On the Threshold: Breadwinning, Capitalism and the Absent/Present Father in the Works of Three Late 20th-Century U.S. Novelists

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ON THE THRESHOLD:
BREADWINNING, CAPITALISM AND THE ABSENT/PRESENT FATHER
IN THE WORKS OF THREE LATE 20TH-CENTURY U.S. NOVELISTS

by

NANCY J. HOCH

VOLUME I

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

ON THE THRESHOLD:

BREADWINNING, CAPITALISM AND THE ABSENT/PRESENT FATHER IN THE WORKS OF THREE LATE 20TH-CENTURY U.S. NOVELISTS

by

NANCY J. HOCH

ADVISER: PROFESSOR JON-CHRISTIAN SUGGS

As society industrialized in the nineteenth century and jobs moved outside the home, a figure which I call the absent/present father began to make his appearance in American literature. This figure, hovering physically or emotionally on the threshold of family life, never completely present but never completely absent either, has filled the pages of fiction from that time until recently when, as the U.S. becomes postindustrial, depictions of the absent/present father decline.

Bringing a socio-economic as opposed to the usual psychological perspective to my close readings of the fictional family, I explore the cultural work the absent/present father does in three recent works as well as in novels from earlier periods, considering why this liminal figure arises in the nineteenth century and how he changes through time. Of particular importance is why so little attention has been paid by literary critics, including feminist critics, either to the absent/present father or to the general subject of fatherhood.

I conclude that hidden within this figure who straddles the public/private divide is a subversive narrative about capitalism, one that highlights its deleterious effects on families and
communities. His hovering demeanor reflects the ambivalent relationship both fictional texts and society have to this knowledge.

The three works I study—Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991), Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996) and John Updike's Rabbit series (1960-2000)—are members of a recent group of literary works that, in paying close attention to this largely unexamined figure, are, like the liminal father they depict, positioned on a threshold: they flesh out the story of the absent/present father just at the moment when he begins to give way both in literature and in life to other, more diverse depictions of fathers and fatherhood.

In these texts the father's behavior, a mixture of withdrawal and aggression, is tied to the difficulties he experiences as a breadwinner crossing between the workplace and the home. For a complicated set of reasons, including his masculinity training, he is silent about the wounds he suffers in the larger world. These traumas surface in distorted form within the family.

Because class has been, until recently, a taboo subject in U.S. society, the father has chiefly been viewed through the lens of gender. A hallmark of these recent novels is their refusal to separate the domestic sphere from the socio-economic world. By drawing attention to the injuries of class inflicted on fathers and families, these works offer an important revision to the familiar story of the absent/present father.
To work within the capitalist system is to wound oneself, and to forget, not the wound, but how the wound was made.

—Richard Godden  *Fictions of Capital*

If we forgive our fathers, what is left?

—Dick Lourie "Forgiving Our Fathers"
Like so many men of his generation, my father was an absent/present father. Born in 1920, he looked from the outside like a man on the road to middle-class success: handsome, athletic, the president of his fraternity at college, graduated from medical school and married to my mother by 23, a doctor by 25. Eight years later he was the father of three children and the proud owner of a house in Westchester County from which he would commute to work at St. Luke's Hospital in New York City until he retired. My father was a good provider and always, as far as any of us knew, faithful to my mother.

Going through my parents' papers after we moved them out of their house and into an Alzheimer's memory ward, I found a newspaper clipping from the 1950s with a picture of the white clapboard house we lived in. The article was a puff piece about the young doctor and his wife, their beautiful home and its furnishings. Though it was published in a local newspaper, the article would have been equally at home in *Life Magazine*: it was straight out of that picture perfect world of suburban happy endings.

Picture perfect, is, in some ways, how I remember my childhood. We lived on the edge of town near the beautiful waters of Long Island Sound. I spent endless hours running through the back woods with neighbor kids or sitting quietly by myself watching ducks take off and land on secluded saltwater ponds. Inside the house, too, there were moments of happiness, but there was also trouble, almost all of it centered on my father and his moods. He was volatile and subject to outbursts of anger. Because we were never quite sure what might trigger them, we learned to be cautious. Even so, there was always the danger of verbal or even physical abuse.
I have early memories of him coming home from work and running to greet him. He would lay me across the back of his neck in a "fireman's carry," his left hand clasping my arm and leg together over his chest so that my body formed a necklace around his neck, his right hand grabbing on to the imaginary ladder we were climbing down as he rescued me from the fire. There were plenty of other good times as a family. We did a lot of camping and hiking and there were long conversations at dinner about science or how something worked. Once, when I had a lead role in the fifth grade play, he surprised me by showing up for the daytime performance: he had taken off from work to be there.

The fact that he hadn’t told me he was going to attend the play was typical: he kept so much to himself. The things I learned about him I learned obliquely, because it slipped out when we were talking about something else or because my mother or one of the other relatives made a comment that shed light on his past. If I asked him anything directly, he would often make a joke or, what was even more painful, say something harsh to push me away, as if even a minor revelation on his part might lead to something catastrophic. Whatever inner demons he was wrestling with, they were too strong for him, for all of us.

Long after I left home, my Great Aunt Timmy, the last living relative who had known him as an adolescent, told me that when my father first went to college, he went through a crisis and that his father “had to go up there and straighten him out.” The result of this father-and-son meet up, according to Timmy, was that my father agreed to pursue a degree in medicine. Later he would join his father in practice and they worked together as close as brothers until my grandfather died at eighty.

He would have been happier working with his hands, Timmy told me. He was fascinated with radios throughout his adolescence, working long hours in his room taking them apart,
putting them together. It was the 1930s and radios were the exciting new thing on everyone's minds. But it wasn't just radios. Cleaning out the garage after he died, I found a beautiful wooden model of a sailboat he had made sometime in high school, complete with masts and rigging. He was crazy about airplanes, too, and eventually got his flying license. Sunday afternoon outings with my dad when I was little often involved going up to the local airport and watching with him through the chain link fence to the airport as small planes took off and landed.

In the garage, I found his flight log and discovered that he stopped flying after my grandfather died. I can only guess now at the reason. It's the kind of thing he never would have shared, at least with me. And anyway, by then I had so internalized his reluctance to talk about himself that the questions I might have thought to ask another person didn't even form themselves in my mind when I was with him.

Looking back now, I can see that his desire to work with his hands, to tinker with radios or cars or fix furnaces or whatever must have sent a cold chill down my grandfather's spine. It must have seemed to my grandfather like my father was in danger of veering away from the path of upward mobility the family was tirelessly plotting out of its immigrant past, that instead of rising, my father was getting ready to go back down the class ladder.

He buckled down after that talk with his father and became a doctor. Still, any chance he got he'd be out in the garage in his "dungarees" building something or taking something else apart. This wasn't just a professional man puttering in his “shop” as a way to feel more manly or to get some alone time away from the wife and kids. My father really meant it. When he bought a used bulldozer to help him build the home my parents eventually retired to—a house he built every stitch of by himself, right down to lumbering the boards from the surrounding property—he immediately took the thing apart. I remember looking out the kitchen window to see bulldozer
parts scattered across the driveway and him looking happy as a clam. Years after he retired, a nurse who had assisted him in the operating room at St. Luke's told me that my father's hands were the talk of the hospital. They were so beautiful, she said; it was “like a symphony” watching him work.

