

HER "BEST THING"?: AUTONOMY VERSUS  
DEPENDENCE IN THE ROLES  
OF MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

BY  
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A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ROLES OF MOTHER AND DAUGHTER**

**BY**

**ELIZABETH HOPKINS**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

**of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores various aspects of the mother-daughter relationship from a psychoanalytic and feminist perspective. Toni Morrison's Beloved and Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping offer two distinct interpretations of the dynamics of mother-daughter interactions. Chapter Two, which deals with Beloved, discusses the way in which Sethe can be perceived as the all-giving mother of psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott. Vivien Nice provides a feminist analysis of motherhood, which helps to explain Sethe's self-destructive actions as she strives to fulfill an unrealistic and unattainable ideal of motherhood. Chapter Three, on Housekeeping, again uses psychoanalytic theory to illuminate the relationship between Ruth and Sylvie who, in no way, conforms to the role of the "ideal" mother figure. Also addressed is the relationship Ruth has with her biological mother, Helen, who, although she is dead, occupies most of Ruth's thoughts and influences her actions. This thesis examines the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship and questions the adequacy of psychoanalytic theories of mothering in light of the novels and in light of feminist analyses of mothering.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I intend to draw on psychoanalytic theory, primarily D. W. Winnicott and Melanie Klein, to analyze the mother-daughter relationships in Toni Morrison's Beloved and Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping. The two novels are particularly amenable to a psychoanalytic reading as the mothers in both works can be viewed as models of the "good" and "bad" mothers which pervade the psychoanalytic theories of Klein and Winnicott. Beloved's Sethe attempts to become the "ideal" mother, while Housekeeping's Sylvie evades conforming to the role in any way. Klein, in particular, also provides some insight into the other theme common to the two novels: that of the potential dangers inherent in the characters' focus on the past, a focus which impedes each of them from living actively in the present.

While Winnicott and Klein provide the lens through which to view the situation of mothers who either wholly accept or reject the goal of being the entirely adaptive mother, Vivien E. Nice supplies an analysis which offers a more realistic view of motherhood. Nice also facilitates a more feminist discussion of the novels, as she focuses on the cultural and societal factors which influence mother-daughter relationships.

The characters of Housekeeping and Beloved share a feeling of longing for reconciliation and reunion, while at the same time dramatising the risks associated

with choosing to live in the past. The psychoanalytic theories are pertinent in a discussion of the novels because most of the "action" occurs in the characters' minds. Psychoanalytic perspectives are useful in analyzing the mothers because, although they offer unrealistic ideals of motherhood which stress selflessness, these theories have permeated our culture and have, to a large extent, shaped our views and expectations of motherhood. The mothers of the novels, particularly Sethe, emblemize the potentially self-annihilating consequences for mothers of subscribing wholeheartedly to the psychoanalytic theories. In the character of Sethe, Morrison appears to be suggesting that, ultimately, the mothering role that Sethe adopts is not one that women should attempt to fulfil.

The disadvantage inherent in the application of psychoanalytic theory to the texts is the danger of discussing the characters as though they were "real" people, as opposed to literary representations. Also, in utilizing the theories, I appear at times to be of the same mind as the theorists, when this is not the case. The characters seem to provide a literary equivalent of the psychoanalytic theories of the dynamics of mother-daughter relationships, and as such, the texts and the psychoanalytic theories complement one another.

The theories of Klein and Winnicott neglect the needs of the mother, and these needs of the characters remain unstated in the novels. Nice provides a structure for discussing the mother as a subject and not solely as the object of the child's needs, as well as supplying a critique of psychoanalysis:



The "good enough" mother (and mothers are allowed to fail sometimes, as this is good for the child's development - but not deliberately or too often) is seen as a natural phenomenon, no effort is expected, mothers will do this instinctively. Underlying this is the idea that the needs of the mothers and children are complementary, belying the effort that goes into the work of being a mother and the effort, via care texts and so on, that has also gone into telling mothers how to be good enough, while it is accepted that mothering involves (and should involve) sacrifice and selflessness. (Nice 31, 32)

Psychoanalytic theory has postulated the existence of an "ideal" mother who is entirely adaptive to her child. Winnicott writes: "the basis of mental health is being actively laid down in the course of every infancy when the mother is good enough at her job" (Winnicott 179). To be a "good-enough mother" does not sound terribly daunting; however, for Winnicott, the "good-enough" mother must be constantly in a state of responding to, and anticipating, her child's needs:

A good-enough mother starts off with a high degree of adaptation to the baby's needs. That is what "good-enough" means, this tremendous capacity that mothers ordinarily have to give themselves over to identification with the baby. Towards the end of a pregnancy and at the beginning of a child's life, they are so identified with the baby that they really practically know what the baby is feeling like, and so they can adapt themselves to the needs of the baby in such a way that the baby's needs are met . . . The mother is laying down the basis for the mental health of the baby, and more than health - fulfilment and richness. (Home 144, 145)

The seemingly innocuous term of "good-enough" actually encompasses a number of expectations the mother must fulfill, the most important of which is the denial of her own needs, in order for her child to grow into a healthy and fulfilled individual.

It appears as though psychoanalytic theory grants the mother a great deal of power; her child's well-being is entirely under her control. In fact, though, by

attributing to the mother's care all of the child's future success and failure, psychoanalysis provides the justification for the blaming of the mother. If a child does not do well in life, it is due to the mother's faulty caring; if a child prospers, however, the mother is not congratulated because she simply was doing the work of ordinary good mothering. Steph Lawler, in reference to Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born, states: "Nurturance, patience, and the rest are not valued (or paid), because it is considered 'only natural' that women should care, selflessly and unconditionally [for children] . . . Because this nurturing is considered an intrinsic part of women's 'nature,' it is not defined as work at all, but as a 'labour of love'" (Lawler 154).

Vivien E. Nice writes: "The idealisation of mothering sets the scene for the demonisation of the mother" (135). In Beloved, Sethe is ostracized from her community after killing her baby daughter and trying to murder her other children in a desperate attempt to spare them the life of slavery to which the "slave catcher" seeks to return them. Sethe's actions are not those of a "good" mother and, upon the emergence of the ghost of her daughter, Sethe strives to become the "ideal" mother to Beloved in order to prove her love and to atone for her actions. The relationship between Sethe and Beloved can be perceived as an articulation, in a psychoanalytic framework, of the ambivalence existing in the mother-daughter bond and the hostility it may engender. Sethe also provides a literal and self-destructive example of psychoanalysis' description of the all-giving mother, entirely adaptive to her child's needs. By devoting herself wholly to Beloved's needs and demands, Sethe almost

loses herself entirely: "[Sethe] sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (Morrison 250).

Sethe's denial of herself and her subservience to Beloved can be seen as an exaggerated version of the relationship of the mother of psychoanalytic theory to her children. The limitations of Winnicott's theory, though, for analyzing other mother-daughter relationships are suggested by Nice:

The further we venture out into the real environment surrounding the mother-infant couple the less consideration we find given to it in the psychoanalytic literature. Social constraints barely get a mention, it is as if poverty, poor housing, social isolation, ill-health and so on, make no impact on the kind of care an infant receives. Psychoanalytic accounts ignore the *actual* environment into which the infant is born, including the relationships surrounding the child, and also ignore the mother's own history and experience (except insofar as these are pathologised in terms of her not being able to be a "good enough mother"). (31)

It is by considering the powerful effects of Sethe's past life of slavery that one may gain additional insight into her interactions with Beloved and into Sethe as a subject in her own right. Sethe has no maternal history of her own on which to rely; her mother is hanged when Sethe is only a baby:

Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left. (200)

Without a matrilineage, Sethe, like Baby Suggs, possesses no "map to discover what she was like" (140).

The emergence, then, of Beloved, who impels Sethe's recollection of the past is a painful but imperative step in constructing a maternal history so that Sethe may begin to know herself and so that Sethe's living daughter, Denver, may forge an identity. Denver, who becomes assertive and confident by novel's end, represents the future, after the past has been put to rest. Overcoming the tendency to slip into a remembering mode is an active undertaking, however. Beloved is "disremembered and unaccounted for" (275), because "remembering seemed unwise" (274). The past, then, is not simply "forgotten"; it is "disremembered," a word which connotes a concerted effort not to recall, a chosen erasure of memory.

Remembering can be unwise because one may become mired in the past, unable to live in the present or to conceive of a future, the fate of Housekeeping's Ruth. Melanie Klein proposed that every individual interacts with others that he or she has known in his or her mind; these people are parts of the individual: "The inner world of our instinctual objects in its primitive form is thus first peopled with our mother and father or the parts of them internalized at this time . . . and those two persons remain as the prototypes of all our later developed reactions with other persons" (Rivi re 351).

Ruth's mother commits suicide when Ruth is young; however, Helen lives on in Ruth's mind: she is "not perished." The denial of the stark reality that Helen is irretrievable produces a sort of idealized picture in Ruth's mind of the realm in which Helen resides, and Ruth longs to join her. Ruth lives entirely in an internal world,

focusing on the past, and this state of mind has a great impact upon her perceptions and actions.

Winnicott's theory of "environmental letdown" works well in interpreting Ruth's behaviour. In discussing the "antisocial tendency," he writes:

It is not the general social failure that is responsible so much as a specific failure . . . *things went well enough and then they did not go well enough*. A change occurred which altered the whole life of the child and this change in the environment happened when the child was old enough to know about things. (Winnicott 91)

Ruth is antisocial in the sense that she has no interest in what occurs around her; she much prefers to interact with those who populate her mind. Ruth has endured many losses over her short life: her mother, grandmother, grandfather, great-aunts, father. All have either abandoned her or have died, and Ruth's interiority illustrates Klein's notion of "the special compensatory connection between external loss and internal acquisition or possession" (Rivière 363). Because of successive abandonments, Ruth has no trust in the outside world. She does not possess, in Klein's words, an "internalized good parent," a figure within oneself that leads to trust in one's environment and in others.

