial and communal links beyond mothers and fathers. Coontz describes the unusual wealth from World War II that caused a shift from urban dwellers to suburban homes. This shift also put more emphasis on buying material goods. The housewife emerged as something new. Yet despite the nostalgia some might have for the 1950s family, this model left out certain families due to class and race. Sirk intentionally uses a maternal melodrama to explore flaws within the 1950s family. I will be examine the performativity of Lora and Annie and how they draw attention to the flaws of the 1950s heteronormative family. Lora illustrates some of the

themes in *Mildred Pierce*. Lora, like Mildred, must perform a version of herself that is feminine in the domestic sphere and masculine in the public sphere. Annie speaks to maternal melodrama issues that *Stella Dallas* explores. I will discuss how Annie performs a sacrificial mother like Stella.⁴

There might be some significance that the film begins with Lora and Annie meeting in 1948. This is the post-World War II era during which Mildred, from *Mildred Pierce*, struggled with the conflicting societal message about working and motherhood in which women were told before the war to leave the domestic sphere and after the war they were told to return to their domestic duties. Lora and Annie are struggling with this as well. In her chapter, “The Three-way Mirror,” Lucy Fischer writes, “Given the specter of world combat, it seems significant that Lora Meredith has no husband- as though the narrative must replay the situation of men away....The patriarchal void allows Lora to work without conflict”(14). Although Fischer seems to suggest that there is no conflict for Lora because she must work since there is not a husband at home. Yet, Lora struggles with becoming the husband and father of the family. She doubts herself throughout the film and asks Annie if having a career is worth it or should she give up. Lora cannot give up because she is the family provider. I believe this conflict of work and mothering becomes quite important once the film’s narrative ushers us into the 1950s. The femme fatale of the 1940s film noir was replaced by the ambitious career woman in the 1950s maternal melodrama. In the 1940s, women were encouraged to work and put their children into daycare, but the 1950s saw a shift in these values. The single mother,

⁴ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* 23-29

however, had no choice. She had to be the career woman in addition to a mother.

Imitation of Life explores this duplicity through Lora. Even though it was made in the 1950s, Lora's struggles are similar to those of Mildred's in *Mildred Pierce*.

In *Mildred Pierce*, Mildred struggles with her femininity and her masculinity and her career and her mothering. Her duplicity is ultimately what makes her lose her daughter to the paternal law. *Imitation of Life*, however, does not provide us with a duplicitous character, but splits these qualities into two people, Lora and Annie. Lora's career as a performer places her in the public sphere. Not only does she literally perform for a living, but she also performs as the paternal. The spectator recognizes that she does this so that their family can imitate a heteronormative family. This imitation also leads to their upward social mobility. Her success allows them to buy a big house in the suburbs as well as provide their daughters with the finer things in life like horseback riding lessons and the best education. Her need for such class mobility is also due to her imitating the desires of a patriarchal class structure, which makes it seem necessary to have a father figure in order to gain such material success.

Lora's performance is similar to Mildred's. Mildred also believed that through a lucrative career she could buy her way into higher class. She did this for her daughter, Veda. Yet Veda and Susie both seem to need something more. It is as if they are trying to tell their mothers that there is something missing. Susie tells her mother that she did not want all of these things and that she would prefer to have her mother's time. She wants something else from her mother that Lora's attempts at patriarchal success cannot offer. This "something missing" could be drawing attention to the heteronormative structure as

an imitation that does not allow the inclusion of non-traditional families. Lora's performance draws attention to this. At one point in the film, she is backstage with Annie and tells Annie that she feels like something is missing. She wonders if it might be a husband and contemplates marrying the playwright she is dating. Annie asks her if she loves him and she says no. I think it is significant that this scene takes place backstage, as if Sirk is presenting us with a moment where Lora is questioning her own performance. Maybe what is missing for Lora is her desire to play the maternal role in addition to the father role. This desire could allow the spectator to recognize single mother families as a way to fill that missing role. Lora is not simply imitating the performance of men, but she maintains her femininity while performing as the husband / father. This might also point to her desire to be something more than a career woman. Yet soon after this backstage revelation, she returns to her role as an ambitious actress.

Annie's and Lora's positions as single mothers means that they must imitate a two parent, mother and father, household to perform as a heteronormative family. Sirk draws our attention to the performance. In a scene in which Lora has just finished performing on stage, she meets with Annie to discuss their plans to move out to the suburbs. Sirk draws attention to cinematic performance by having Lora not look at Annie while she goes over their plans. Instead, Lora looks beyond the camera. For the spectator, it gives the impression that there must be something outside of this film because we ask ourselves, what is she looking at? What Sirk could be illustrating is the way in which all families imitate and perform. It makes the spectator aware that this is a literal

performance even while Lora performs in other ways, including her masculine performance as the family patriarch.