He was at home fixing things and people, too, if surgery counts. Maybe it gave him a sense of control. Fixing his relationships with people was another story: he tried as best he could, but mostly he was awkward at it and often, as the attempt to relate wore on, he ended up saying something abrasive or competitive or both which either shut the conversation down or else caused it to escalate into a fight.

One night something upset him at dinner. I can't remember now what remark or thought or feeling set him off, but he got up and rammed his fist into the wall so hard it broke one of his fingers.

Like the depression that descended upon the middle-class housewives Betty Friedan portrayed in *The Feminine Mystique*, the problem my father suffered from also seemed to have no name. It kept us from being close to him and to each other. The fallout settled over the whole family, drifting into the crevices of everything we could and couldn't do together. If people outside the family sensed there was anything amiss, we never knew. No one ever spoke about it. In fact, I assumed the opposite, that the world outside the family saw my father in the same light as the local newspaper did: the successful head of a successful family.

The night he died, at age 90, I sat looking at his body, at his hands, at the extremely crooked finger that he had chosen not to have set. He had carried it with him all these years, the visible sign of his inner turmoil. As his hands grew pale and the blood carrying the last of his
warmth pooled towards the center of his body, I thought of how much had happened since that evening long ago when I was a small girl and he had put his fist into the wall.

In the final five years of his life, after both he and my mom had developed Alzheimer's, I discovered what I had somehow known all along: that underneath his wary exterior was a soul eager to love and be loved. As he loosened his grip on who he was and who I was in those last years, we were able to sit together and be close and loving in a way we were never able to be when he and I were younger.

Though I didn't realize it when I started this project or even for a long time after I began working on it, this dissertation has been a way for me to get closer to my father. Despite the many differences between the fictional fathers I studied and my own father, there is, underneath, a sort of template of American fatherhood that they all share. The works I studied spoke to me in surprising ways about the experiences I had had in my own family.

It has taken a long time, longer than it should, but in the end the work I have done here has given me a way to put more of the pieces of the puzzle that was my father together. Chris Suggs, my adviser, maintains that writing a dissertation is a gift you give yourself. It's an idea that has seemed farfetched when my inner critic was raging, making me doubt my ability to craft even a single sentence let alone pull together such a big project. There were many times when I thought longingly of giving it all up.

In the end, though, I'm glad I stuck with it: this project has helped me put my father and the family that I grew up in into a larger context and that has been healing. Also healing is the thought that in sending this dissertation out into the world I am helping to break the silence about a trauma that is still, it seems to me, far more widespread than we, as a society, are willing to admit.
I like to think that my father would have recognized something of himself in the story I have told here of the absent/present father and that he would have been glad to see it being brought out into the open. But if not, I hope at least he would feel how this story, which is really as much my story now as it is his, is offered in love.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

VOLUME ONE

PREFACE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

STANDING ON THE THRESHOLD:
THE ABSENT PRESENCE OF THE FATHER IN U.S. LITERATURE (1)

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT DOES ECONOMICS HAVE TO DO WITH IT?
THE RISE OF THE BREADWINNER DAD AND THE SILENCE OF THE FATHER IN LIFE AND LITERATURE (19)

I: The Rise of Capitalism, the Modern Family, and the Breadwinner Dad (21)

II: The Rise of the Novel, Critical Responses to the Fictional Family, and the Call for a New Type of Literary Theory (43)

III: The Silence of the Father in Life, Literature, and Literary Criticism (86)

CHAPTER TWO

FATHER FIGURING:
NARRATIONS OF THE ABSENT/PRESENT FATHER IN LITERATURE AND LITERARY CRITICISM (110)

I: The Absent/Present Father as Literary Critics Have Figured Him (113)

II: American Literature's Figuring of the Absent/Present Father (162)

III: The Figuring of the Absent/Present Father in Smiley, Diaz and Updike's Works (193)
VOLUME TWO

CHAPTER THREE  OBSIDIAN SHARDS
PIECLNG TOGETHER PATRIARCHY, CAPITALISM AND THE STORY OF THE ABSENT/PRESENT FATHER IN JANE SMILEY’S A THOUSAND ACRES (243)
I: Introduction (243)

II: Excavating the Father's Story (253)

III: Some Cause for These Hard Hearts
—Understanding Larry Cook (273)
—The Third Thread (286)
—The Monopoly Game: Capitalism and Men's Hard Hearts (296)
—The Monopoly Game Revisited: Women No Longer Have to Play with the Men (332)

CHAPTER FOUR  OF MASKS AND MASCULINITY
FATHERS, SONS AND THE CASTING OF IDENTITY
IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S DROWN (359)
I. Introduction (359)

II. Seamless Absences: Telling the Father's Story (365)

III. Fathering Identity: The Work/Home Interface
—Contradictions (384)
—Deformed or Detained Elsewhere: Masks, Masculinity, and Fatherhood (392)
—Between Men (432)
—Legacies (445)

CHAPTER FIVE  RABBIT-LIGHT AND THE ROCKETS’ RED GLARE
BREADWINNER DADS AND THE AMERICAN CENTURY
IN JOHN UPDIKE’S RABBIT SERIES (466)
I. Introduction (467)

II: Into the Rabbit Warren: "Yes, But" and the Art of Telling the Father's Story (472)
III: Hating oneself with a Certain Relish: Work, Personal Life, 
and the Middle-Class Family in Late Capitalism 
—Breadwinning and Inner Dwindling (496) 
—Become a Big Boy Yourself (518) 
—Exploding from Within (537) 
—Saying Goodbye to the Absent/Present Father (573) 

CONCLUSION WHAT IS LEFT? (585) 

LIST OF WORKS CITED (604)
INTRODUCTION

STANDING ON THE THRESHOLD:
THE ABSENT PRESENCE OF THE FATHER IN U.S. LITERATURE

In *Moby Dick*, when Ishmael has second thoughts about signing on to the *Pequod* and placing himself in the hands of the mysterious Captain Ahab, the ship’s business manager Captain Peleg clinches his argument that Ahab is a “good man” with the revelation that Captain Ahab is a father: “Besides, my boy, he has a wife [and] . . . by that sweet girl that old man has a child: hold ye then there can be any utter, hopeless harm in Ahab? No, no, my lad; stricken, blasted, if he be, Ahab has his humanities!” (93)

Ahab’s fatherhood comes overtly into play only once more in the text and when it does, it is at another dramatic juncture. The day before the catastrophic hunt of Moby Dick begins, Ahab and Starbuck stand on the deck of the Pequod and contemplate abandoning the chase and steering for home. Ahab, wracked by the thought that he has chosen to spend the last forty years of his life in “continual whaling. . . . furiously, foamingly [chasing my] prey,” begs Starbuck to come close to him so that he can “look into a human eye.” There Ahab finds the opposite pole to his hellish working life: “I see my wife and my child in thine eye. . . . the faraway home” (507). For a brief moment, Ahab imagines the scene that is going on at home in his absence, sees his son waking from a nap and his wife telling the small boy “how I am abroad upon the deep, but will yet come back to dance him again”; Starbuck, also a father, recalls how his own wife has “promised that my boy, every morning, should be carried to the hill to catch the first glimpse of his father’s sail” (508).
On the strength of the child waiting for each of them at voyage’s end, Starbuck presses Ahab to turn back: “Come, my Captain, study out the course, and let us away! See, see! the boy’s face from the window! the boy’s hand on the hill!” (508). But Ahab, breaking his connection with Starbuck, averts his gaze and plunges back into the whirlpool of his obsessions:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozzening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare: Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? . . . [T]he air smells now, as if it blew from a far-away meadow; they have been making hay somewhere under the slopes of the Andes, Starbuck, and the mowers are sleeping among the new-mown hay. Sleeping? Aye, toil we how we may, we all sleep at last on the field. Sleep? Aye, and rust amid greenness; as last year’s scythes flung down, and left in the half-cut swaths. (508)

Appearing once towards the beginning and once towards the end of Moby Dick, the fact of Ahab’s fatherhood brackets the novel. It emerges in these two scenes as a redemptive chain that pulls him towards “natural lovings and longings” and away from “stormtime” and the “horrors of the deep” (506-508). But though the text ascribes great power to fatherhood, we never see Ahab with his son or family; instead, in between the two scenes described above, lies the thick bulk of the novel in which Ahab appears as a solitary figure, obsessed by work and his place in the universe. Against these “larger” concerns, fatherhood and home life recede.