Ruth, in recalling her mother to mind, remembers a mother who: "tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone - she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned" (Robinson 109). In contrast, Ruth's sister Lucille's memory of Helen is of a woman who was: "orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow (more than [Ruth] ever knew or [Lucille] could

prove) who was killed in an accident" (109). The girls' disparate characterizations of their mother have a profound impact on the course of their respective lives. Because Ruth's mother was the "abandoner," Ruth, consciously or not, seeks situations and relationships which continually replicate the same pattern; she is not capable of functioning well in society. Lucille, who has trained herself to believe that Helen was, in fact, "the one abandoned," has been able to create an "internalized good mother," which has allowed her to exist successfully in interaction with others.

The power, then, of subjective perception in influencing and altering objective "reality" is clear. Ruth perpetuates a cycle of successive abandonments throughout her life because loss is something with which she is comfortable, and is something she expects. Ruth has come to be comforted by renunciation and longs to be reunited with those who have abandoned her through the erasure of her self; Ruth feels "incompletely and minimally existent" (105). Lucille, though, who perceives Helen as having been reliable and orderly, leaves Ruth and Sylvie in order to live with Miss Royce, the home economics teacher, a veritable symbol of the "ideal" mother. Lucille, presumably, goes on to lead a "normal" life, after devoting so much time and energy to learning to be like "everyone else," a desire evident in her impassioned plea to Ruth: "*We have to improve ourselves! . . . starting right now!*" (123).

Lucille, though, like the neighbourhood women in Beloved, must make the effort continually to "disremember" in order to live successfully in the present and not to be overcome and grounded in the past. Housekeeping ends with Lucille, as imagined by

Ruth, sitting in a restaurant: "No one . . . could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie" (219). The language implies a concerted effort, a self-delusion of sorts, to forget or to not see, much like the phrasing at the end of Beloved:

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss. (275)

The deliberate "forgetting" of the past demonstrates the power of subjective perception and, as Rivière writes about Klein's theories: "the *reality* of sensation, emotion, and the surges of instinct in us [are] so much more actual and vivid than any perceptions of the external world" (367). Ruth says of Sylvie that

[she] did not want to lose me. She did not want me to grow gigantic and multiple, so that I seemed to fill the whole house, and she did not wish me to turn subtle and miscible, so that I could pass through the membranes that separate dream and dream. She did not wish to remember me. She much preferred my simple, ordinary presence, silent and ungainly though I might be. For she could regard me without strong emotion - a familiar shape, a familiar face, a familiar silence . . . But if she lost me, I would become extraordinary by my vanishing. (195)

As with the ghost of Beloved, the spectre of the past, without constant vigilance, threatens to overtake and supplant the present.

The majority of criticism to date dealing with Beloved focuses on the horrific effects of slavery and views the novel as an articulation of these: Beloved "stands as a monument to the shameful history of slavery . . . Morrison's narratives . . . testify

to the continuity of a historical (and historiographical) struggle" (Holton 89). Beloved is interpreted as a vehicle through which to tell an oppressed people's history: "the historicity of uninscribed life experiences [is] the central dilemma in Beloved" (Liscio 36, 37).

Most analyses view Beloved as giving voice to what previously has gone unrecorded: the lives of slaves and the destructive aftermath of slavery. What is not addressed is Sethe's relationship to Beloved as an "ideal," all-giving mother, and how this is equally tragic for Sethe.

Ignês Sodré and A. S. Byatt, in their discussion of Beloved do address the fact that the characters are in danger of being immobilized entirely by their memories: "These are people who have gone through such unbearable experiences that they have to be constantly engaged in fierce battles with their own minds" (Sodré 196). Sodré's and Byatt's interpretation approximates mine most closely; however, they do not focus much on the mother-daughter dynamics.

In general, critical attention on Housekeeping has centered on the theme of Ruth and Sylvie's renunciation of society in favour of a sort of communion with Nature. The women are viewed as rejecting patriarchal constructs for a "feminine space": "The gradual, graceful process of de-evolution, of de-civilizing, that the novel enacts is also a rejection of the patriarchal values that have dominated American culture and a return to values and modes of being that have been associated in myth and imagery with the province of the female" (Kirkby 92); and: "Housekeeping both explores the



centrality of the space of the house in the construction of feminine subjectivity and attempts to imagine a new *transient* subjectivity which is located in a place outside all patriarchal structures" (Geyh 104). What the critics tend to ignore is the fact that, at novels's end, Ruth and Sylvie are "nowhere" and that the novel does not present this as an entirely positive choice on their part. In Housekeeping, the rejection of patriarchy (and also of psychoanalytic definitions of "good" mothering) seems to leave Ruth and Sylvie in a realm where they are impelled to, and do not choose to, keep moving and avoid any sense of connection with others. The critical interpretations do not address the fact that, because of Ruth and Sylvie's almost exclusive focus on the past, they possess few skills for living in the present and no ability to plan for a future.

What I intend to illustrate in the first chapter, on Beloved, is how the characters are incapable of relating effectively to their situations as they exist because they have not dealt with the devastating events of the past. I also will attempt to show that Sethe and her daughters can be viewed as emblematic of the mother-daughter relationship as described by psychoanalysis, and that Sethe, as the all-giving and selfless mother, is in peril of being destroyed by her attempts at atonement and self-negation.

In the second chapter on Housekeeping, I will again explore the issue of interiority and of focusing solely on memories to the exclusion and detriment of external relationships. I will discuss the fact, albeit discouraging, that Sylvie, who is not a

**"good-enough" mother is relegated to a realm which offers an uncertain space for an alternative style of mothering that preserves and nurtures selfhood.**

## CHAPTER 2

"I AM BELOVED AND SHE IS MINE":

DOES THE ROLE OF MOTHER ALLOW FOR A "ME"?

Toni Morrison's Beloved is about confronting the past in order to deal effectively with the present and to envision a future. Sethe, a former slave, acknowledges her past actions through "rememories" and storytelling. The catalyst which initiates Sethe's exploration of events and emotions that she would prefer to keep buried is the appearance, in human form, of the ghost of her baby girl - a baby murdered by Sethe in order to "save" the baby from a life of slavery and degradation.

The ghost of the baby, who is referred to only as Beloved - the one word Sethe has secured for the headstone - functions as a character on equal footing with the others in the novel. Prior to Beloved's manifestation in concrete form, Sethe and Denver, her daughter, attempt to communicate with Beloved's ghost as though she were visibly present: "Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something would help" (Morrison 4). While Beloved acts as one of the characters, she is also representative of the past, both individual and collective. In their interaction with Beloved, the others must face their respective demons and endure the difficult process of exorcising them.

Beloved is also the embodiment of feelings and impulses that have long been suppressed out of self-preservation. Beloved is rage and desire personified. Because Sethe has murdered her, Beloved feels abandoned and forsaken and thrives on, but is never placated by, Sethe's incessant pleas for forgiveness. Through trying to justify her actions, Sethe is forced to confront the guilt and desperation she experienced when she chose to murder her baby because she felt there was no other alternative. For Paul D, contact with Beloved leads to the involuntary opening of the "tobacco tin" which has taken the place of his heart; he has sealed in the tin all of the things which are too devastating to remember. Denver, as a result of her relationship with Beloved, must venture back into her community, after a long period of partially self-imposed isolation. The characters' confrontation of long-avoided painful experiences is traumatic and nearly devastating, particularly for Sethe; the turbulent and trying relationships that Sethe, Denver, and Paul D share with Beloved are indicative of the agonizing process of facing the past.

In the same way that Beloved's appearance provides the impetus for reliving individual histories, the telling of these stories creates a record of a collective past of slavery and oppression. The idea of narrative serving as a sort of nourishment and comfort, for both the speaker and the listener, is reinforced throughout the novel. As Sethe begins to tell Beloved about the past, she notes that: "It became a way to feed her, which amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost . . . But, as she began telling

about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it" (Morrison 58). In a sense, then, the emergence of Beloved in human form, and the ensuing conflicts and trauma, provide the former slaves with a way to talk about and to document their experiences. The opportunity to explore the relationship between mothers and daughters is also significant and is a central issue in the novel.

The psychoanalytic theories of Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott are useful in exploring the relationship between Sethe and Beloved because these theories address the dynamics of mother-child interaction, particularly at the so-called pre-oedipal stage, in which Beloved can be situated, because she was murdered as a baby. Klein writes: "the Oedipus tendencies are released in consequence of the frustration which the child experiences at weaning" (186); weaning typically occurs toward the end of the first, or the beginning of the second year of life. Beloved is nearing the end of the pre-oedipal period when she is killed. Upon returning from the dead, Beloved could be perceived as acting out the unconscious impulses which are characteristic of the stage of development she has attained.

D. W. Winnicott's notion of the "good enough" mother is useful in examining Sethe's relationship to her children because Sethe emblemizes the all-giving mother of psychoanalytic theory. The adequacy of Winnicott's theory for judging Sethe's, or other women's, parenting skills needs to be questioned, though. As with Klein, Winnicott tends to focus attention on the woman solely on the basis of whether she is capable of meeting her child's needs. The character of Sethe is complex and multi-

dimensional, and the theories of Marianne Hirsch and Vivien E. Nice, with their cultural and societal focus, help to understand Sethe as much more than a mother. Because psychoanalytic thought tends to assume a nuclear family as the norm, care must be taken in applying these theories to the analysis of the characters in Beloved. Families are torn apart, relatives and friends disappear or are murdered, and a total absence of stability and predictability is the norm for those who are subjected to slavery.

The majority of criticism which deals with Beloved tends to focus on the issues of racism and the destructive effects of slavery. The relationship of Beloved to slave narratives and to the writing of other African-American women, such as Alice Walker and Harriet Beecher Stowe, is explored. The analyses typically regard Beloved as being a symbol of all slaves whose stories, for the most part, have gone unheard. Less common, yet equally important, are theories which view Beloved as, primarily, an articulation of the mother-daughter bond with all its ambiguities. It is in the area of the equivocal relationships between mothers and daughters that psychoanalytic perspectives may be useful. Beloved always returns to the issue of connections, or the lack thereof, between mothers and daughters, making a study of the novel from this point of view fitting.