Once they move out to the suburbs, Lora wants to fill their home with as much stuff as she possibly can. When she is asked why she spends so much money on so many things, Lora replies that she needs it because it is part of the image she has created for herself. Sirk focuses on the imitation and performativity in families in his *mise-en-scene* and use of Technicolor. One of the key characteristics of maternal melodramas is their use of excess. This can mean an excessive display of emotions and tears or, in Sirk's case, excessive amounts of stuff, especially furniture. Sirk not only drowns us in these women's tears, but also the amount of things he packs into every scene. He uses saturated colors that do not even appear to exist in the real world. This is illustrated in a scene where Lora and Annie have just moved into their home in the suburbs. The colors are more vivid than those in the urban setting. Lora is unpacking and delivery men are coming into the home with new furniture. The *mise-en-scene* is packed with stuff. Annie asks Lora if they can afford to have all of this and Lora replies that they cannot afford not to. The spectator can recognize the artifice in this scene with the use of Technicolor and excessive stuff.

In maternal melodrama, excess is found in its use of too much emotion, but it could also speak to the characters' and actors' excessive performances. Lora performs to the point of excess in her acting career and her paternal role by providing too much. She cannot seem to stop herself from buying stuff for her home and for her daughter. Annie also performs by performing a mother and housewife who is too sacrificial. She is

similar to Stella in *Stella Dallas*. Stella sacrifices her daughter because she believes it is the best for Laurel. Stella, like Annie, performs as a sacrificial mother.. She pretends as though she does not want Laurel to push her away from her and towards her father.

Annie sacrifices her relationship for similar reasons. Annie and her daughter, Sarah Jane, endure marginalization due to her race. When Annie is dying, she has a similar performance to Lora's. She tells Lora that she wants almost everything to go to Sarah Jane, even though Sarah Jane rejects and ignores her mother. Annie looks off into the distance, beyond the camera, while she tells Lora her last wishes. This scene also seems to signal to the spectator that Annie is performing. Sirk wants the spectator to recognize that she, like Stella, seems to be performing as a sacrificial mother so that her daughter can gain acceptance where she could not. Laurel is able to perform as upper class without her mother. Sarah Jane is able to perform as a white girl without her mother. The spectator wishes that these sacrificial performances did not have to occur. In *Stella Dallas*, we see that Laurel wants to keep her mother close and she, and the spectator, are truly heartbroken that her mother does not come to her wedding. We identify with Laurel's pain. While we watch Annie die, we wish that Sarah Jane would be there with her mother. The spectator wants this because we recognize what Sarah Jane discovers at the end of the film, that Sarah Jane should not have severed her bond with her mother.

In a way, Annie and Stella are accepting the patriarchal order by their actions of sacrifice. It is not Laurel who wants to sacrifice her mother, but Stella. Stella chooses to sacrifice her daughter because she believes the patriarchal order will work for Laurel

where it did not work for her. Annie seems to accept her place as a sacrificial mother. Annie, like Stella, sacrifices her own desires and hopes for her daughter's success. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow writes, "A girl alternates between total rejection of a mother who represents infantile dependence and attachment to her, between identification with anyone other than her mother and feeling herself her mother's double and extension. Her mother often mirrors her preoccupations"(138). What Chodorow suggests is that daughters go from total dependence upon their mother to total rejection. Annie feels this from Sarah Jane. When Sarah Jane was younger, she was completely dependent on her mother. Annie now feels her daughter pulling away from her. Sarah Jane is not just trying to pull away from her mother, but her race too. She seems to want to find identification someplace other than Annie, perhaps she desires to identify with Lora in her attempt to pass for white. Annie does not seem to stand in Sarah Jane's way as Sarah Jane attempts to pass for white. Sarah Jane tries to pull away from her mother at the same time she can never fully breakaway because she is always there to remind her that she is black. This is significant because Annie is always there to remind Sarah Jane that she is performing as a white girl. Her mother is a constant reminder of the performance.

This passing for white is illustrated in a scene where Annie goes to Sarah Jane's school to bring her lunch. Annie is unaware that Sarah Jane has been imitating a white girl at school. Annie's presence shatters Sarah Jane's performance, and she is no longer able to pass for white. This makes Annie feel guilty for preventing her daughter from getting the same educational treatment a white student would receive. This illustrate the

racial stratification that occurs inside and outside the home. The spectator recognizes that she should not feel guilty and that these patriarchal institutions should change.

The family is marginalized by its interracial component. Annie and Sarah Jane's race cause a class and racial stratification within the home. This is further enforced by the division of labor. Annie's position as a poor, black, single mother limits her prospects for gainful employment. Annie becomes Lora's housewife. They have a shared interest in each other's daughters. Annie is not only mother to Sarah Jane but also plays mother to Lora's daughter, Susie. Annie performs as if she has no desire but to be in a position of servitude. Sirk's depiction of Annie almost appears like a black "mammy." Yet, I do not think he is trying to romanticize such an idea. I think he strips her of any personal desire for a reason. He seems to suggest that these sacrificial roles within the family are part of the imitation of heteronormative familial structure. Annie illustrates that this sacrifice is not only hierarchical by gender, but also by race.