Since the consolidation of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, the landscape of American literature has been replete with the depiction of fathers as absent presences. These depictions, I maintain, reflect the socio-economic changes wrought by industrialization, most especially the move of work outside the home. Husbands and fathers take on a liminal cast in the pages of American literature around the same time that the ideology of separate spheres of work for men and women arises, an ideology expressed nowhere in the
industrializing world with as much vigor as in the United States. Concurrent with the ideology of separate spheres comes the notion that man's chief contribution to family life and, in particular, to his children, is his ability to provide materially for his family. This role of breadwinner, which becomes, until the social and economic changes of the late twentieth century, so fused with the notion of fatherhood as to be almost synonymous, has placed fathers, in literature as well as in life, firmly on the threshold: suspended somewhere between work and home, they are never completely present in the family but never completely absent either.

Ahab is an extreme example of the absent/present literary father since the domestic aspect of his life is so submerged in the narrative as to be almost non-existent, but the outlines of his relationship with his child—one of murky and missed connections as the father peers at his son through the eyes of a fellow sailor and as the boy waiting at home relies upon his mother’s mediations to piece together a picture of his absent father—is repeated in literature from Melville’s time right up to the present. Ahab is literally absent from the home, but even in the texts where the father returns home each night there is a vacant, apparition-like quality to his participation in family life.

Nearly one hundred years after the appearance of Melville’s *Moby Dick*, for example, Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* offers us a similarly distant relationship between a father and his sons. Convinced that his grownup son Biff thinks he is “nothing,” Willy Loman envisions his funeral as a moment of triumphant revelation of his substance:

> That funeral will be massive! They’ll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! All the old-timers with the strange license plates—that boy will be thunder-struck . . . because he never realized—I am known! . . .

---

1 Tony Tanner makes the observation that the division of life into domestic and public spheres is more extreme in the U.S. than in any other industrializing nation in his book *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression*. 
He’ll see it with his eyes once and for all. He’ll see what I am. . . . He’s in for a shock, that boy! (126)

As if he is an object conforming to the dictates of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, Willy can only imagine his son “seeing” him at the moment when, through death, he becomes irretrievably absent.² Further, he believes Biff will best be able to see him through the mediation of his work life, through the other salesmen—the “old-timers”—who know and understand the non-domestic side of Willy. Biff, tormented by his own inability to combine meaningful work with a big paycheck, feels equally unseen by his father: “Dad, you’re never going to see what I am, so what’s the use of arguing,” he says, then adds sarcastically, “If I strike oil I’ll send you a check. Meantime forget I’m alive” (129). The correlation between men’s worth and their breadwinning abilities assumes its starkest proportions in Willy’s decision to kill himself in order that his family should be able to get $20,000 of life insurance money: “[a] man can’t go out the way he came in . . . a man has got to add up to something” (125).

The question of what Willy adds up to, of how his identity and his relationship to his family have been sculpted by his relationship to work and his breadwinner role is at the heart of Miller's play. The dissembling a salesman like Willy must do to sell his products has deformed his relationship to himself. Moreover, the effect of selling himself in the public world where he makes his lonely journey “way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine” does not remain confined to the world of work but circles back around to infect Willy’s home and family life: Willy is obsessed with helping Biff and Happy succeed in the business world (138). To that end, instead of developing an intimate relationship with them, he spends his time coaching them

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² The Heisenberg uncertainty principle applies to the problem in quantum mechanics of what can be known about objects: when one has two related measurable quantities—position and momentum, for example, or time and energy—the accurate measurement of one of the quantities produces uncertainties in the measurement of the other so that one can never know both at the same time.
to exaggerate, or even invent, certain qualities of personality and repress others. In this way, the distance he feels from himself and the trouble he has staking out a rooted identity is passed on to the next generation of men—his sons.

Willy's almost non-existent relationship to his own father, who, the family story goes, left for Alaska to seek his fortune and was never heard from again, offers a clue to Willy's inability to develop his persona or put down emotional roots: "Dad left when I was such a baby and I never had a chance to talk to him and I still feel—kind of temporary about myself" he explains to his older brother Ben (51). Ben, who also left home when Willy was a small boy in order to make his fortune in Africa, functions as another absent/present father in Willy's life. Willy doesn't see Ben again until after Willy has grown up, established his own family and become a salesman. As Willy sinks deeper and deeper into crisis, he begs Ben for help in how to counsel his sons to become successful, but Ben, who floats in and out of the play as Willy's hallucinatory memories conjure him forth, is too preoccupied with his own business affairs to offer Willy more than pat clichés and vague responses.

After Willy's death, Biff has memories of his father doing things around the house—"making the stoop. . .putting on the new porch"—but in none of these memories do the two work together. As with Ahab, who imagines himself in the end as a work tool—a discarded scythe—Biff's wistful observation that “there’s more of [Willy] in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made” congeals his father's essence into an inanimate object, even as it attempts to fix him in the home instead of at work (138). It is significant that Biff can locate his father's spirit only in the threshold of the house: even in death, Willy remains firmly on the edges of the family sphere. The sparse and unsatisfactory nature of Willy’s interaction with his family when he was alive pairs perfectly with the idea that his spirit has become embedded in a small external
part of the physical house his breadwinning has procured for the family and both instances of
father absence haunt the play’s closing scene when Linda, returning from Willy’s funeral,
ponders the irony of her and Willy having just paid off the mortgage and become full owners of
the house at a time when “there’ll be nobody home” (139).

Whether absent physically or psychologically or both, the indeterminate nature of the
father functions like a black hole in this and many other U.S. narratives giving a distinctive pull
to the story of family and domestic life even as the father’s own makeup remains unclear, located
somewhere beyond the view of characters, readers, and even, it seems, many authors. The no
man's land that the literary father occupies reflects the bifurcation of U.S. society into public and
private realms which accompanied the Industrial Revolution, a splitting up of society which
continued in force throughout the twentieth century. Positioned at the nodal point where the
compressed energy of two worlds—the private, intimate realm of the family and the public realm
of political and historical events—meet, we might expect the father to be able to "speak" in such
a way as to shed light on both realms and on the connection between them. In the pages of U.S.
literature, however, the father functions in almost the opposite fashion. Rather than a bridge, he
is a barrier between the public and the private realms. Rather than producing a rich narrative
based on his unique vantage point, his story comes to us in such muffled tones or goes so largely
unvoiced that the linkage point between private and public, like the father himself, remains
unparsed and unmapped.