While the novel seems to suggest a possibility of reclaiming and of asserting selfhood for Sethe, few critics discuss Sethe as an agent, separate from her relationship with Beloved and the other characters. Many analyses, much like the

approach of traditional psychoanalysis, examine the novel from Beloved's, or the child's, perspective, focusing on Sethe's actions in terms of their effect on her children. It is important that Sethe be looked upon as a subject and that her position be given equal weight to that of Beloved.

There are many post-modern, Lacanian interpretations of Beloved, which stress the idea that Sethe and Beloved exist in a pre-oedipal, pre-symbolic environment, free of the law and language of the "Father." By relegating Sethe and Beloved and, by implication all mothers and daughters, to the realm of the pre-symbolic, however, the relationship and the individuals are effectively silenced. The interaction must be investigated in another manner which grants full subject status to both mothers and daughters.

The novel's first paragraph establishes the fact that the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone are all female: Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver, and the baby ghost. Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, have fled the house because the ghost's antics have become unbearable. It also is asserted within the first few pages that Baby Suggs has died with a broken spirit: "Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn't get interested in leaving life or living it" (Morrison 4, 5), and that Sethe needs to explain herself to the ghost: "'But if she'd only come, I could make it clear to her'" (Morrison 5). The horribly destructive effects of slavery on the family are made plain in Baby Suggs' remark that all eight of her children were taken from her, and all she can remember of them was that her first-born loved the burned

bottom of bread. The conscious effort necessary to forget the past, as well as the perils of recalling also are palpable in Sethe's remark that she "worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (6). So, from the very beginning of the novel, it is clear that this is a story about women, about slavery, about trying to overcome an atrocious past, and about mothering in these conditions.

We first encounter the spirit of Beloved as Paul D enters Sethe's house after not having seen her in eighteen years. While Paul is somewhat apprehensive about walking through the undulating red light, neither he nor Sethe question the fact that the house is being haunted. As Ignès Sôdré states: "This is a non-gothic ghost story, in which the ghost is completely matter-of-fact and concrete; so that there is no question of terror of the unknown and no possibility of 'not believing' in the ghost" (194).

In fact, the ghost serves as a companion and friend for Denver, who appreciates "the safety of ghost company" (Morrison 37). Denver characterizes the ghost as "lonely and rebuked," which is also a projection of sorts, because Denver feels much the same way. Denver is desperately in need of an ally because she is terrified of the world beyond her yard, and she does not feel safe and secure with Sethe. Because she has not been able to comprehend the events which led up to Sethe's desperate act of killing her baby, Denver fears that what motivated her mother in the past could do so again: "Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over



the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too" (Morrison 205).

Denver does not possess, in Kleinian terms, an "internalized good mother," or a figure within her personality which is perceived as wise and caring. Having "internalized good parents" leads to a sense of confidence and trust in oneself, as well as in members of the community outside of the family. Winnicott also refers to the acquisition of a lack of confidence in the environment as a result of a specific traumatic event:

babies and little children do not remember when things went well, they remember when things went wrong, because they remember that suddenly the continuity of their life was snapped, and their neck went back or something, and it came through all the defenses and they reacted to it, and this is an extremely painful thing that has happened to them, something they cannot ever lose. (146)

If Sethe's actions are disturbing, and the recollection of them debilitating for Denver, then for the murdered baby, Beloved, no amount of reassurance and explanation will convince her that she is, indeed, loved. Beloved can be placed in a category of people whom Winnicott describes as having suffered "environmental letdown, and who must carry with them all their lives the memories (or the material for memories) of the state they were in at moments of disaster" (31). The majority of the characters in the novel could be defined in much the same way; they all are immobilized by remembering, or making every effort not to remember, the past.

Paul D's appearance on the steps of Sethe's house impels the process of recollection. Because it has been eighteen years since Paul and Sethe last have met, the simple fact of finding one another alive is remarkable and turns their minds to a shared history. When conversation shifts to Denver's father, Halle, Denver's vulnerability and loneliness are evident; she feels excluded from Paul and Sethe's shared knowledge: "They were a twosome, saying 'Your daddy' and 'Sweet Home' in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her. That her own father's absence was not hers" (13).

Because Halle is gone and Denver never really knew him, she has created an idealized picture of her father in her mind, based on bits and pieces of information: "My daddy was an angel man. He could look at you and tell where you hurt and he could fix it too" (208). According to psychoanalytic theory, Denver must have one "internalized good parent" in order to keep her sanity, so she creates an image of a father who fulfills all of her unmet needs for security. In a similar way, the ghost of Beloved has filled Denver's need for a friend and a companion to protect her against the potential threat of her mother: "Ever since I was little she was my company and she helped me wait for my daddy. Me and her waited for him. I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it" (205).

Sethe's actions, particularly in her relationship with Beloved, may be discussed from the perspective of the psychoanalytical theories of Klein and Winnicott because

Sethe is entirely selfless in her dealings with Beloved. The psychoanalytical perspectives presume a "good-enough" mother who is entirely adaptive to her child's needs: "Towards the end of a pregnancy and at the beginning of a child's life, [mothers] are so identified with the baby that they really practically know what the baby is feeling like, and so they can adapt themselves to the needs of the baby in such a way that the baby's needs are met" (Winnicott 145). A "maternal instinct" is taken for granted and, as Nice writes, nothing "is considered too great an expectation of mothers because the mother's ability and willingness to abandon herself to the needs of her infant are seen as the natural behaviour of a 'healthy' woman" (26). Typical psychoanalytic theories are based on the needs and perspective of the child and cannot "present one crucial aspect of women's experience - the voice or the subjectivity of the mother" (Hirsch 160). Because these theories generally focus entirely on the child's needs, they are fitting in analyzing Sethe's relationship with Beloved, as Sethe strives to be the selfless, idealized mother who has "milk enough for all." The primary, well-deserved, criticism of psychoanalytical theories of mothering is that they entirely ignore the mother's subjectivity. Throughout the majority of the novel, however, Sethe has no real sense of self or subjectivity to speak of, making the psychoanalytic theories useful in discussing some aspects of Sethe's behavior; whereas they might be inappropriately applied to an individual with a strong sense of self. In order to better understand Sethe outside of her relationship with Beloved, theories which recognize women and mothers as subjects are more fruitful.

Within the context of Sethe's interaction with Beloved, Sethe becomes progressively less in touch with her own needs as her focus shifts entirely onto Beloved. As Paul D observes of Sethe, after learning that she has murdered her daughter: "This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began" (164). Beloved manifests herself in tangible form immediately after the carnival, where Sethe allows herself to begin to plan, or to envision a "life" with Paul D. Despite the high spirits of Sethe, Paul, and Denver as they walk through the carnival grounds, their shadows holding hands, the oppressive signs of racism are inescapable: "The barker called them and their children names ('Pickaninnies free!')" and "Wild African Savage shook his bars and said wa wa" (Morrison 48, 49). Amidst these circumstances, Sethe ventures to "dare life" by planning a future with Paul D. No sooner has the thought entered her mind than Beloved returns to the world of the living to claim Sethe entirely for herself.

Ignès Sôdré writes: "When a relationship becomes triangular - like the moment Paul D appears - [Denver] finds it unbearable. She desperately needs an ally - somebody she can feel twinned with - to be blood sisters with Beloved" (202). It is partially Denver, then, who calls upon the spirit of Beloved to declare herself. If, however, Beloved may be viewed as an emblem of the past, in order for Sethe effectively to create a future for herself, she must confront her history (in the form of Beloved) in order to break its hold on her. Sethe must "lay it all down," as Baby admonishes; she must stop fighting her memory and allow all of the seemingly

unbearable thoughts to enter her consciousness, in order eventually to overcome them. Indeed, as Sethe begins to tell Beloved stories about the past, she enjoys recalling some of the things she has suppressed. Of course, if Beloved is a metaphor for the past, then the fact that the storytelling "became a way to feed her" (Morrison 58) suggests that the retelling of the past will make it grow larger in Sethe's mind, demanding to be addressed. Later in the novel, Beloved's increased size is symbolic of the past's potential to overtake Sethe. It is established early in the novel that Baby Suggs' spirit has been broken, finally, by Sethe murdering her own daughter. Sethe says of Baby that she died: "Soft as cream. Being alive was the hard part" (Morrison 7). Because her horrendous past is "unspeakable," Baby is, ultimately, unable to conquer it and be at peace.

The soul-destroying effects of slavery leave Baby with no sense of self whatsoever; by the time Halle "buys" her freedom with his labour, it is too late for this woman who has never been treated like a human being:

Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me? (140)

The "map" that Baby Suggs is denied is a family, a sense of security and stability crucial to the development of an identity. Baby never has listened to her own heartbeat until she, presumably, is freed from slavery: "Next she felt a knocking in

her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing?" (141). Baby's total lack of anything resembling a stable family unit illustrates why traditional psychoanalytic theories are not useful in a discussion of the characters: "here is a picture of a whole people which was not allowed to be a mother or to have a child. Or to be a child or to have a mother. They were treated as a commodity" (Byatt 227). Again, it is clear that none of the characters belong to a "typical" family, because the realities of slavery have made this impossible. In applying the psychoanalytic theories to the characters, it is important also to keep the social context in mind.

Even on "Sweet Home," or perhaps especially there, the slaves have no opportunity for self-reflection. It is stated that Garner called his slaves "men" and listened to their opinions; however, in a more violent environment, the slaves at least would have no delusions that their "master" is a fair and caring man. Baby says that "nobody knocked her down" at Sweet Home, implying that elsewhere she had been brutalized physically; but, what the slaves may gain in physical liberty, they lose in intellectual independence: "the good-natured, liberal Garners, who have a better kind of slavery, represent a real threat to the slaves' freedom of mind, to their capacity to fight for freedom" (Sôdré 210).