The film was released in 1959, a moment in history when the civil rights movement was gaining momentum, yet the film presents us with an image of a black woman who has no ambitions of her own and is more than happy to sacrifice her own desires so that Lora can be successful. I believe Sirk is linking up racial plight with housewife duties. This is not to say that gender performance and race should be treated synonymously. In Judith Butler's book, *Gender Trouble*, she explains how gender and race sometimes become interchangeable when discussing the hierarchy of gender performance. She believes that the theory of performativity cannot be simply transposed onto race. Butler argues that gender performativity might be a useful tool in thinking

about the way race is constructed within the heteronormative hierarchy along with gender. This hierarchy is illustrated in Annie and Lora's home. Annie and Lora are not equals. Annie is put into the position of wife/mother because she is black. Lora is capable of performing as the husband / father because she is white. It implies that racial roles are a performance too and not natural roles. This adds another dimension to the marginalization within the film that a single mother should be able to perform as both mother and father. Yet despite their unequal treatment, Annie has something to say about the marginalized position of the single mother. She, like Stella, seems to be placed in a societal position that does not want to accept her. For Stella, this was due to her class status. For Annie, it is because of her race and class status. Both mothers feel as though they must sacrifice their daughters in order for their lives to be better.⁵

Annie is the mother who, like in all maternal melodramas, must sacrifice her daughters so that she can enter into the public sphere and symbolic order. Lora could provide this bridge for the girls, but the film ultimately displaces her as a significant bridge to the public sphere. Lora replaces Annie and Steve, Lora's fiance, becomes the patriarch. Lora has been placed outside of the domestic sphere in order to provide for her family, while Annie remained at home. Where Lora appears too ambitious, Annie appears too sacrificial. The two become polarizations for mothering. However, I believe Sirk is presenting us with these two extremes to illustrate how they might be foils for the other. Sirk might be asking us to combine these two mothers and think about a new kind of mother. One that is not too cold or too emotional and one that is not too self-serving or

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* xv-xvii

too self-sacrificing. The single mother has to find a way to reconcile these, but traditional gender roles within the family usually asks one parent to embody one or the other. Lora is in a position at the end of the film to take on the role and responsibilities that would normally be assigned to both the father and mother. But the film does not allow Lora to take on the duality. This leaves the spectator to feel that the ending has missed an opportunity to build a family in which a mother can be the father too. The spectator has watched Lora perform as the father and it is hard for us to accept that she would give up that role.

The question that seems to be at the heart of the film is, which of these roles should these mothers perform? I believe the film asks the spectator to recognize Annie's death and Lora's return to housewife as unsatisfactory. Annie and Lora raised two girls to be independent and capable of surviving on their own. Sarah Jane leaves home to seek a career as a performer and Susie prepares to leave for college. To suggest that Lora must return home, seems to suggest that the family life they had was a rehearsal and now they are taking up the roles they were born to fulfill. The spectator watches this role reversal and can recognize that it is silly to send Lora back home to care for her adult daughters. If the goal is to suggest that Lora and Annie's family is invalid because it is an imitation of a nuclear family, then it only shrouds the heteronormative family in more suspicion. This is because we distrust the film's ending. There is no way the spectator believes that this family will work. This suspicion is due to how ridiculous it would be to send Lora back into the home after having a successful career and a grown daughter. Our suspicion of Sirk's ending opens the spectator up to the possibility that this family could still go on

performing successfully without Steve. The spectator can recognize that Lora does not need Steve and Annie does not have to die. This film challenges the spectator to rethink the nuclear family, even if the film's narrative suggests otherwise. *Imitation of Life* reimagines gender performance, race relations, and mother-daughter separation as it is structured within the nuclear family.

The film's ending is supposed to be read as a "happy ending." Lora is getting married, Sarah Jane can pass for white, even though she briefly stopped performing and accepted her mother's and her own race, and Susie will now have her mother's undivided attention. Yet, for the spectator, this is an unfulfilling end. They seemed to have missed the opportunity to create a new kind of family. The single mother is one such attempt at a new kind of family. The single mother, in many cases, is in a position where she must be her child's mother and father. Sirk offers some hint of this. He splits the two parental roles between Annie and Lora, but when Annie dies, Lora must become the housewife. There is another way of reading this transition in which Lora might take up her maternal role in addition to the paternal role that she has already been performing. Annie and Lora's imitation of a heteronormative family illustrates alternative ways to perform familial roles. I believe the film asks the spectator to recognize the ending, in which Lora becomes a housewife, as unsatisfactory. In doing so, we can begin to construct a new familial model.