The father's inability to be completely present in the domestic sphere where the rest of the
family is located casts a huge shadow across each text in which domestic life and family are the
central subjects. In some texts, his inability to integrate work and family life presents itself as a
sore that cannot heal. The schizophrenic position the father finds himself thrust into as he moves
back and forth between two disparate worlds donning and then casting off the identities that go with each one is reflected in literary depictions where the father is rarely a fully fleshed out individual; seldom is there a stereoscopic portrait of the father that encompasses both his home and his work persona. More often, fathers appear as two dimensional figures. They hang around the margins of many texts in the same way that they hang around the edges of many families: vague and unformed, emotional ciphers who are difficult, if not impossible, to read. At times an author will take a leap and turn the father lurking like a specter in the family into an actual ghost. Such a transformation, paradoxically, often allows the "ghost" father to speak more clearly and truthfully to family members than the living father ever could. Alternatively, the father who is not quite all there may take on monstrous traits. Novelist John Irving hints at the impulse of this process when he explains how "the absence or the silence about [my own father] . . . demonized him in my eyes" (Studio 360). But even the demonic or tyrannical father who places himself at the center of everyone's attention often remains unreadable and unknowable. In these and many other texts, the father's identity becomes a puzzle for readers and characters alike: a skeleton forever incapable of re-clothing itself in flesh, there is no solution to the conundrum he poses as he simultaneously seems to appear and disappear, to attract attention and, at the same time, push it away.

Adding to the sketchiness of the father's depiction in much of U.S. literature is the fact that the experience of fatherhood is seldom narrated by the father himself. Perhaps this is so because the alienation of living a life split in two and of feeling nowhere completely at home makes the father's standpoint an especially difficult one to articulate. The fact that male silence

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3Alice Walker's novel By the Light of My Father's Smile and David Auburn's play Proof are recent examples of literature in which the father is a literal ghost hovering over the action. A catalogue of monstrous literary fathers would include Pap in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Larry Cook in Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres. The latter novel is the subject of my third chapter.
has been and continues to be both normalized and valorized—as in the approbative phrase "the strong, silent type"—in U.S. society no doubt adds to the literary challenge of creating a father able to speak openly about his experience. The paucity of narratives written from the father's point of view has a snowball effect since it becomes harder to produce first-person father characters when there are so few father voices already in the inter-textual conversation. For these and many other reasons the fictional father often comes to us glazed over, not only unable to offer us a clear reading, but, to the best of our ability to determine, unable to read himself.

Multiple problems arise when we attempt to understand the father in these texts. One obvious problem is the lack of information we have about his internal makeup. What he genuinely thinks or feels often remains as obscure at the end of the work as it was at the beginning. The father's troubling demeanor is engaged and laid to rest in these texts, but not by route of developing a deeper understanding of the father himself. Instead, the progress a character makes generally consists of growth on the character's own part as he or she comes to terms with the father's absent presence.

Another related problem is the way that the scant presence of the father who is not rendered with as much three dimensionality as other characters in a literary work becomes a blank screen upon which images and ideas can be projected. In this regard the critics' version of Ahab's question "Is Ahab, Ahab?" moves to the fore: is the father in a given text representing himself or does he move about the pages on some other errand? Is he a stand-in for the Past, with a capital "P," for example, or for History? Or is his silence meant to hide the "origin story" that, once ferreted out and brought to voice, will provide the sons and daughters of the next generation with the psychological keys they need to understand their own identity and achieve maturity? Is what lies obscured beneath the father's shadowy shape the fraught realm of sexual desire? Or is
the urge to forge connection with a father who constantly retreats beyond the range of intimacy a
metaphor for some other profound longing—for life itself, say, or some other set of dreams and
desires that seem simultaneously attainable and just beyond our reach?

When we attempt to decode the absent/present father on a literal level, other questions
arise, many of which are equally hard to answer. Where, for example, is the father situated? Is
he inside or outside of the family? When he is outside, beyond the reach of the domestic sphere,
what happens to him? What shapes his desires, his persona in the work environment? To what
pressures is he subjected? When he crosses over the threshold dividing home and work and
returns to his family, what aspects of the work world comes home with him? And what from the
domestic sphere does he carry back out into the work world?

The task of locating the father in these texts is made even more difficult by the fact that
U.S. society, and therefore a great deal of its literary critics, take the father’s inability to be fully
present in the family for granted. The playwright and critic David Mamet, in a tribute written on
the occasion of Arthur Miller's death in 2005, reveals the sort of thinking which has made the
absent/present father a difficult subject to focus on. Mamet begins his tribute by recalling an
interchange he had with Miller after viewing a performance of *Death of a Salesman*:

"Arthur," I said, ". . . it was as if I was listening to a play about my own
relationship with my father." I went on a bit, and looked over to see a small,
distracted smile on his face. Of course, I thought. He's . . . probably heard [this]
from every man who ever saw the play.

Up to this point, Mamet seems to be complimenting Miller on the accuracy of his
portrayal of father-son relationships in the second half of the twentieth century. As Mamet goes
on analyzing the play he calls "the great American Domestic Tragedy," however, he reveals a
bias against viewing Willy in his historical time and place:
We are freed, at the end of [the play] not because the playwright has arrived at a solution, but because he has reconciled us to the notion that there is no solution—that it is the human lot to try and fail, and that no one is immune from self-deception. . . . Bad drama reinforces our prejudices. It informs us of what we knew when we came into the theater—the infirm have rights, homosexuals are people, too, it’s difficult to die. . . . The good drama survives because it appeals not to the fashion of the moment, but to the problems both universal and eternal, as they are insoluble.

It is doubtful that Miller would agree with Mamet's assertion that the problems tackled by the play are either outside of history or "insoluble." It's true that there is no positive solution for Willy as the choices he has made and the forces operating on him throughout his life come due, but the play as a whole does offer insights into how these particular father-son relationships have evolved and how they might be changed as well. In the most quoted line from the play, Willy's wife Linda angrily asserts to her sons, that "attention must be . . . paid to such a person [as Willy]" (56). The question, of course, is what kind of attention. For Mamet, Willy poses a universal problem. In asserting this perspective, Mamet, perhaps without realizing it, naturalizes or normalizes Willy's absent/present style of fathering, a move which encourages the overlooking of Willy's specific historical inflection.

A different way to pay attention to Willy is to pay close attention to the socio-economic forces that have shaped him. Historian John Demos takes such an approach, arguing that "received models of fatherhood are not writ in the stars or in our genes. Our ancestors knew a very different pattern from our own, and our descendants may well have another that is no less different. Fatherhood, history reminds us, is a cultural invention" (Past 64).

Willy Loman’s predicament, tragic as it is, is neither universal nor eternal. Rather, his is the story of a specific permutation of fatherhood, one inflected by the conditions of work and family in mid-twentieth-century U.S. society. Death of a Salesman can, in fact, be read as a meditation on the problematic nature of American capitalism. The fact that Willy is employed as
a seller of goods rather than a producer of them, as Ahab was, reflects the changing face of U.S. capitalist production in the twentieth century. An exploration of the value of work, the competition amongst workers that capitalism fosters, and the effect various kinds of work has on both the worker and the community are all central aspects of the play. It is in the fleshing out of these economic circumstances, within the context of men being the family's designated breadwinner, that the relationship between Willy and his sons takes shape.