Paul D, relatively late in the novel, comes to realize that he has been deceiving himself as to the amount of self-definition he actually was granted at Sweet Home: "Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to

pieces. Now ain't that slavery or what is it?" (220). Garner may not beat or rape the slaves, allowing them some degree of freedom; however, the fact that Garner has slaves at all convicts him absolutely as a racist. The Garners' form of slavery, with its superficial respect for the black people and their ideas, is dangerous because it increases the likelihood of the slaves internalization of their oppressors' value system, as it undermines their ability to perceive and to question the unjust treatment.

Sethe tries to murder all of her children in order to protect them from a life of subjugation. The result, however, is that her two sons are driven from the house by the ghost of the baby girl, and Denver is so petrified by the outside world that she is unable to leave the yard. In a sense, then, the violence inherent in the relationship between a white slaveholder and his or her slaves is adopted by Sethe as a means of resolving a seemingly impossible situation. Sethe's choice essentially enslaves her children in another way: the boys cannot stay in the house, Denver cannot leave it, and Beloved is forever in limbo. Unwittingly Sethe perpetuates a relationship of ownership, particularly with regard to Beloved. Sethe repeatedly stresses the fact that Beloved belongs to her: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine." . . . "She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine" (200, 204). In much the same way as the slaves are denied selfhood, Sethe views Beloved as a possession, projecting all of her feelings and needs onto Beloved, and refusing to perceive her as a separate entity.

Paul D also has internalized some of the whites' (and patriarchy's) values in the sense that he resents what he sees as Sethe's independence from him. Paul would feel

more comfortable if he were in control of Sethe and her family. As Paul and Sethe lie in bed together, he contemplates her face:

Looked at this way, minus the polished eyes, her face was not so attractive. So it must have been her eyes that kept him both guarded and stirred up. Without them her face was manageable - a face he could handle. Maybe if she would keep them closed like that . . . But no, there was her mouth. Nice. Halle never knew what he had. (25)

Paul D needs to be able to assert control over Sethe in order to feel at ease; he appreciates Sethe as having been Halle's property, and not as an individual. It is, perhaps, unrealistic to expect Paul to perceive Sethe as being autonomous, since neither she nor anyone else views her as such.

There is a sense that the black people in the community have absorbed some of the white viewpoint of their worthlessness. After the party thrown by Baby Suggs, which is blown entirely out of proportion, the neighbours begin to resent Baby for what they describe as pride: "It made them furious. They swallowed baking soda, the morning after, to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124. Whispered to each other in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled-for pride" (137). That the community is angered by what it construes as pride suggests that the black people do not believe that Baby, or they, have any cause for self-esteem and dignity. They are inadvertently perpetuating a system which encourages the subjugation of identity. Neither the black nor the white characters fully question and transcend the pervasive racist attitudes of the time. Paul D and Sethe escape physically; and, at the end of the novel, the implication is that they may



overcome mental and emotional bondage as well. The others, however, are either killed or, like Halle, are victims of another type of slavery - the torment of their own minds after all they have endured.

Sethe longs to be able to go insane, as did Halle, but she cannot because she must persevere for the sake of her children:

And how sweet that would have been; the two of them back by the milk shed, squatting by the churn, smashing cold, lumpy butter into their faces with not a care in the world . . . But her three children were chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio and no butter play would change that. (70, 71)

For Sethe, there are no "conflictual demands of maternity and selfhood" (Hirsch 49). She has not succumbed only because her children need her: "All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me . . . nobody had her milk but me" (Morrison 16). Sethe, thinking she may die before Denver is born, refers to herself as "her children's mother" (30), "this baby's ma'am" (31), and "a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby's last hours" (34). Sethe is the selfless, all-giving mother of psychoanalytic theory; she has neither concern for, nor concept of, her own needs. Like Baby Suggs, Sethe has not had a "map" to help her discover what her needs actually may be. It seems as though Sethe would like to share a "life" with Paul D; but she must transfer all of the energy and focus from Beloved onto herself in order to discover and negotiate her desires.

Winnicott's description of "pathological preoccupation," wherein the mother becomes over-preoccupied with anything the child does, is applicable to Sethe. "The

notion that we can actually be the all-giving mother leads to guilt, depression, and loss of self" (Nice 37). Certainly in her relationship with Beloved, the compulsion to explain and to justify her actions distances Sethe further and further from the fragile sense of self she possesses at the beginning of the novel - an identity tenuously built upon keeping the past at bay.

Beloved, as symbolic and concrete representative of the past, demands to be addressed. Beloved is murdered when she is roughly one year old, or when she, presumably, would be beginning to deal with the anxieties associated with the Oedipus complex; these anxieties are manifested in desire and aggression, or love and hate, at first directed to such limited objects as the mother's breast. Beloved demonstrates a vast need to possess and incorporate Sethe into herself: "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes . . . The longing [Sethe] saw there was bottomless. Some plea barely in control" (Morrison 58, 59). Joan Rivière, writing on Klein's theory of child development, states that the child's fear of losing "whatever is intensely craved and needed" is what motivates the desire to incorporate the object into the self; also: "All fears are intrinsically related to the deepest fear of all; that in the last resort any 'loss' may mean 'total loss'; in other words, if it persists or increases, loss may mean loss of life itself and unconsciously any loss brings that fear nearer" (356). Beloved's terror of losing Sethe is not simply based in unconscious dread; she is justifiably afraid that Sethe will abandon her, which is how Beloved feels after being killed. Because she was just a baby, Beloved cannot comprehend the factors

which militate against Sethe and push her to the limit of her endurance: "Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children . . . Beloved accused her of leaving her behind, of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. She said they were the same, had the same face, how could she have left her?" (Morrison 241). Beloved's perception is that of a baby. She does not fully understand what has happened to her; all she knows is that her mother had been there to fulfill her needs, and suddenly she was gone: "loss and absence of loved ones can be equivalent in our unconscious to *lack of love*, hostility, hate, even malevolence, in them to us and in us to them" (Rivière 364).

As the novel progresses and Sethe becomes increasingly desperate to explain herself to Beloved, the abstract desire of the child to introject the mother takes concrete shape:

The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (Morrison 250)

Despite Sethe's justifications, Beloved cannot understand, as she is forever limited to the baby's understanding she possessed when her life was cut short. Regardless of Sethe's pleas and her subservience to Beloved, the ghost of her baby simply reiterates that Sethe took her "face" away, the mother's face being the object on which a baby's attention is riveted.

Klein theorizes that, at the beginning of the Oedipal stage, the baby is faced with an onrush of questions, only partly conscious; even when conscious, these questions cannot yet be articulated in words and, so, remain unanswered: "Another reproach follows hard upon this, namely, that the child [can] not understand words and speech. Thus [the] first questions go back beyond the beginnings of [the] understanding of speech" (Klein 188). Because Beloved is still at a stage where her understanding is greatly limited, she cannot grasp the meaning of Sethe's explanations. In Beloved's own disjointed narrative, she asks, "how can I say things that are pictures" (Morrison 210). There is no punctuation in Beloved's account of her experiences, which is symbolic of her lack of boundaries. Beloved is aware of the fact that her body really has no parameters; she anticipates a time when she will fly apart and disintegrate: "It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces" (Morrison 133). Winnicott speaks of the baby's process of "integration," which "carries the baby through to unit status, to the personal pronoun 'I'" (28). Beloved did not live long enough to reach the stage of integration, so she exists in fear of coming apart.

Beloved's narrative illustrates the various aspects of her character. She is the dead baby girl, returned to be claimed; she is also the history of all of the slaves whose stories have not been told. Stamp Paid, approaching the house, hears a clamor of voices, all speaking at once, all saying "mine": "although he couldn't cipher but one

word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons. What a roaring" (181). Beloved says: "All of it is now - it is always now" (210), meaning that she carries within her all of the past, whose power is never diminished: "In [Beloved's] presence there are echoes of the middle passage across the Atlantic into slavery, echoes of plantation life, of a variety of atrocities - sexual and otherwise - committed against African Americans over a period of centuries" (Holton 86).

Beloved is representative of not only a collective "unspoken" history, but of the individual histories of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver. Sethe's "rebellious brain" is forced to examine all of the horrors it has been suppressing for so long, as Sethe rationalizes her actions toward Beloved. When Beloved seduces Paul D and opens his "tobacco tin," he relives all of the potentially devastating experiences he has endured. As painful and as dangerous as the journey into the past proves to be, it is essential to the possibility of creating "some kind of tomorrow": "Mourning is necessary so life can continue in the present, but the wish of every character to obliterate the past in fact disrupts this process; when remembering is so unbearable, there can be no gradual distancing from the past" (Sôdré 214).

Sethe's foray into her history is fraught with peril. Like Baby Suggs, Sethe retires from the world, overwhelmed and seemingly defeated from trying to negotiate the past. Sethe's physical state mirrors her psychological: she is entirely depleted of energy and strength. Sethe's belief that she was protecting "every bit of life she had

made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful" (Morrison 163) returns to haunt her.

For Sethe, trying to be the self-sacrificing, entirely adaptive mother nearly proves devastating. It is, however, Denver who precipitates Sethe's rescue. Denver, once she is cut out of the "games" played with Sethe and Beloved, is able to assess the situation more objectively and realizes that "if Sethe didn't wake up one morning and pick up a knife, Beloved might . . . [Denver] would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (242, 243). Although Denver does not realize the magnitude of the situation until she is excluded from the relationship, once this does occur, it appears as though, for Denver, Beloved's (and the past's) hold has been broken. Denver's state of mind is mirrored in the season. Where earlier "the snow went on and on and on. Piling itself, burying itself. Higher. Deeper." (Morrison 134), reflecting the increasing isolation and mirroring of the occupants of the house, now: "It was April and everything alive was tentative" (243). Denver's exploratory venture into the community suggests a rebirth of sorts. She is reconnecting with others and rebuilding relationships with those people who shared an interdependence with Baby Suggs. Denver is also affirming a selfhood for the first time: "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252).