In that final funeral scene, where we see Lora, Susie, Sarah Jane, and Steve drive away, perhaps there is another death in addition to Annie's. If we look at the excessiveness of the film as a way to rethink cultural issues, then the cultural issue being

explored in this film is the family. I believe the ending suggests the death of the 1950s nuclear family. As we watch the drive away, we know that the civil rights movement, women's liberation, and youth movements lurk just around the corner and are about to give the American family a violent jolt.

CHAPTER THREE:

Mothers Becoming Fathers: Rethinking Mother-Daughter Separation in William

Friedkin's *The Exorcist*

At a time when the mythology of our dominant culture can no longer resolve the social contradictions exposed by experience, the nuclear family has found itself in a nuclear crisis.... Not only has the bourgeois distinction between family members and alien others, between private home and public space, between personal microcosm and sociopolitical macrocosm, been exposed as a myth, but also the family itself has been exposed as a cultural construction, as a set of signifying, as well as significant, practices. The family and its members are seen, therefore, as subject to the frightening, but potentially liberating, semiotic processes of selection and combination-and their order, meaning, and power are perceived as open to transformation, dissolution, and redefinition (Vivian Sobchack, "Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange," 1987, 146-147).

The Exorcist (1973), directed by William Friedkin, begins at an archaeological dig site in the Middle East. Father Mirren, who is both an archaeologist and a religious practitioner, has just unearthed a peculiar object of a minor Mesopotamian deity, Pazuzu. This peculiar object intrigues and scares Mirren. He chooses to leave the Middle East to return "home." Yet "home" has some unsettling peculiarities to be unearthed, too. The film takes us out of the exotic Middle East and into the temporary home of actress, Chris MacNeil, and her twelve-year-old daughter, Regan, in Washington, D. C. They appear to be a happy family, but menacing music suggests that something dark is about to be unearthed within this home. Regan acts out in peculiar and disturbing ways after

becoming possessed by an even more peculiar illness. Chris seeks outside help in the medical and psychiatric communities, but when their only suggestion is to put Regan in an asylum, Chris decides to find an alternative method to deal with her daughter's possession--an exorcism by Father Mirren and another, younger priest, Father Karras.

The Exorcist can be critiqued as an archaeological dig of the American family. This includes a single mother family like Chris's. Chris undergoes her own change as she seeks alternative paternal figures to help her with Regan. Chris is a powerful actress who has been able to provide for her daughter financially without any help from a husband. Yet she seems to not realize her own power in the home. She is a doting and loving mother who performs as a feminine mother. She is capable of performing as a masculine and feminine mother, but has not fully accepted this duality. Regan seems to notice this possibility in Chris, but Chris tries to seek out surrogate fathers. *The Exorcist* is about a mother's journey to become her daughter's mother and father.

The film begins with a single mother who is uncertain about playing both mother and father to Regan. She reaches out to Regan's biological father, the paternal realm of medicine, and finally religious fathers. Chris's journey in dealing with Regan's possession leads her to accept duality in her parental role and brings her closer to her daughter rather than pulling them apart. Regan seems to show her mother that neither Regan nor Chris need a paternal figure the way Chris seems to think. This chapter is an excavation into how Chris and Regan hold onto each other despite the horrors they face, and what they have to say about familial changes in a seemingly chaotic moment in the history of the American family.

The women's rights movement challenged some of the stagnant ideologies about women's roles in the home. In her book, *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz writes, "Even after the revival of the women's rights movement in the mid-1960s, most of the women who pioneered new marital, fertility, and work patterns were not in revolt against mainstream culture"(162). Chris is one of these women who wants new familial structures, yet still clings to wanting a traditional patriarch for Regan. *The Exorcist* occupies this time in history when women were advocating for changes at work and at home even as they tried to maintain traditional values such as Chris's original instinct to ignore her capability to be Regan's mother and father and hand off the latter responsibilities to surrogate fathers. Chris is an independent single mother who has a successful career, yet at least initially, she still longs to have a traditional paternal figure for Regan. Despite her independence, Chris struggles to reconcile these new ideas about gender roles that a mother can be masculine and a father can be feminine. This is a common struggle for a single mother who must find a way to be both.

The decade leading up to *The Exorcist* witnessed the falling apart of the mythological nuclear family and required reconsideration of what makes a family and the gender roles within the home. In a film like *Imitation of Life* (1959), Lora took up her role as the housewife and the heteronormative family was seemingly restored in end. *The Exorcist* occupies a time in American culture where there is a heightened need to figure out the family, especially gender performances in the home. Single-mother households are one of these familial models that need to be "figured out" because these mothers are asked to perform in non-traditional ways. Unlike Stella Dallas, who pushed her daughter

away so she could have the upward class mobility to which Stella did not have access because of her upper class performance; Mildred Pierce, who was separated from her daughter by paternal law because of her masculine performance; or Annie in *Imitation of Life*, who was separated from her daughter by death and her sacrificial mother performance, Chris in *The Exorcist* does not lose maternal power to the paternal. In this film, the father is sacrificed in order to keep the mother and daughter together.