Take, for example, the play's treatment of the American Dream—the iconic belief that anyone, no matter how low their starting point—Willy's last name, after all, is Loman—can rise. Willy's younger son Happy seems doomed to repeat his father's mistake: "Willy Loman. . . .had a good dream," Happy proclaims. "It’s the only dream you can have—to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I’m gonna win it for him” (139). Biff, however, who has been paying closer attention to his father than his brother has, draws a different lesson from Willy's troubles: “He had all the wrong dreams. . . . He never knew who he was,” Biff says. The implication at play’s end is that Biff has begun to shed his belief in the American Dream and is casting about for an alternative value structure: “I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer . . . I’m a one dollar an hour. . . . I’m nothing. . . . I’m just what I am, that’s all.” Sobbing, Biff cries out to his father, “Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?” (132-3).

That the fatherhood pattern Miller details so closely in Death of a Salesman still resonates with us today does not mean that these family relationships are "eternal" or "universal" or biologically determined by gender. Rather, it points to the fact that the conditions, especially the economic conditions, which gave rise to these patterns, interactions and belief structures have lasted for much of the twentieth century and continue to exert an influence on us even today.
That this is not immediately clear to us in the opening decades of the twenty-first century is due both to the continuing silence of fathers who, like Willy, fashion exteriors to hide their inner vulnerabilities and to the silence of U.S. society itself first about fatherhood in general and then, more specifically, about the effect that work in our capitalist society has had on the father who, through much of this time period, has been the family's chief representative in the world of work. These multiple silences about the experience of fatherhood have led to the erroneous view that the qualities that have been observed in U.S. fathers since the Industrial Revolution are universal attributes of fatherhood rather than the patterns of a particular time and place.

Heeding the call that "attention be paid" to men like Willy Loman, I focus in this dissertation on the specific permutation of U.S. fatherhood that he represents, a permutation that I call the absent/present father. I have chosen to study three contemporary novelists and the fictional works they produced on the subject during the last few decades of the twentieth century. Each novel centers on a breadwinning father whose identity as a father was formed during the first few decades of the postwar period. Each of these fathers, albeit in different ways, functions as an absent presence in his family. All three works confront the problem of the father's silence, constructing a text which is the literary equivalent of a crime scene investigation: they dig up and examine the overly remote father, fleshing out and reconstructing his inner life as best they can in an attempt to make him “speak” even when he himself remains mute. Two of the works—Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and Junot Díaz's *Drown*—are told from the point of view of a grown child who works backwards piecing together memories and other bits of evidence to come up with a deeper understanding of the father. The third work, John Updike's Rabbit series, is told largely from the father's point of view, but this work, too, casts the father as a conundrum so overwhelmed by the events swirling him along that the text takes on the feel of a case book in
which evidence is recorded daily—Updike uses the present tense throughout—in the apparent hope that the emerging pattern will help to solve the enigma the father himself represents. 4

These novels are part of a trend in U.S. literature in the last decades of the twentieth century that, in response to changing socio-economic conditions, has been refiguring and reinterpreting the literary father. The novels I study belong to a subset of this trend, a subset that focuses on the figure of the breadwinning father. This subset is special because the problem of the silence emanating from and surrounding these "traditional" fathers is placed at the center of each work and because these works approach that silence without the resignation or acceptance which authors and critics have generally applied to such characters. In dealing with the deeply recalcitrant subject of the absent/present father, these works neither back off from him nor depict his behavior as natural or universal. Instead, they do what they can to get through his hard exterior in order to gain a better understanding of his internal makeup and motivations.

What is most important about these works is that they place a special emphasis on viewing the father through the lens of the socio-economic world he inhabits. In doing so, they resist the general tendency in U.S. society to rely chiefly upon psychological approaches to produce a reading of the father and his role in the family. By foregrounding the link between men's demeanor in their families and their experiences in the public world, especially their experiences in the work world, these novels take men out of the realm of gods, monsters, and tragic figures and situate them where they belong, in the realm of the human.

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4 Updike's Rabbit series which began in 1960 with the publication of *Rabbit, Run* and concluded four books later in 1990 with *Rabbit at Rest* is arguably the longest portrait of U.S. fatherhood ever produced. It evolves in "real time" with characters aging 30 years, for example, between the first and last novel. Though most of the Rabbit novels are told from Rabbit's point of view in a close third person narration, there are a few brief glimpses of events from his son's and wife's point of view. In the sequel, *Rabbit Remembered*, published in 2000, much of the action is narrated from the point of Rabbit's son, now a father himself.
What emerges from these novels is certainly not a transparent view of the breadwinning father: the fathers in the texts I study retain an opaque quality as if their identities have been too completely molded by their years of straddling the disparate worlds of home and work to do anything other than continue stodgily on as before. The construction of U.S. fatherhood itself, however, becomes clearer as we traverse these texts. As the economic and social forces which shape fathers and fatherhood become more apparent, the figure of the absent/present father stops seeming so mysterious and remote. Less inflected by an essentialist view based on male/female differences, less layered over by ideological codes that do not take the material or the historical into account, he becomes easier to read.

The willingness of these novels to take a critical look at the construction of the absent/present father is itself a product of socio-economic conditions: the changeover from an industrial to a postindustrial society in the U.S., the increasing hold of corporate capitalism on nearly every aspect of life, and the concomitant decline of living standards for the majority of Americans over the last three decades of the twentieth century has produced a change both in the actual face of fatherhood and in its representation in literature and other media. By the 1980s, reflecting the economic pressure on families to have more than one wage, the notion that breadwinning is fatherhood's defining attribute begins to loosen its grip on the societal imagination.

Absent/present fathers continue to exist both in literature and in life right up to the present day, but recent U.S. literature is no longer so littered by them as it has been in texts from the mid-nineteenth century up to the 1980s. This change in the literary depiction of fathers parallels the historical trajectory of the breadwinning father, which, as sociologist and feminist scholar Jessie Bernard notes, "emerged in [the United States] roughly, say, from the 1830s,
when de Tocqueville was observing it, to the late 1970s, when the 1980 census declared that a male was not automatically to be assumed to be the head of the household" (150).

The economic changes of the last few decades of the twentieth century and their effects upon family life are apparent in each of the works I study. At the beginning of each fictional family's saga, the father is the designated breadwinner. His economic position is signaled by a patriarchal power dynamic where the father is the acknowledged "head" of the family. His elevated status includes the freedom to make and enforce decisions for the family as a whole. This special status engenders a great deal of resentment: at times the father makes decisions that seem more about satisfying his own needs than those of his family, at other times it is the father himself who seethes with resentment, longing to walk away from the burdensome responsibilities family life imposes upon him. In each text, the family experiences itself as desperately dependent for its very survival upon the father and his economic abilities in the world. His separation from the rest of the family by virtue of his special status and his tendency to disappear emotionally or physically or both produces tremendous pain and anxiety in those he leaves or, in a complex array of ways, threatens to leave behind. As each novel progresses, the father's status as leader of the family begins to erode. The attack against the father's authority comes from within the family, but it coincides with or is perhaps spurred on by an erosion of the father's status in the economic realm where, as conditions change, his breadwinning is either no longer sufficient to support the family, or is no longer the family's sole means of accessing money and the world of work. Wives and grown daughters move into the workforce either to replace an absent or declining patriarch, to "supplement" the male breadwinner's wages, or in order to escape the patriarchal setup, which suddenly, after years of acquiescence, seems to grow unbearable.
I argue that attention must be paid to the novels produced about the breadwinning father during these years because they occupy a threshold position between the depiction of fatherhood in novels written throughout the period of industrialization and a more recent group of novels which can be characterized as "postpatriarchal." In postpatriarchal fiction, Ellen Friedman writes, "fathers are not magnified, mythological presences drawn to different proportions than other characters. They do not carry the Barthesian import of Father as origin and law, the reason for all storytelling." 5 Friedman points to a number of novels written in the second half of the 1990s that have what she calls "postpatriarchal endings." In these novels, though "the father or his representative still helps to drive the plot," the father "disappears or becomes unimportant or ordinary" or "life-sized" by the end. His disappearance is experienced by his children as "an ordinary, rather than an unrecoupable, loss," a fact which makes it possible for the children "to move on without him" focused on the present and the future rather than obsessed by "a quest for origins and the (past) law that justifies the present" (697). Another smaller group of novels appearing over the last two to three decades goes even further, creating a portrait of fathers and fatherhood which is more completely postpatriarchal. From the very beginning of these novels, the father appears as simply another member of the family: neither his presence nor his absence drives the plot so that there is no need to mount an extraordinary quest to "find" him, nor to expend tremendous energy rejecting, ignoring or overthrowing him. The father in these novels takes his place as an equal alongside the other members of the family; he is no longer inflected with a special powerful valence that sets him mysteriously apart from or hierarchically above the rest of the family. 6