The theme of interconnection and mutuality is present throughout the novel. When Sethe tries to explain her past actions to Paul D, she stresses the fact that she

had no other women to talk with, to share information with about raising children, and to offer support: "there wasn't nobody to talk to. Woman, I mean . . . It's hard, you know what I mean? by yourself and no woman to help you get through" (Morrison 160). The spiritual group that Baby Suggs leads in the clearing dissolves after she loses hope and stops believing in what she has been preaching. The necessity of interdependence is also stressed in Paul D's description of his escape with the other men on the chain gang: "For one lost, all lost. The chain that held them would save all or none, and Hi Man was the Delivery . . . they trusted the rain and the dark, yes, but mostly Hi Man and each other" (Morrison 110).

When Denver decides that it is she who must save her mother by re-entering the community, she overcomes the hostility and isolation that have plagued her family since Sethe took her baby's life and was ostracized by the neighbourhood women. It is the women and Paul who help Denver to confront the spectre of their shared past in the form of Beloved, who has grown so large that the denial of her has become impossible. As Baby Suggs affirms: "You could be lost forever if there wasn't nobody to show you the way" (Morrison 135). It is Ella who galvanizes the women to rescue Sethe, after imagining her own horrific past coming back to overtake her: "Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present . . . The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out" (Morrison 256). It is essential that the characters overcome their refusal to address what has occurred in the

past so that they do not perpetuate destructive behaviour. Throughout the novel, great efforts are made to suppress and "disremember" because the process of recollecting is so painful. The denial of past events has served to isolate individuals from one another; but, the growing threat of Beloved (and the past) reunites the community in a common purpose - to save Sethe and, by extension, themselves. It takes the whole community's help to "stomp out" the past so that they may exist in the present and plan for a future and, as the women sing their rescue, the sound breaks over Sethe "and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (Morrison 261).

The story of the "sixty million and more" slaves is articulated through Beloved, Denver, Sethe, and Paul D. What has remained unspoken finally is given voice. The "black mother-daughter bond, a doubly invisible participant in white patriarchal history" (Liscio 39), is also narrated; loss and abandonment are integral elements of this relationship. Sethe must try to come to terms with the fact that her own mother "left" her and "hurt her feelings and she couldn't find her hat anywhere" (Morrison 272). Sethe longs for a forever unrecoverable opportunity to be a good daughter and to be mothered; but her mother has been hanged, one of a multitude who form the chorus of voices claiming "mine": "These roaring voices constitute the aphasic testimony of all those whose witness to the damage done to them continues to be denied, whose loss remains unresolved, continues to seek a proper hearing" (Holton 87).



The telling of the maternal and racial histories documents and begins to alleviate the sense of loss. Throughout the novel, the idea of storytelling as a sort of nourishment and protection is postulated. As Denver tells Beloved tales she has heard from Sethe, she is passing on a maternal history, but she is also "holding this child with almost no past and no mind, with a net made of the past" (Sôdré 229). Through her narration, Denver comes to perceive her mother's perspective for the first time, as opposed simply to hearing the parts of the story which relate directly to Denver's birth. It is important that she better understand her mother in order to heal her own pain, but also in order to value and pass on her maternal history: "Matrilineage is not only about the daughter's need and desire to know about her heritage, but also about the mother's and grandmother's need to pass this knowledge on through her daughter and granddaughter so that it will not be lost" (Nice 190).

That it is crucial to construct a matrilineal history of slavery is obvious; what, then, of the admonition at the novel's end: "This is not a story to pass on" (Morrison 275)? Sethe tells Paul D that Schoolteacher never could have listed her "animal characteristics" if she had not made the ink. Does she, then, as Liscio suggests, feel complicit in what she has suffered?:

Crossing over from the mother tongue to the language of the father, inscribing the nourishment of mother's milk in the public language of signification inevitably implicates the narrative with the white father . . . Acknowledgement of this complicity prompts the narrator to participate in re-erasing her own story. (45)

While Liscio's theory is somewhat plausible, it does not address the fact that the telling of the story, the confrontation of the past, ultimately is healing and suggests a possibility for reclaiming selfhood. Paul D and Sethe may be able to help one another to create the "maps" they need to determine whether they are good partners, good friends; they, potentially, can discover these things about themselves, something Baby Suggs was denied. The possibility exists for them to start afresh and to create "some kind of tomorrow" (273).

Perhaps, instead, the caution not to pass on the story signifies the fact that, as Sethe's selfhood is tentatively affirmed ("me? me?"), it is time to tell a new story of motherhood and of selfhood, after the ravages of slavery have been acknowledged and the past has been confronted. Denver, who has become independent and confident by the novel's end, suggests that Sethe's story has not been passed on as a pernicious legacy to her daughter.

The ending of the novel, however, is problematic in that it seems to suggest that constant vigilance is necessary to avoid being overcome by one's history: "They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her . . . Remembering seemed unwise" (274). Much like the ending of *Housekeeping*, the conclusion of *Beloved* refers to a conscious, concerted effort not to remember. Just as Ruth and Sylvie are not in Boston, *Beloved* is not in the minds of Sethe, Denver,

and Paul. While it is emphatically asserted where Ruth, Sylvie, and Beloved are not, the reader is left to wonder where, in fact, they are - which is somewhat disconcerting.

The best efforts of the characters in Beloved to forget are sometimes undermined by a small event which stirs the memory:

Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative - looked at too long - shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do. (275)

The "loneliness that roams . . . alive, on its own" (274) threatens perpetually to uproot one from the present, only to be mired in the reproaches of an unalterable past.

## CHAPTER 3

## KNITTING UP THE FRAGMENTS:

## DEALING WITH LOSS AND THE LONGING FOR RECONCILIATION

Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping explores issues of abandonment, loss, and longing for reconciliation. The protagonist and narrator, Ruth, and her sister Lucille have been left in the care of their maternal grandmother after their mother, Helen, commits suicide by driving into the lake. Helen leaves Fingerbone to be married, and returns only to deposit Ruth and Lucille on their grandmother's porch: "A total of seven and a half years passed between Helen's leaving Fingerbone and her returning" (19). At the time of Helen's suicide, then, Ruth is no older than seven, and Lucille a year younger than she. Ruth, as narrator, hardly discusses any aspects of her life before Helen's abandonment; therefore, much of Klein and Winnicott is not pertinent to an analysis of Ruth and Lucille because of the psychoanalytic emphasis on early childhood development and the mother-infant relationship. Klein's concept of the importance of the individual's internal world in guiding perception and action, though, is appropriate in a discussion of Ruth. As in Beloved, Winnicott's theories regarding an instance of "environmental letdown" in a child's early life and the effects of such trauma on subsequent interaction are fitting also.

What constitutes a "good enough" mother certainly is problematized in Housekeeping, where the biological mother abdicates responsibility, and a variety of

more or less "maternal" figures participate in caring for Ruth and Lucille. The nature of loss and of abandonment is explored, with typical definitions of such concepts thrown into question. Ruth asserts that "need can blossom into all the compensation it requires. To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow" (152). Whether Ruth's inner world and her vision of a reconciliation with those who are gone is enough to dispel her grief and loneliness is a question to be explored. It is unclear if Ruth and her ultimate "caretaker," her aunt Sylvie, are able to transcend society's values of stability and security in their life of transience or, rather, if such a life is the only one available to them because of their inability to form connections with others.

For Ruth, as for Sethe, the spectres of the dead are always present in her mind. Unlike *Beloved*, however, Ruth's loved ones do not make themselves physically visible; their power and influence are no less tangible, though. Ruth's dialogues are almost entirely with the individuals who populate her mind, as opposed to those who inhabit Fingerbone, for instance. The haunting of Ruth, while not violent like that of Sethe, is equally demanding and entirely absorbing. Helen's abandonment has occasioned in her daughter "the habit of waiting" for a reunion with those whose absences consume her thoughts.

The majority of critical attention has focused on Ruth and Sylvie's renunciation of society in favor of a sort of communion with nature; discussions of the nature vs. culture dichotomy abound. Following tradition, culture is associated with the masculine, while nature is allied with the feminine. Ruth and Sylvie are perceived as

creating a uniquely "female" space for themselves outside of the oppressive cultural sphere: "The gradual, graceful process of de-evolution, of de-civilizing, that the novel enacts is also a rejection of the patriarchal values that have dominated American culture and a return to values and modes of being that have been associated in myth and imagery with the province of the female" (Kirkby 92). The women's flight from, and rejection of, society generally are interpreted as almost wholly positive acts of rebellion and self-assertion. The tendency is to overlook the fact that Ruth and Sylvie do not choose, but rather are compelled, to keep moving from one nondescript town to another. Ruth remarks about her jobs serving in various restaurants and stores: ". . . finally the imposture becomes burdensome, and obvious. Customers begin to react to my smile as if it were a grimace, and suddenly something in my manner makes them count their change . . . Once they begin to look at me like that, it is best that I leave" (214). The fact is that Ruth and Sylvie are driven to a life of transience because they are "so unlike other people" (214), and cannot situate themselves in society.

Aldrich comments that: "By convention, abandonment suggests suffering, nostalgia, a subjection to the past, but for Sylvie and Ruth, abandonment becomes a way of life, the means to overcome subjection to the past" (130). Yet, all the textual evidence disputes Aldrich's claim. What are "subjection to the past" and "nostalgia" if not Ruth's obsession with the lake, where her mother has drowned, and Sylvie's compulsion to ride in freight cars and walk across train bridges, her father having

perished in a train wreck? There are innumerable passages in Housekeeping wherein Ruth envisions a reconciliation with the inhabitants of the lake; her entire narrative is a reference to the past in some way. There is no evidence that the women's life of "abandonment" liberates them from the omnipotence of memory: "Setting the house on fire and entering a life of transience is a kind of declaration of existence" (Aldrich 138). Rather, setting the house on fire and hoping that all mementoes and remnants of a "life" will be consumed in the flames suggests an articulation of Ruth's feeling of being "invisible - incompletely and minimally existent" (105). Ruth does not want to assert her existence; she wants to return to a state of "mere unbeing" (215).