Chris is presented as a career-driven woman, the film suggests that she might have been responsible for pushing Regan's father away, even as she desperately tries to get him back. Chris feels as though she needs a father to help Regan enter into the public sphere, not realizing she has the potential to do it herself. This is traditionally viewed in object-relation theories as the moment the daughter begins to let go of her mother in favor of her father. In *Stella Dallas*, this transition was fulfilled by Stella giving up Laurie to her father. In *Mildred Pierce*, Mildred could not let go of Veda so the "law" stepped in and forcefully separated mother and daughter. In *Imitation of Life*, Annie died in order for Steve to take his place as father and complete the transition for Susie and Sarah Jane. Chris seeks alternative paternal figures after Regan's father shows little interest. She first seeks out the medical profession to step in and then the religious fathers. When they fail or die, she is able to reconcile her own struggles and become Regan's mother and father. This struggle is significant because she is a single mother, and single mothers have to reconcile their internal struggle to play mother and father.

It is not a coincidence that the demon only enters into Regan after she hears her mother arguing on the phone while she tries to get in touch with Regan's father who has

abandoned her and Chris. In *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed states, “Mother and daughter exist in what appears to be a happy family situation. Whatever tension exists in the family emanates from the figure of the mother, who has clearly not resolved her relationship with her estranged husband”(33). Regan is raised by a single mother who has made a lucrative career for herself as a movie actress. She plays the role of mother and father to Regan, but seems reluctant to recognize it until Regan shows it to her. Although she is successful in her chosen career, she still feels the need to have a paternal figure. She feels as though she cannot quite fill in the gap that Regan’s father has left. This is illustrated in Chris’s attempt to reach out to Regan’s father. Chris is angered by his lack of interest in their daughter’s twelfth birthday. She yells profanities trying to get him on the phone. This behavior might point to her masculinity that she has yet to fully embrace. Regan overhears her frustration, and the next time we see Regan, she starts to show signs of her possession. When Regan reveals disturbing symptoms of an unexplainable illness, Chris does what any mother would do, she takes Regan to see a doctor. She, like Stella and Mildred, feels as though she must defer to the paternal--in this case, the medical and psychiatric and, later, religious communities. She reluctantly allows them to do tests on Regan, even though she senses they will not help. Chris’s inability to recognize her power as mother and father is part of the reason that leads to Regan’s crisis. Regan senses her mother’s frustration which turns into her own frustration, but Chris tries to find a surrogate father to help Regan through her crisis.

The film introduces surrogate fathers throughout the narrative: the doctors, Chris’s boyfriend, Burke, Father Karras and Father Mirren. The biological father is never

seen, but it is understood that he has little to no interest in his daughter because he forgets her birthday. He has abandoned Chris and Regan. This becomes a big theme in horror films after the late 1960s. In “Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange,” Vivian Sobchack writes, “As the culture changes, as patriarchy is challenged, as more and more families no longer conform in structure, membership, and behavior to the standards set by the bourgeois mythology, ...father is the synchronic repressed who, first powerfully absenting himself, returns to terrify the family in the contemporary horror film” (152). Although Regan’s father does not return to terrify the home, it is implied that his absence might be the source of Regan’s “illness.” When Father Karras meets Regan and discovers her disturbing condition, his initial response to Chris is to ask, “Where’s her father?” This seems to suggest that if her father were home then Regan would not be in a crisis. She would have a father to guide her into the public sphere and it would be an easy transition. Her lack of father keeps her tied to the bed, a prisoner of the domestic sphere.

Chris’s boyfriend, Burke, is one such paternal surrogate who seems to make Regan’s possession worse. He seems to be what pushes Regan’s possession deeper. He represents a broken paternal order with limited power. As a film director, he has the power to call the shots. Chris takes orders from him. Yet there is something that is undesirable. He drinks too much at Chris’s party causing him to make racial slurs to people around him. He becomes the embodiment of that which is wrong with patriarchy. He is not a “good” surrogate father. He firmly belongs in the horror genre, if we take Sobchack’s analysis into consideration. She states that the 1970s father became “bad” in

the horror film genre and “good” in the familial melodrama genre. These bad father in the horror genre were a response to a patriarchal order in crisis. The bad fathers tended to abandon the family and they were dealing with their partial loss of societal power. His “bad” fathering does not go unnoticed by Regan. While possessed, she pushes him out of her bedroom window. The spectator cannot help but wonder what he was doing in her bedroom. She rejects him as a suitable replacement for her biological father. She performs her own exorcism by casting him out her bedroom and home.⁶