5 Roland Barthes writes in *Pleasure of the Text*, "Every narrative [leads] back to Oedipus... If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories[...]? Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origins, speaking one's conflicts with the Law?" (qtd in Friedman 693)
What I am most interested in exploring in the threshold novels considered in this dissertation—the novels positioned between older literary works that have more or less embraced the father as an extraordinarily powerful absent presence and the postpatriarchal novels now appearing with more frequency—is what these threshold novels can tell us about the effects of the U.S. economy on fathers and, through analyzing those fathers, on family life. As I show in the next chapter, the connection between the kind of activities the breadwinning father does in the work world and his behavior in the home has been largely ignored in literary as well as in other academic and nonacademic circles. The thread that I begin to pull out in Chapter One and that I will trace through the dissertation as a whole is that what lies quietly coiled in the literary portrayal of postwar U.S. absent/present fathers is the effect of capitalism on individuals, families, and communities. The fact that the breadwinning father's powerful relationship to the world of work has begun to wane in the novels I study, has allowed my authors to poke and prod beneath the mantle that has up until now kept the father's experience as he straddles the world of work and home out of sight. What these novels pull out from underneath that loosening mantle and set before us are the complex and surprising ways in which economic and psychological life are connected.

Looking forward, such a study may illuminate more than the workings of the breadwinning father in literature and in life: with the stagnation of wages from the 1970s on and the corresponding rise of the two-wage family, these novels and my study of them may also bear on the experiences and literary portrayals of working mothers who, in increasing numbers, have also begun to find themselves forced to negotiate the transition between public and private,

6 Jane Hamilton's *Disobedience* is an example of a novel that is postpatriarchal.
between work in a capitalist economy and the communal, nurturing environment of the home. Sociology Arlie Hochschild observes that in the nineteenth century when men were drawn into market life and women remained outside it, female homemakers formed a moral brake on capitalism. Now American women are its latest recruits, offered membership in the public side of market society on the same harsh terms as those offered to American men. The result makes for a harshness of life that seems so normal to us we don't see it. (Commercialization 8)

In the threshold novels about breadwinning fathers that I explore in this dissertation, the story about the harshness of family life under capitalism, a story which, as Hochschild indicates, we are so used to that we tend to not see it, is told in such a way that we are compelled to pay attention.

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According to Hochschild, in 1900 less than 20% of married women in the U.S. worked for pay. That figure jumped to 40% in 1950 and up to almost 70% by the year 2000. (Commercialization 2).
CHAPTER ONE

WHAT DOES ECONOMICS HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

THE RISE OF THE BREADWINNER DAD
AND THE SILENCE OF THE FATHER IN LIFE AND LITERATURE

Received models of fatherhood are not writ in the stars or in our genes. Our ancestors knew a very different pattern from our own, and our descendants may well have another that is no less different. Fatherhood, history reminds us, is a cultural invention.

—John Demos  Past, Present and Personal

—At century’s end one thing seems clear about fatherhood: although we miss it, we can recreate its authority only either as an absence or as a failed relation

— Eva Paulino Bueno, et al. Naming the Father

Although, as Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt write, "it is a double shift that is implied in trying to construct both . . . an analysis of literature and of history and society" (xix), I begin my dissertation on the study of the figure of the absent/present father in contemporary U.S. literature with a section on the economic and sociological history of fathers and family life because this information is crucial to an understanding of the literary figuring of the father. In fact, it is my thesis that so little attention has been paid by literary scholars to the omnipresent figure of the absent/present father in U.S. literature precisely because there exists a gulf between the study of literature and the study of political economy.

In Part I of this chapter I explore the relationship between the advent of capitalism and the rise of the modern family which comes into being around the same time and which historians link to the economic changes capitalism brings. I trace, as well, the appearance of the
breadwinner father which coincides with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and which sets off another round of profound sociological, ideological and emotional changes. A particular focus in this section is the emergence during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, of the ideology of separate spheres, where the domestic sphere is conceived of as a humane haven isolated and quite separate from the ruthless public sphere of business, commerce, and politics.

In Part II of this chapter I consider the origins of the novel, tying it, as many critics before me have, to the sociological and ideological changes associated with capitalism, most particularly the creation of a middle class and the "discovery" of individual subjectivity. Included in this discussion is the extent to which the novel can be seen to be supporting the socio-economic status quo and the extent to which it is posing an alternative or resistant viewpoint. In the rest of the section, I analyze the responses literary critics have had to the novel's figuring of the family and especially to its presentation of the father. A particular focus of this section is the tendency of literary critics to rely upon psychological theories to analyze the fictional family. Such an approach becomes unsatisfactory by the late 1980s and, while many critics simply stop writing about the subject, some, especially feminist critics, begin casting about for a new way to analyze the workings of the fictional family.

In Part III of this chapter I begin by situating the novels that I study—all written in the last years of the twentieth century—in their socio-economic setting. It is a time of great ferment as the changing nature of fatherhood, which has its roots in the changeover from an industrial to a postindustrial society, provokes widespread debates in scholarly and popular circles about the role of the father in family life. Against this public furor, there is a glaring silence amongst contemporary literary critics on the subject of the fictional father. A major reason for this silence, I argue, is the apparent reluctance of scholars in general and literary critics in particular, to bring
an economic and class analysis to their work. The novels that I study tread where theory has so far feared to go: instead of maintaining the public/private split, these novels use the figure of the absent/present father to explore the ways in which the intimate world of the family and the public world of economics and history are actually part of the same continuum.

I. The Rise of Capitalism, the Modern Family, and the Breadwinner Dad

In the eighteenth century, as capitalism, industrialization and urbanization came to be the dominant forces shaping society, Europe and America experience widespread changes in lifestyle and belief structures. One change which takes place concerns the family where, in a radical reworking of domestic life, the traditional family is transformed into what historians have come to call the modern or nuclear family.