Critical interpretations seem to fall either into a group which interprets Sylvie and Ruth's flight as self-affirming, or into the group which adopts the perspective of the townspeople of Fingerbone and judges the women for their decision. Mallon, in particular, assumes that readers will be of one mind, not comprehending the women's rejection of "apple pie" and community in favor of truck stops and freight cars:

Like the townfolk of Fingerbone, we believe that people and things - like children, relationships, jobs, and houses - need to be made secure. We might permit, with tentative indulgence, a "stage" of rootlessness, a year or two of journeying. But ultimately, we will maintain, everyone and everything need a home. (95)

Aside from the patronizing tone, Mallon's analysis and passing of judgement do little in terms of provoking fruitful discussion about the novel. In addition, her views on Ruth and Sylvie contradict the novel's sympathetic portrayal of all the characters. There is no textual basis for either praising or condemning the women's choices.

It is more interesting to look at the novel in terms of what options are available to Ruth and Sylvie. Both characters are subjected to successive abandonments throughout their lives. As Winnicott notes, a traumatic incident is never forgotten by a child, regardless of how well events progress prior to the event, "and if [trauma] is in the pattern of their care, it builds up into a lack of confidence in the environment" (146). Perhaps the women continue and perpetuate the desertion characteristic of their upbringing because it is the only situation in which they feel comfortable; they have no sense of security in the "other world" of society. Transience and renunciation are familiar to Ruth and Sylvie; therefore, they gravitate toward this type of existence: "Because deprivation is what Ruth knows best, she makes choices that - despite the seemingly radical difference of her transient life - tend to replicate the patterns of loss and painful connections that have shaped her life before she leaves Fingerbone" (Kaivola 689).

The cycle of abandonment begins when Helen deposits her two daughters on their grandmother's porch and calmly and purposefully "sail[s] off the edge of the cliff" (23), and into the lake. Ruth observes that her grandmother "cared for us like someone reliving a long day in a dream . . . it must have seemed to her that she had returned to relive this day because it was here that something had been lost or forgotten" (24). Sylvia, the girls' grandmother, cannot account for the fact that her husband, Edmund, and her three daughters have disappeared so absolutely. For Sylvia, as for Ruth and Sylvie, the absence of those closest to her consumes her



attention, their "presence" in her mind being far more concrete than what transpires in the world around her, "the reality of sensation, emotion, and the surges of instinct in us being so much more actual and vivid than any perceptions in the external world" (Rivière 367).

Because she has been forsaken so many times, Sylvia comes to anticipate the same behavior from her granddaughters: "my grandmother saw our black souls dancing in the moonless cold and offered us deep-dish apple pie as a gesture of well-meaning and despair" (26). Sylvia's various housekeeping tasks of braiding hair, whitening shoes, frying chicken, and so on, are perfunctory attempts at imposing order and predictability on a life which she is aware defies these mechanisms. Tending the household also provides Sylvia with the distraction she needs to quell her own impulse to "fling it all out of the windows," and devote herself to a path of evanescence. She recognizes that her nature is to be "a soul all unaccompanied," and acknowledges that "she had never really wished to feel married to anyone" (17): "you may see in someone's mending that he or she is building up a self-strength which makes possible a toleration of the destructiveness that belongs to that person's nature" (Winnicott 88). While it does not appear that Sylvia's inclination is toward destruction per se, her cleaning and tidying, and her later religious zeal, may serve to suppress her strong urge to flee society and its constraints.

Sylvia's (and the townspeople's) aversion to hoboes, and her admonition to Lucille and Ruth that "hoboes made a practice of whisking children under their coats and

carrying them off" (95, 96), likely masks an attraction to the hoboes' life of transience. Sylvia also warns her grandchildren that "a child who came too near a train was liable to be scalded to death where she stood by a sudden blast of steam" (95). Their grandmother sees, perhaps, her own desire to escape mirrored in the girls and attempts, futilely in Ruth's case, to protect them. Sylvia "had never really wished to feel married to anyone" and she most loved her husband, Edmund, when he behaved "as a soul all unaccompanied, like her own" (17). There is a hint, then, that Sylvia, like Sylvie and Ruth, did not want to, or could not, form close attachments. Similar to Sylvie's affinity for sequined shoes is Sylvia's attraction to the fanciful picture of two seahorses, painted for her by Edmund: "It was the seahorses themselves that she wanted to see as soon as she took her eyes away, and that she wanted to see even when she was looking at them. The wanting never subsided until something - a quarrel, a visit - took her attention away" (12, 13). Perhaps the seahorses, like the hoboes, represent a freedom of sorts, for which Sylvia longs, but of which she is also frightened. As Robinson herself states in an interview with Tace Hedrick, Sylvie, like the hoboes "is threatening to [the townspeople] in the way that someone who tempts you is threatening" (Robinson 3).

Sylvia resists her apparent tendency toward departure likely because she feels a responsibility to her three daughters and her husband, initially, and later to her grandchildren, to provide a sense of security and stability in her home. Apparently, Sylvia could be defined as a "good-enough" mother, as she seems to adapt in a self-

sacrificing way to her children and grandchildren. She sublimates a possible urge to wander off in the quotidian tasks of housekeeping and child care.

Ruth describes her grandmother's death as Sylvia having "eschewed awakening" (29); in the same way, her grandfather "escaped this world years before [Ruth] entered it" (3). Death is perceived as an active undertaking of avoidance or as a well-planned decision. For Ruth, death is an opportunity to return to a state of "unbeing" and to reunite with loved ones, in particular her mother, who is, to Ruth: "a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished" (160). Ruth repeats that her mother is "not perished," possibly to quiet her own anxiety that her mother, in fact, is irretrievable, and that Sylvie may have supplanted Helen's memory.

Some critics, notably Aldrich, interpret Ruth's longing for reconciliation as: "a daughter's long continuation of her pre-oedipal attachment to her mother and her near disregard for the symbolic order - the law of the father" (Aldrich 133). Julia Kristeva, in discussing the "pre-oedipal" phase, states:

The child is bound to the mother's body without the latter being, as yet, a "separate object." Instead, the mother's body acts with the child's as a sort of socio-natural continuum. This period is dominated by the oral and anal drives of incorporation and aggressive rejection: hence the pleasure is auto-erotic as well as inseparable from the mother's body. (148)

In Housekeeping, there is little or no reference to the body; when the corporeal is acknowledged, it is in Ruth's wish: "Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart" (159). Unlike the character of Beloved, Ruth does not express the

desire to incorporate or to merge with her mother. While Ruth does dream of a reconciliation with her mother (among others), she seems to recognize herself as being differentiated from Helen. Ruth is able to look objectively at her mother, in the sense that she looks for an explanation for Helen's desertion:

I think it must have been my mother's plan to rupture this bright surface, to sail beneath it into very blackness, but here she was, wherever my eyes fell, and behind my eyes, whole and in fragments, a thousand images of one gesture, never dispelled but rising always, inevitably, like a drowned woman. (163)

Ruth is haunted by the image of her mother because she has disappeared. Rather than a desire to return to the realm of the pre-linguistic, pre-oedipal sphere, Ruth's longing expresses the sharply-felt lack of her mother, in addition to other members of her family, and, in fact, the "entire population of Fingerbone, past, present, and to come" (34).

Again, unlike *Beloved*, who could be situated in the midst of pre-oedipal anxieties and aggression, Ruth's narrative disputes her consignment to the same realm. Kristeva writes: "It is interesting to note that, on the level of speech, the pre-oedipal stage corresponds to an intense echolalia, first in rhythm and then in intonation, before a phonologico-syntactic structure is imposed on the sentence. This latter is only totally achieved at the end of the oedipal phase" (149). *Beloved's* narrative is disjointed and not cohesive, and her repetition of the word "mine" could be an echoing of *Sethe* or of *Denver*, which lends support to Kristeva's view. Ruth, in contrast, relates her story in a coherent and differentiated manner. The ideas and

perceptions expostulated by Ruth are her own, which signifies that she has a sense of herself as separate from others. So, whatever Ruth's motivation may be, it is not a need to possess or to incorporate her mother; Ruth's longing is almost devoid of passion, and certainly without the ambivalent and co-existing feelings of rage and desire characteristic of the pre-oedipal stage. Rivière writes: "all fears come back to the fear of death" (356), and it is this ultimate fear which lies behind the cravings to acquire and incorporate. Rather than a dread of death, Ruth expresses an acceptance of, and a looking forward to her inevitable end, again contradicting Aldrich.

If Ruth's yearning for reunion cannot be explained in terms of a regression to the pre-symbolic, neither can it be understood adequately with reference to the notion of "women's fluid ego boundaries" (Hirsch 197). To assert that women, as a whole, do not have strong "ego boundaries" is essentialist and limiting. Worse yet, Siân Mile writes:

"woman" must not e-merge from the body, mother, house, thing, or sex but must merge with darkness and space until all differentiation between "I" and everything dissolves . . . This may be an alternative "femininity" since it is constructed by women and does, in fact, seem to fit in, for once, with the French feminists. (134)

Regardless of whether or not the new "femininity" is constructed by women, it serves to subdue and dismiss them. If women are to merge with everything else and obliterate the "I," it then becomes impossible to speak and to assert oneself. Again, women are relegated to a pre-linguistic realm, postulated as a viable space by French feminism, which effectively silences them, and does not provide an acceptable lens

through which to view Housekeeping. Perhaps Robinson has a point when she comments derisively, in an interview with Thomas Schaub on "this French criticism, which is absolutely simultaneous with the fact that the French can't write literature" (Robinson 245). In any case, the theories do not seem appropriate to a discussion of Housekeeping.