Part of what makes this film’s narrative different is that it belongs to a different genre than the films I’ve explored in my preceding chapters. The American family in film is traditionally looked at through a maternal melodrama lens. It might, at first, seem as though horror would not fit, but I believe that the horror genre speaks specifically to motherhood in a way the maternal melodrama cannot. The horror genre appeals to different kinds of spectatorial sensibilities. Unlike the maternal melodrama, which asks us to view the mother and daughter relationship as a source of pity, the horror genre makes this relationship a site of disgust. Disgust might sound troubling, but it opens up new possibilities in gender performance within the family. Julia Kristeva explains that disgust can be used to rethink and redraw social boundaries in her book, *The Powers of Horror*. She explains that sometimes we, culturally speaking, need to confront the grotesque and that by doing so it enables us to unearth possibilities that might otherwise remain hidden.⁷

⁶ Vivian Sobchack, *Bring it all Back Home* 152-153

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 3-5

Regan's possession brings disgust to Chris. She, and the spectator, are meant to look at the possibilities single motherhood has to offer and that have been hidden from Chris and the spectator. Regan molests her mother after Chris has given up on science, and thus the traditional paternal order. Regan stabs her vagina with a crucifix causing blood to gush and stain her white nightgown. She shoves Chris's face in it. Chris is being confronted by the horrors of her daughter's femininity as well as her own. Yet Regan's abrasive behavior and manly voice also suggests masculinity. Regan is making Chris confront the grotesque in order to make her see her own potential to be both masculine and feminine. This scene is one of the hardest in the film to watch. The spectator has to deal with two kinds of gross. The first "gross" is Regan stabbing her vagina with a crucifix, and the second is Regan shoving her mother's face into it. I believe the viscera of this scene pushes us to think about mother-daughter separation because this incident does not pull them apart as one might think it should, but brings them closer together and reveals new possibilities in gender performance at home. This scene's grotesque subject asks us to rethink and redraw the boundaries of mother-daughter relationships.

As a single mother, Chris does not fully accept her masculine performativity with ease. She has an unstable relationship to her own gender performance, which causes some of Regan's instability. Regan seems to regress into an infantile state rather than progress toward independence. This return to infancy is also a return to the maternal body. In *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains that the grotesque is linked to the maternal body. She describes the grotesque and the feelings of disgust it produces as

abject. She writes, “The abject confronts us... and this time with our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her...It is a violent, clumsy breaking away”(13). Kristeva uses the abject as a way to suggest a breaking away from the mother, but I think for Chris and Regan the abject can be used also to bring them closer. This closeness asks them, and us, to think about the possibility of holding onto our mothers rather than letting them go. The abject in Chris and Regan pushes them together and it is a violent. This combination of femininity and masculinity within Chris attracts Regan. When she is possessed, she gets juxtaposed to the Mesopotamian deity, Pazuzu. This deity is know for its relationship to serpent. There is another statue in the film that seems to have particular importance to Chris. Early in Regan’s possession, she defaces a Madonna statue in a near-by church. Regan gives this mother figure a phallus and accentuated breasts, as if it were an attempt to tell her mother that she has both and does not need to seek outside paternal help.

This defacement is met with horror and fear in the public sphere. A priest is disgusted and horrified to discover that the Madonna has been given a phallus. If Madonna is the mother figure, I find it significant that Regan feels the need to give her mother figure a phallus as well as accentuated breasts. For her, a mother is a source of both nurturing and power. Regan seems to be in a crisis over this and cannot come to terms with this duplicity. This causes her to develop exaggerated forms of both. She is a girl in crisis about her own gender identity, but this is because her mother is also in crisis about her own duplicitous gender roles in private and public. This crisis of duplicitous

gender roles seems more significant because Chris is a single mother and must perform both, even if she is reluctant to do so.

Regan seems to be reaching out to her mother. The scene with the defaced Madonna is one way she might be trying to capture her mother's attention. Regan can already sense that her mother is also a father, and she does not seem to need her father as much as Chris thinks she does. When Regan attached a phallus to the madonna, she was signifying to her mother that she already has access to the paternal power, but Chris is not willing to notice her own power and ability she has to lead her daughter into the public sphere. Although Chris performs masculinity, she is still uncertain and unable to accept these qualities within herself.

What this scene also illustrates is that Regan is holding up a mirror to her own mother. She reveals to her what Chris has been repressing. Possessed Regan takes on exaggerated masculinity and femininity. Regan is forcing her mother to confront this. In her chapter "Her Body, Himself" from *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol J. Clover examines her idea of a "Final Girl." The Final Girl is the one girl in the slasher film who survives the monster. She is able to do this because she investigates when others do not. There is something about her that is boyish in comparison to the other girls, and she also mirrors the monster as both tend to be repressed. Clover writes, "The Final Girl is boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine.... Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls" (40). Chris is also marked masculine by her crude language, short hair, and even by her name. Chris may not recognize these traits,

but Regan does, and she tries to show it to her mother. Chris also mirrors her monster / daughter through shared blood. There is the blood from Regan's molestation of her mother and also from being genetically tied to one another. Chris and Regan are trying to figure out the new rules for their familial structure and their gender performances.