The "modern" family distinguishes itself not by changes in size or kinship structure since, as in previous centuries, parents and children continue to constitute the central core of household life. Rather, what is strikingly different about the new family that emerges with capitalism is, in the words of historian Edward Shorter, its “state of mind” (205). In the traditional family, members turned outwards towards the community, spending more time with peer groups organized along age and gender lines than with family members.\footnote{For a description of the different age and gender peer groups and their activities during the time of the traditional family, see Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*, particularly pages 206-212.} In contrast, modern family members turn inward:

What really distinguishes the nuclear family . . . from other patterns of family life in Western society is a special sense of solidarity that separates the domestic unit from the surrounding community. Its members feel that they have much more in common with one another than they do with anyone else on the outside—that they
enjoy a privileged emotional climate they must protect from outside intrusion, through privacy and isolation. (Shorter 205)

A radical change in patterns of interaction and intimacy—what Shorter calls a “surge of sentiment”—accompanies the rise of the modern family: in the realm of courtship and mating, allegiance to parents and the community gives way to notions of romantic love where concerns about personal happiness and self-development and privacy predominate; in the realm of parenting, mothers move from viewing the happiness and development of children under two with indifference to placing “the welfare of their small children above all else” (Shorter 168). Finally, a new ideology of domesticity arises which places the “precious emotional unit” of family life at a distance from the surrounding community. Positioning family life as somewhat separate and complete unto itself is, no doubt, a helpful compensatory thought to individuals who are losing or letting go of the community supports that once anchored their lives or those of previous generations (Shorter 227).

Turning to the question of why this surge of sentiment occurred, Shorter connects the emergence of the revolution in feeling and social structure during the late eighteenth century with the emergence of capitalism. This connection between the sea change in family structure and changes in the economy is so crucial and, in general, so absent in contemporary thought that it is important to quote Shorter's analysis at length:

The traditional economy was a local economy, where moral notions about how much people were entitled to charge or earn in order to support a family [held sway]. . . . The logic of the marketplace positively demands individualism: the system will succeed only if each participant ruthlessly pursues his own self-interest, buying cheap, selling dear, and enhancing his own interests at the cost of his competitors (i.e., his fellow citizens). Only if this variety of economic egoism is internalized will the free market come up to the high expectations of its

2 Shorter argues that the “American family was probably ‘born modern’ because the colonial settlers seem to have seized privacy and intimacy for themselves as soon as they stepped off the boat” (242).
apologists, for if people let humanitarian or communitarian considerations influence their economic behavior, the market becomes inefficient; the weak cease to be weeded out. Thus, the free market engraves upon all who are caught up in it the attitude: “Look out for number one...” Egoism that was learned in the marketplace became transferred to community obligations and standards, to ties to the family and lineage—in short, to the whole domain of cultural rules that regulated familial and sexual behavior. In traditional society, the balance was very heavily tilted toward the community, toward adhering to the rules and standards of those about you and away from pursuing your own desires and pleasures. Capitalism tilted this balance the other way. And once the rules of marketplace individualism had been learned, they easily took control of the whole arena of conscious attitudes. (Shorter 225-9)

Prior to about 1830, most households in the United States were involved in subsistence, agrarian economies where it was taken for granted that everyone in the household played an important role. To be sure, labor was divided along gender lines with women tending to cloth and candle production and other kinds of productive tasks which could be performed either inside or close to the house, while it generally fell to men to make and repair tools and to work in the fields. The gendered division of labor, however, was not rigid: one sex would occasionally join the other in their work. Further, it was widely understood that both sexes were making crucial economic contributions to the family’s livelihood.3

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, however, the site of paid work moved outside the home into the new spheres of industry and business. In the United States, young, unmarried women were some of the country’s first factory workers, but, as the nineteenth century progressed, work outside the home became seen as the province of men, a gendered state

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3 John Demos notes that women occasionally joined men in the fields ("American Family" 430). It seems logical to infer that men, especially during the winter months, might also help women with their indoor work. See Demos' "The American Family" as well as Jessie Bernard's "The Good-Provider Role: Its Rise and Fall" for more on the family features of the agrarian/subsistence economy and for a description of how these features changed with industrialization and urbanization.
of affairs that was bolstered by the emerging idea that a man should be paid a “family wage”—enough to support not just himself but also his wife and children.\textsuperscript{4}

The changes taking place in the economic world profoundly changed dynamics between the sexes and within the family. Within decades, motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood all came to be radically restructured.

In colonial times, the family was seen, particularly in New England, as the basic political unit of society, “a little commonwealth” both reflecting and sustaining the overall system of patriarchal government.\textsuperscript{5} At the family’s head was the father, the dominant figure of the family. It was his responsibility not only to direct the work done in the home, which was still a production center, but also to maintain the overall spirit of cooperation amongst family members. In addition, he served as the link between the family and the larger community, representing the family in public councils and being held, in turn, accountable by public officers for the behavior and the welfare of the members of his household. The father took special pride and responsibility in shaping the character of his sons who would, in turn, become society’s future leaders.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{4} Heidi Hartman and also Kathleen Gerson describe the evolution of job segregation by sex and the emergence of the idea of the family wage. Women from the poorest classes continued to work outside the home throughout the period of industrialization out of sheer necessity, but the majority of middle-class women found themselves barred from public economic activity. See Michael Kimmel (“Birth”) for a description of working-class men’s attempts to exclude women from the public work sphere. Hartman and also Gerson describe the evolution of job segregation by sex and the emergence of the idea of the family wage.

\textsuperscript{5} William Gouge writes in 1622, that “. . . a familie is a little Church, and a little commonwealth . . . Or rather it is as a schoole wherein the first principles and grounds of government and subjection are learned: whereby men are fitted to greater matters in Church or commonwealth” (qtd. in Demos, Little xviv). Demos points out that in the Plymouth Colony, and, by extrapolation, throughout the period before the growth of an “urban, industrial system,” family “did not stand out in any special way from adjacent parts of the social backdrop. . . . Family and community, private and public life, formed part of the same moral equation. The one supported the other, and they became in a sense indistinguishable.” (Little 186-87)

\textsuperscript{6} For a good description of family life under colonialism see Anthony Rotundo's American Manhood, Chapter One. See also Demos' A Little Commonwealth.
Mothers during the colonial period took care of children’s physical needs and played an important nurturing role in the early lives of both girl and boy children, but the sort of relationship women offered was, according to historian Anthony Rotundo, viewed as inappropriate for older children: mothers’ “unconditional love, the colonists thought, would ruin older children, especially boys. Thus, after the age of five or six, most colonial boys passed to the influence—if not always the physical care—of their fathers” (28).

It is during the early nineteenth century with the changeover from a corporate household economy, where the household itself is the productive center, to a commercial-industrial system where work moves outside the home that male breadwinning—what we today think of as a “rock-like feature of the national landscape”—first came into being (Bernard 150). Instead of being intimately involved in all of the family’s doings—moral, emotional, economic, and physical—men were suddenly spending the majority of their waking hours away from home. Almost overnight, the defining characteristic of fatherhood changed, narrowing from being the family’s chief authority in a wide number of areas to being the family’s chief financial support, or, as many came to think of it, to being a “good provider.”⁷ Instead of working side by side with their children and helping to train sons, in particular, to take over the family trade or business, fathers now left their children behind to perform their economic functions in the mysterious outer reaches of offices and factories. The toll of these changes on father-child relationships became increasingly apparent as evidenced by a host of domestic moralists who urged men to cultivate closer relationships with their wives and children. But, as historian Robert

⁷ For a discussion of the evolution of the "good provider" role for men, see Bernard’s "The Good-Provider." Rotundo notes the rapidity of the changeover of men’s position in the family: “When Francis J. Grund visited the United States in the 1830s, the Englishman noted that among Boston businessmen a man might ‘become the father of a large family and even die without finding out his mistake.’ With allowing for hyperbole, this is still an astonishing change. Throughout the colonial period, the father had been the dominant figure in the family, yet by the 1830s he was secondary in the household. How had this happened so quickly?” (25-6)
Griswold points out, “the structure of work and the ideology that legitimated it worked against such bonds. . . . [T]hus, while moralists hoped to bring fathers and children together, the structure of the economy drove them apart” (14). The actual time fathers spent away from home, particularly in the middle classes, continued to increase over the nineteenth century as work hours and time spent commuting to and from work lengthened. It is true that in the last few decades of the century, a “quiet countertrend” emerged as some men began to develop more intimate relationships with their sons, but this countertrend was small and did not disturb the “dominant theme of formal authority and father absence” (Rotundo 27).