Melanie Klein's theories are more helpful for gaining a measure of insight into Ruth's interiority:

all those who have been emotionally important to us are still with us and inseparable from us . . . they are *in us* and part of us and therefore inseparable and available to us. Memory, relating to external events and to the corporeal reality of loved figures as beings distinct from ourselves, is one facet of our relation to them; the other facet is the life they lead within us indivisible from ourselves, their existence in our inner worlds. (Rivière 362)

Ruth, then, appears to be more allied with the forces and memories in her mind than with the outside world. She remarks: "I have never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming. I know my life would be much different if I could ever say, This I have learned from my senses, while that I have merely imagined" (215, 216). Ruth, after Lucille leaves, has a relationship with only one person, Sylvie; the rest of her interactions transpire in the recesses of her imaginings. Because of the successive abandonments to which Ruth has been subjected, she withdraws inside of herself and relates solely to those who cannot desert her because they live only in her mind. Rivière states that a "special compensatory connection [exists] between external loss and internal acquisition or possession" (363). Ruth, like Denver in Beloved, cannot

tolerate "another leaving, another trick" (Morrison 123); she is uneasy in society because she has no trust in her environment: "The inner space ordinarily given over to social consciousness and social forms seems reserved, in Ruth's case, for those who have gone away and may some day come back" (Toles 153, 154).

In Sylvie, Ruth recognizes a kindred spirit characterized by the great-aunts as: "too dreaming and self-absorbed to be ordinarily considerate" (44). From a traditional standpoint, Sylvie "is a less than adequate caretaker" (Kaivola 681); however, Ruth recognizes that she and Sylvie are "of a kind" (106), and waits for Sylvie to claim her. Sylvie does not fulfill societal expectations of a "good" mother. "Good Housekeeping" magazine is useful only as a fire extinguisher; leaves, birds, cats, and debris gather in the corners of the previously well-kept house, and Sylvie is entirely indifferent as to the girls' school attendance. As the novel progresses, the townspeople become increasingly uneasy and judgemental toward Sylvie and her parenting of Lucille and Ruth: "The mother is judged, her basic humanity evaluated, on the basis of her daughter's neatness, sweetness, and docility" (Nice 82, 83). Sylvie buys the girls "blue velveteen ballet slippers" (93), covered in sequins, for school shoes, she does not assist them in dressing, and she does not make Lucille go to school when her "symptoms" are: "pains in her wrists and knees, a buzzing in her ears, a sore tongue, faintness, a stomachache, and double vision, but no fever or loss of appetite" (77). Sylvie does not lose herself in Ruth and Lucille; she is not self-sacrificing and entirely empathetic, as psychoanalysis would prescribe. She is,

however, willing to let the girls express themselves as they wish and be independent. When Lucille demands meat and vegetables for dinner, Sylvie does not argue but gives Lucille the money to purchase such things.

While Sylvie does not conform to the role of housekeeper, seemingly synonymous with that of mother, she is never abusive or really neglectful of the girls; she simply continues to live the way she always has done, not losing herself in their needs:

Over the centuries, despite wild variations in child care, the incidence of mental illness among children, as best we can determine, seems to have been fairly constant. Whether children were empathized with or were the subject of Watson's behaviorism, whether they were sternly disciplined or spoiled, they managed to thrive. Apparently ordinary mothering does not cause psychological problems . . . All this casts serious doubt on the validity of our current image of ideal mother. Perhaps she needn't be all-empathic, after all. (Thurer 300)

Thurer does not define her concept of "ordinary mothering"; however, it likely encompasses caring for children's physical needs as well as attempting to foster their emotional and intellectual well-being. Sylvie provides Ruth and Lucille with food and shelter and is never violent or opprobrious, all important components of good parenting. Whether Sylvie adequately nurtures the children emotionally and mentally is less clear. Sylvie develops a stronger bond with Ruth than with Lucille because she may identify more readily with Ruth. It is plausible that most parents cultivate a somewhat deeper relationship with a child to whom they can relate, as opposed to one whose values they do not share.



Sylvie, then may be a "good mother" to Ruth, because she is able to recognize and to meet her needs, however unconventional. For Lucille, though, who dreams of a mother in the image of Mrs. Browne, who takes her daughter, Rosette, to Spokane for ballet lessons, sews the costumes, and takes her to Naples for baton lessons (103), Sylvie is not an adequate mother. Lucille, who has endured the same abandonments as Ruth, instead of perpetuating and internalizing this behavior, strives for the opposite: stability, order, and predictability. As Lucille begins to assert herself and to distance herself from Sylvie and Ruth, increasingly she and Ruth have disparate memories of their mother; Ruth remarks:

Lucille's mother was orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow (more than I ever knew or she could prove) who was killed in an accident. *My* mother presided over a life so strictly simple and circumscribed that it could not have made any significant demands on her attention. She tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone - she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned. (109)

Ruth's version may be the more realistic of the two; but both girls create a mental image of an ideal mother, in addition to projecting their own tendencies onto this imagined person. Nice writes: "The death of the mother is only in the physical sense a final separation. The relationship lives on in the daughter's mind and there is still a lot of work to be done on it" (221). The internal dialogue that one has with those who inhabit the mind provides an opportunity for dealing with unresolved issues and conflicts.

That Lucille ultimately leaves Ruth and Sylvie for the Home Economics teacher, then, is entirely appropriate. Miss Royce represents, for Lucille, everything that a mother should be: she is demure, "in her brown box suit with the salmon-pink bow at the throat" (141), predictable, and presumably, cooks and cleans. Ruth notes that Miss Royce: "In effect, adopted [Lucille]" (140), which is an interesting point. Reddy and Daly write, referring to Sara Ruddick's work, that:

all mothers are adoptive mothers, meaning that one "adopts" the child - whether one has given birth to that child or not - when one chooses to care for that child. We think this notion of "adoption" may serve as the foundation of a transformation of motherhood, as it is predicated upon the necessity of choice and thereby rejects essentialist views of women. (4)

It is easy to judge Sylvie and to label her as having no "maternal instincts"; but the concept of "maternal instinct" is essentialist and potentially dangerous. The biological mother is not necessarily the best person to care for a child; if a woman chooses not to, or is incapable of care, the child will not be nurtured adequately. An individual, male or female, who is emotionally available and mature, and who consciously chooses to raise a child, is a better caregiver than one who, for whatever reason, decides not to do so. Sylvie, it seems, elects to care for Ruth as best she can, recognizing a kindred personality. Lucille is so different from both Sylvie and Ruth and her needs conflict so sharply with theirs, that Sylvie cannot provide Lucille with the care she desires. Perhaps Ruth seeks out Sylvie because, never having experienced security, she is replicating the relationships she has had with others throughout her life; the novel, however, does not support a passing of judgement on

either Lucille's or Ruth and Sylvie's choices: "to use terms like 'well-being' is to position oneself outside Ruth's own perspective, to assume that one is in a privileged position in relation to Ruth, to believe that one is able to determine what, exactly is in her best interest" (Kaivola 682).

Sylvie offers Ruth a life of transience and impermanence, with no guarantee of security. Remaining with Sylvie, though, is Ruth's only hope for some semblance of a relationship with a living family member. Lucille is forever lost to Ruth because their natures are so vastly different. Regardless of Sylvie's shortcomings as a caretaker, she and Ruth are alike and they are "family"; neither is willing to suffer the pain of another abandonment. Ruth remarks:

Sylvie did not want to lose me. She did not want me to grow gigantic and multiple, so that I seemed to fill the whole house, and she did not wish me to turn subtle and miscible, so that I could pass through the membranes that separate dream and dream. She did not wish to remember me. She much preferred my simple, ordinary presence, silent and ungainly though I might be. For she could regard me without strong emotion . . . But if she lost me, I would become extraordinary by my vanishing. (195)

Neither Sylvie nor Ruth want to add one another to the number of spirits which haunt them, occupying their minds continually. Ruth says: "Even the illusion of perimeters fails when families are separated" (198). Because of successive losses, both women prefer the tangible presence of the other, despite a less than ideal life of transience, to the overwhelming power of memory.

Interestingly, though, the way in which Sylvie "claims" Ruth reenacts Helen's desertion. Sylvie, after taking Ruth to the island to see the wild children and the

dilapidated house, disappears. Ruth is left to discover that: "Now there was neither threshold nor sill between me and these cold, solitary children who almost breathed against my cheek and almost touched my hair" (154).

Sylvie claims Ruth, paradoxically, by temporarily abandoning her, so that Ruth comes to realize that Sylvie is all she really has. Ruth remarks that: "once alone, it is impossible to believe that one could ever have been otherwise. Loneliness is an absolute discovery" (157). It is just after Ruth makes the "discovery" that she is utterly alone that she anxiously insists that her mother is "not perished, not perished" (160). Ruth realizes that she has no alternative but to follow Sylvie because she cannot live within the parameters of "normal" society, and Sylvie is the closest approximation to a mother that Ruth will have.

Apparently, Sylvie abandons Ruth in the hope that Ruth will come to just such a conclusion. When Sylvie finally returns, Ruth notes:

I could feel the pleasure she took in my dependency . . . by abandoning me she had assumed the power to bestow such a richness of grace. For in fact I wore her coat like beatitude, and her arms around me were as heartening as mercy, and I would say nothing that might make her loosen her grasp or take one step away. (161)

Ruth has passed the test that Sylvie has devised for her, and Sylvie begins to replace Helen's image in Ruth's mind: "the faceless shape in front of me could as well be Helen herself as Sylvie. I spoke to her by the name Sylvie, and she did not answer. Then how was one to know? And if she were Helen in my sight, how could she not be Helen in fact?" (167) The power of subjective perception in creating "reality" is

evident here. As Ruth notes, she has never "distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming" (215). What Ruth imagines or remembers in her mind's eye is more vivid and actual than whatever may exist objectively in the world. If Sylvie, then, takes the place of Helen in Ruth's mind, Ruth concludes that she does so also in reality.

Ruth experiences a sort of "rebirth" in which she accepts and recognizes Sylvie as her mother, in effect. Any resistance Ruth may have felt toward Sylvie and a life of drifting is overcome by the recognition that no viable alternative exists for her.