Both mother and daughter must change the rules about how they deal with one another. They will never go back to the way they were before the possession, but they can change the rules about how they relate to one another. This scene challenges the spectator to possibly reconsider the ways about which we think a mother's relationship to her child and the perceived need to give up a child at a certain age to a paternal. If Chris and Regan can maintain their relationship after such an assault, then it would seem mother's and children can maintain their connection with having far less traumatization. It is not just a matter of surviving the trauma. The assault is necessary for them to change their relationship to one another. It causes transformation for Chris. Part of this transformation is her realization that she must let go of her conventional views of the paternal order and seek out an unconventional gender order who can help her with Regan.

Clover explains that in an occult horror film like *The Exorcist* there is a kind of "opening up" that occurs for Regan and Father Karras. She believes that the possession is useful for rethinking gender performances for both men and women. Karras is able to open himself up to the demon because he opens up to his femininity. I also believe this film is "opening up" possibilities for rethinking familial structures and parent-child relationships for mothers and fathers. Karras's opening up is what saves Regan, yet it comes at the cost of Karras's life. Karras becomes like Annie in *Imitation of Life*. Annie

is the good mother who is sacrificed in order to keep Susie and Sarah Jane with Lora. Karras is a good father who is just as tragically sacrificed in order to keep Regan with Chris. This sacrifice seems to indicate that the American family might not be ready for fathers like Karras at this moment. Yet the film opens up the possibility for fathers like Karras just as it opens up the possibility for mothers like Chris.

Karras is both a religious practitioner and he is a psychiatrist. Clover writes about “Black Magic” being associated with the feminine world. This would include priests, too. She then explains that medical profession belongs to “White Science.” White Science, Clover explains, is aligned with masculinity and the paternal. This means that Karras is both feminine and masculine, just as Regan and Chris perform both genders. The other fathers have failed because they cling to worn-out perceptions about male gender performance. However, Father Karras struggles with this duplicity. He is unsure about his role as both priest and psychiatrist. He sometimes thinks he should have chosen to be only a psychiatrist. This struggle is wondering whether or not he should have taken up a more traditional, paternal role in society. Yet he is open to the possibility of being both feminine and masculine, like Regan, which enables him to take in and then destroy her demon.

Chris is undergoing a similar crisis. She is unsure about how to be both Regan’s mother and father. Chris’s traumatic encounter with her daughter allows her to start reconsidering fathers. Once Karras has sacrificed himself by taking in the demon and killing himself, Chris takes up her role as Regan’s mother and father. She seems to have exorcized her need to find a surrogate father.

The film's title suggests that this film is about an exorcist and exorcism. It is for this reason that the film is traditionally discussed about Father Karras's existential crisis. However, I think there are different kinds of exorcisms being performed throughout the film. There is the literal exorcism of the demon inside of Regan, but it seems as though the film is performing an exorcism of ideas about what a family should look like and how mothers and fathers should perform within the family. This film is trying to unearth and drive out ideas about the family that are worn out and no longer stick, like the way the film's detective, and the spectator, try to unearth what has happened in the narrative. Chris is also a kind performing her own exorcism. She is trying to expel her need for Regan to have a surrogate father so that she might fully embrace her ability to be both mother and father to Regan.

The Exorcist is performing an exorcism on us, the spectator, too. The detective character is interesting because he tries so desperately to make sense of what is going on in the MacNeil home but fails. The detective is first introduced after Burke's death. He is investigating the crime scene at the same moment Chris is investigating Regan's room. Chris unearths a crucifix from Regan's pillow and the detective unearths one of Regan's sculptures from the crime scene. They both are trying to figure out what has happened. The detective confronts Chris and tells her he believes that Burke was killed by a "very strong man" inside of Regan's bedroom. He is almost certain that this is what has happened to Burke. This certainty is challenged at the end of the film when he goes into Regan's bedroom and finds Father Mirren dead and Father Karras in the same place

Burke was found murdered. The perplexed detective cannot make sense of the scene. Any certainty he had is gone.

I believe that the detective, like the one in *Mildred Pierce*, represents the paternal law. In *Mildred Pierce*, the detectives were convinced that they knew exactly what had happened. They had it all figured out and just needed to turn Mildred like a key to make all the pieces fit together. The detectives brought order to chaos and put Mildred back in her “place.” The detective in *The Exorcist* is different. He cannot bring order to the chaos. He does not know where to begin to putting things back into place because he is unsure where they may belong. This uncertainty is a reflection of what is going on in American culture and how it reconfigures the family. At one point in the film, the detective tells Father Karras that he likes going to the movies. He said he likes to talk about, discuss, and critique films. I believe *The Exorcist* is asking us to talk about, discuss and critique it. One of these topics is the way the family is reflected in this film. I believe Chris is an important addition to the discussion and critique of *The Exorcist*. Her position as a single mother requires her to challenge cultural, and her own, ideas about gender roles in the home.

The film ends with Chris and Regan reunited and driving away into an uncertain future. Yet despite this uncertainty, they remain together. Their family has survived the reconfiguration of gender roles within the home. The film represents a single mother who did not give up her daughter to a paternal figure. She recognized and then remained both Regan’s mother and father. The mother was not sacrificed, but the father was. Chris

and Regan drive off into a future that must struggle with the changing familial gender roles and the children of these homes can no longer be contained.

CONCLUSION

What this thesis explores are many manifestations of single motherhood in American films. I examine maternal melodrama, film noir, and horror and cultural transformations of gender performance, familial structures, and mother-daughter separation. My goal is to start an academic conversation about single mothers and how they are represented in film and American culture. I also want this project to challenge what might appear as “bad” representations of single mother families. I do this by examining the duplicitous gender performance of a single mother in *Mildred Pierce*, exploring single-mother performances within the heteronormative familial structure in *Imitation of Life*, and examining a single mother who learns to be a father in *The Exorcist*.

My introduction looks at a classic maternal melodrama, *Stella Dallas*, and its narrative of tear-jerking sacrifice. Stella struggles as a single mother. She wants to give her daughter, Laurel, material comforts and a heteronormative family. Stella perceives she has failed because she cannot provide these things to Laurel. This ultimately results in Stella giving up her daughter to another family. A classic “weepie,” the narrative builds to an inevitable separation of mother and daughter. My reason for beginning with this film is to illustrate what a traditional maternal melodrama looks like before moving on to its mid-century reformulation or its extension to and transformation through other genres like film noir and horror.

Chapter One unearths the anxiety that surrounds a single mother's masculine gender performance in the film noir *Mildred Pierce*. The film illustrates how Mildred's move out of the domestic sphere and into the public sphere. She becomes a successful businesswoman and performs a double gender identity in order to provide for her family. As with all films noir, the film creates anxiety and uncertainty, not only with respect to the murder in which Mildred's daughter, Veda, is implicated, but also with regard to its use of a single mother who performs duplicitously. Although the film suggests that Mildred's success as businesswoman comes at the price of her failure as a mother, I believe this is a misreading of the film. Mildred offers a glimpse of the necessary duality and performance of gender that occurs for single mothers who must be in the domestic and business spheres.

My second chapter continues to look at single mothers who struggle with the duality of their public and private roles, only here with a return to maternal melodrama through *Imitation of Life*. This chapter is most concerned with destabilizing the heteronormative familial model of the 1950s. Lora and Annie live together to improve their economic circumstances. Lora is able to actively pursue her acting career, while Annie stays at home to perform the domestic duties and care for their two girls. While noting the racial hierarchies their relationship implies, I believe that these women perform a version of patriarchal, heteronormative family to improve their class status. This illustrates how all families, including patriarchal heteronormative ones, are performances. In spite of the the film ending on Annie's separation from her daughter, Sarah Jane, it still offers insight into a family that can rework ideas about performativity

within the family. *Imitation of Life* challenges what a family should look like and how its members should perform. Lora performs as the providing father and Annie performs as the sacrificing mother. What the film leaves the spectator with is the desire to see both performances within in one mother.

The last chapter explores how horror, too, challenges conventional gender and familial norms, only this time through spectatorial repulsion rather than pity or anxiety. When Chris's daughter, Regan, is possessed by a demon, Chris begins to doubt her ability to perform as Regan's mother and father. She consults institutions of patriarchy like doctors, psychiatrists and the Church. Yet these surrogate fathers are rejected by Regan. Regan tries to show her mother that she can be her mother and father through a repulsive act. It does not lead to their separation. *The Exorcist* is the only film that ends with the mother and daughter sticking together. The eruption of repulsive monstrosity helps Chris get in touch with the duplicity inside of her. This film has traditionally been analyzed in academic research as Regan's passage into adulthood, but it has much to offer research in single mothers who must perform as mother and fathers. Chris, along with all the mothers I examine, illustrate how the single mother must be something else *and* a mother. The "something else" takes on various manifestations within each film.

This project examined films from the 1930s to the 1970s, however there are several decades that follow that are worth exploring. I believe these themes could be explored in terms of the single mother experience since the 1970s. These ideas could expand beyond the three genres I examined. Single mothers show up in genres other than maternal melodrama, film noir, and horror and these genres might provide different

insight into representations and experiences of single mothers in American culture. The films I chose illustrate how single mothers open up new ways of thinking about gender performance, familial structure, and mother-daughter relationships.

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