Ruth and Sylvie must flee Fingerbone to avoid being separated. After unsuccessfully attempting to burn down the house, the two women cross the train bridge and embark on a life of transience. Because the bridge is perilous and has never been crossed, Sylvie and Ruth are presumed to have drowned in the lake: "Dogs traced us to the bridge. Townspeople began searching at dawn for the bodies, but we were never found, never found, and the search was at last abandoned" (213). It is interesting that Ruth does not distinguish between the newspaper report of their death and the apparent reality of their successful crossing of the bridge. She says: "the lake claimed us" (214), and: "Since we are dead, the house would be [Lucille's] now" (217, 218).

Envisioning Lucille in an imaginary restaurant, Ruth includes herself and Sylvie in the group of people who are not going to greet Lucille at her table: "My mother, likewise, is not there, and my grandmother in her house slippers with her pigtail

wagging, and my grandfather, with his hair combed flat against his brow, does not examine the menu with studious interest. We are nowhere in Boston" (218). Whether Ruth and Sylvie, in fact, have perished in the lake or not, finally, is irrelevant. The "crossing of the bridge" has put them in a realm where everything is asserted by negation. Ruth, Sylvie, Helen, Sylvia, and Edmund are not in Boston; they are nowhere in particular. The recognition of this fact, however, calls their images to mind, and through memory, their presences powerfully are felt.

## CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION

Through the lens of psychoanalysis, I have attempted to discuss the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationships in Beloved and Housekeeping. Also, from the perspective of the novels, I have tried to examine the adequacy of the psychoanalytic theories for an exploration of the relationship. Because the mothers in the two novels possess an elusive selfhood at best, the child-centered analyses have been appropriate.

One of my initial goals was to present the viewpoint of the mothers: Sethe, in Beloved, and Helen, in Housekeeping. Unfortunately, at times, I tend to adopt the viewpoint of the theorists with whom I take issue. In attempting to assume the mothers' perspectives, I have discovered that these two novels make the task inherently difficult. I chose these particular novels because they convey a sense of the complexity and ambiguity intrinsic to the mother-daughter bond. The mothers must make difficult choices in terms of striking a balance between connection and separateness, and the novels do not allow for the passing of judgement on these decisions. As I have stated, however, the mothers are rarely portrayed as subjects, separate from their daughters. Because the novels themselves seem to disallow such an interpretation, it has been challenging to discover places in the novels where the agency of the mothers is addressed.

For instance, the character of Ruth's mother, Helen, develops solely through the recollections of the narrator, Ruth, her sister, Lucille, and their aunt Sylvie. It is possible only to surmise Helen's feelings and desires, and what may have motivated her to abandon her children and to commit suicide. There is more of an indication as to the forces which drive Helen's mother, Sylvia, in her quotidian tasks of "keeping" house. She, too, remains very much on the periphery of the story told by her granddaughter, Ruth.

These two novels are interesting in that they reflect, to a degree, the reality of mother-daughter interaction. While psychoanalysis does not allow the mother to be separate from her child's needs, this has been the actual experience of mothering, historically. The fact that it has been difficult to discuss the mothers' subjectivity in the novels illustrates the scarcity of theoretical frameworks on which to draw that recognize the mother as something more than the recipient of the child's demands. The reality is that losing oneself has been a part of "good" mothering, as exemplified in the novels.

The only "maternal" figure who is granted full subject status in Housekeeping is the aunt, Sylvie. As I have mentioned, Sylvie is the antithesis of Winnicott's "good enough" mother. She and Ruth embark on a life of transience, impermanence, and instability because they cannot conform to the norms of society. They place themselves in an uncertain realm at novel's end - something which is disturbing, as it seems to suggest that there is no place for a mother like Sylvie, or a mother who is



detached from her children in the sense that she is not subject to their demands and needs.

Even in Sylvie's case, though, we are obliged to see her through Ruth's eyes. Although apparently independent and self-sufficient, Sylvie is not given her own voice. Any information the reader receives is filtered through Ruth's perception of Sylvie. Ruth narrates the novel; the mother-daughter relationship is presented from the daughter's perspective. In Beloved, the narrator, seemingly, is objective, in that she is not one of the characters. There is a section of the novel, though, where the characters of Sethe, Beloved, and Denver each are given a voice, where they seem to vie for narrative control and individuation while, concurrently, wanting to merge together: "Don't love her too much. I am loving her too much . . . Beloved / You are my sister / You are my daughter / You are my face; you are me / I have found you again; you have come back to me / You are my Beloved / You are mine / You are mine / You are mine" (216).

Toward the conclusion of Beloved, where Paul tells Sethe: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (273), there is a suggestion that Sethe may be capable of affirming her selfhood ("Me? Me?") as separate from her children. For the first time in the novel, what is repeated is not "Mine," which establishes an interdependence, but rather "Me," which potentially creates an identity for Sethe. Problematically, though, the novel does not end here. The spectre of Beloved continues to roam, and it is

suggested that without constant effort ("Remembering seemed unwise"), her demands may again supersede Sethe's tentative strivings for selfhood.

By "selfhood" and "independence," I do not mean existing entirely separately from family or society, as Sylvie and Ruth are compelled to do. Rather, I am referring to the desirability of being able to pursue one's goals and interests, to develop one's abilities while, at the same time, maintaining a sense of connectedness with and responsibility to others, all qualities which are key to mothering while nurturing oneself as well. Often, as evidenced in the novels, mothers must submit to the needs of their children to the detriment of selfhood.

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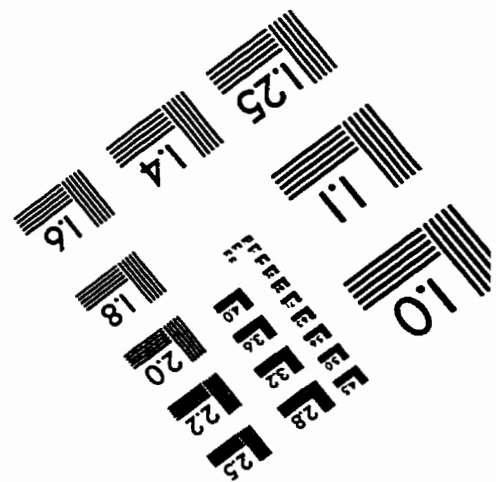
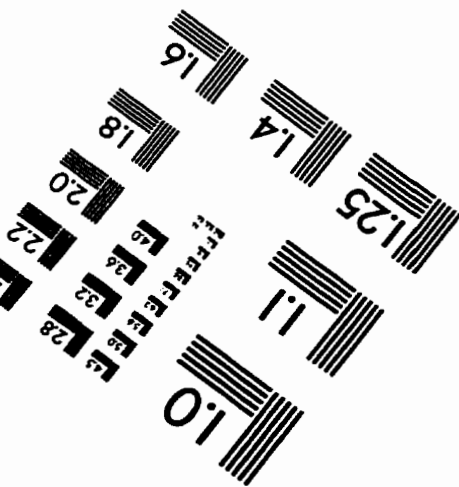
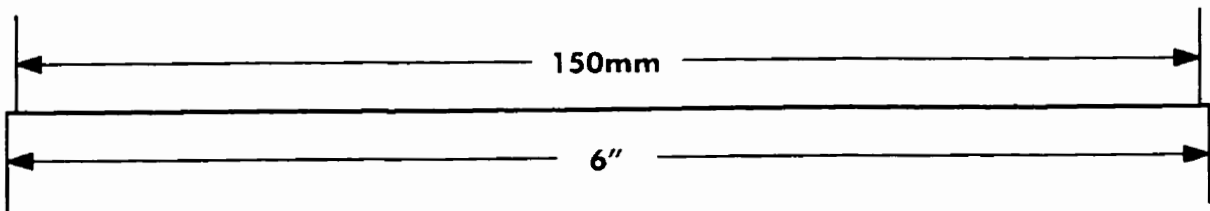
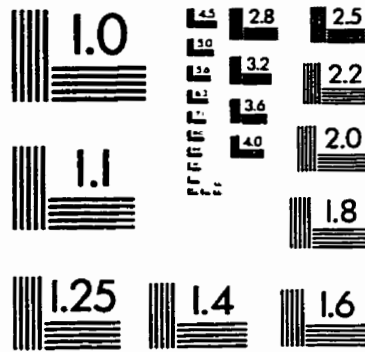
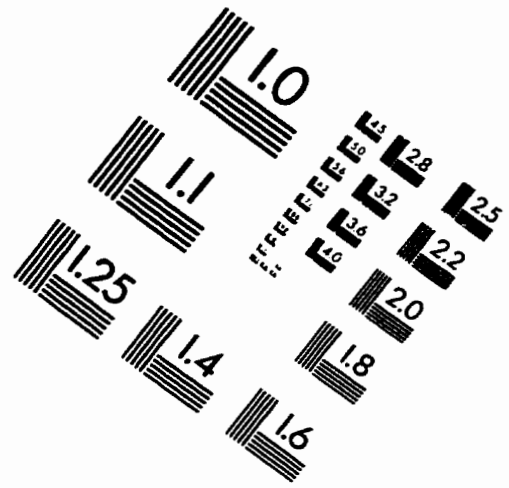
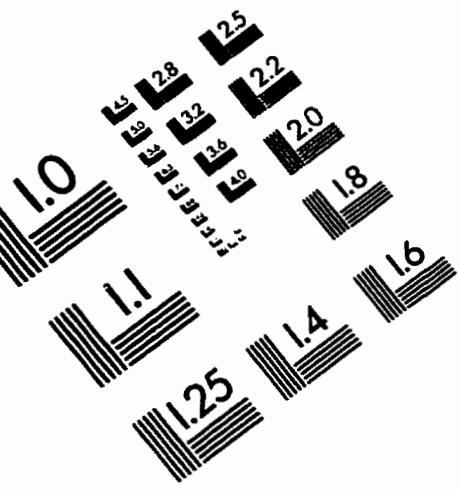
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