As breadwinning became the father's designated family role in the early to mid-nineteenth century, motherhood underwent an equally dramatic revision as it expanded to fill and then to refashion the empty spaces in the family left by its vacating men. Whereas in colonial times the assessment of women’s moral character had been chiefly negative, mothers now assumed primary responsibility for the shaping of the character of both sons and daughters. As Rotundo observes, "For the first time in American history the mother had become the primary parent” (28). A tight emotional unit began to form around mother and children and a decidedly female flavor characterized the home. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes it as "a world in which men made but a shadowy appearance” (229). With men away at work, boys increasingly turned to mothers or other boys for models of adulthood.8

Men's role in the public world also changed dramatically as a result of the economic changes sweeping the United States. Prior to 1800, "New Englanders saw a close link between manhood and 'social usefulness’” (Rotundo13). Rotundo refers to this "phase" in American manhood as the era of "communal manhood” (2). During the nineteenth century the notion that

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8 See Rotundo's American Manhood, especially Chapter Two.
active engagement in the betterment of one's community is an important and laudatory feature of manhood is gradually replaced by a different image of manliness, that of the self-made man. The idealization of the man who succeeds by dint of his own merits in a world where advancement has been narrowly defined as individual, or, at most, familial rather than communal, fits with Shorter's thesis that the economic principles of capitalism encourages a loosening of communal commitment and a concomitant expansion of each individual’s or each isolated family unit's sense of self worth.

As industrialization progresses, the sense of separation between the sexes is further heightened in the United States by the “cult of true womanhood,” a movement which deifies women as highly spiritual beings while aligning men’s characters with the base, the sensual, and the profane. Under the sway of this cultural movement and ideology, women’s sphere of labor—the home—comes to be seen as a safe haven, a cooperative and highly civilized place where the best qualities in human nature are nourished. In contrast, the public sphere is increasingly depicted as a place of cutthroat competition where self-interest reigns and ends are used to justify questionable means.

Historian John Demos speculates that the loss of casual, intimate, everyday contact during the working day, coupled with these new, dichotomized attitudes towards home and work led to new emotional distances between the sexes:

[W]hen character itself appeared to be so gender-specific, what was the likelihood of meaningful communication [between the sexes]? Gone was that sense of instinctive sharing, that implicit sexual symmetry, which had suffused the full range of experience in premodern society…. [In industrial America m]en and women came together from opposite directions, as uncertain allies.” (“American Family” 438)

An article entitled “Home” which appears in Ladies Magazine in 1830 gives a flavor of the extremity of the ideology of separate spheres in the United States.
We go forth into the world, amidst scenes of business and pleasure . . . and the heart is sensible to a desolation of feeling: we behold every principle of justice and of honor, and even the dictates of common honesty disregarded, and the delicacy of our moral sense is wounded; we see the general good sacrificed to the advancement of personal interest. [In contrast, in] the sanctuary of the home . . . sympathy, honor, virtue, are assembled; there the eye may kindle with intelligence, and receive an answering glance; there disinterested love, is ready to sacrifice everything at the altar of affection. (qtd. in Rotundo 23)\(^9\)

Assuming a largely female audience, the magazine article quoted above takes as its perspective the home: business and the pleasures of the market place are seen from the viewpoint of someone who goes “forth” from the home to investigate them. Once there, the language places readers and writer in the spectator position: “we behold . . . we see.” The public world being placed under the microscope retains its alien character. Back home the eyes can “kindle with intelligence” and human beings can communicate through glances, but the atomized human beings of the public world, devoid of feeling and unable to connect either with the spectators or with each other, do not seem able to be parsed and are best left to their own devices. In the end, the public realm is not so much explored as judged and found wanting: readers and writer scurry back, with a palpable sigh of relief, to the “sanctuary” of the home.

Literary critic Gillian Brown, exploring the gulf between home and market in the cultural landscape of the United States during this period, points out that “by maintaining the integrity of

\(^9\) In addition to Rotundo, see Demos’ “The American Family” and also Neil Smelser in “Vicissitudes of Work and Love in Anglo-American Society” for descriptions of the growing dichotomy between male and female spheres in the nineteenth century and its effects on both the family and cultural life. Smelser’s essay is particularly interesting in that it finds both modern British and United States history (from the nineteenth century to the present) as having been deeply influenced by the increased cultural opposition between what Smelser calls the instrumental or work mode (the “disciplined organization of activities toward the accomplishment of designated tasks”) and the affective or love mode (referring to the “expressive or gratificatory attachments to both human and nonhuman objects”) (105). Smelser argues that both societies have tended towards greater instrumentalization and rationalization of life and a wider and wider split between the realms of work and love. Smelser sees the split of the instrumental and affective into mutually exclusive categories as having the unfortunate effect of limiting the “number of moral and psychological solutions [available] for [addressing] the dilemmas of human existence” (108). Without a balanced mix of instrumental and affective modes, Smelser concludes, “the living of social life becomes correspondingly impoverished and alienating” (109).
the private sphere, this opposition [between work and home] sustains the notion of a personal life impervious to market influences” (174). The sense that the home is a sanctuary, a quiet oasis where individuals can develop a stable sense of self far from the traumatic reversals of fortune found in the business world finds expression in the work of domestic architect and landscape artist Andrew Jackson Downing. Through the use of asymmetrical designs and intricate, handcrafted decorations, the middle class housing he designs during the mid-nineteenth century stresses each house’s, and, through extension, each owner’s, individuality. Believing that a house should provide an isolated retreat or “counterpoise to the great tendency toward constant changes” in the economic and social world, Downing obscures even the domestic economy upon which the house depends, placing the kitchen as far away as possible from the parlor and other social areas of the house and devising screens that will shield the kitchen gardens from sight (qtd. in Brown 77).¹⁰

Downing’s architectural philosophy and the views of the Ladies Magazine article quoted above are symptomatic of a generalized disconnect between personal life and work during the early years of industrial capitalism: the world of labor beyond the home is blocked off or it is seen from a distance as if by a tourist. In either case, it is the perspective of the home, the supposed seat of individuality and subjectivity, which predominates. The perspective of those who do spend at least a part of their day “living” in the work world is pushed aside. Living within the sanctuary of the home, and, in fact, supporting its very existence through his financial endeavors in the public world, the one member of the domestic circle—the male breadwinner—who might give a more informed report of the world beyond the home, is silent instead. The stories he might tell, were he to speak, would breach the firewall between the two worlds, not

¹⁰ For more on Downing’s architecture and the cult of domesticity, see Brown Domestic Individualism, particularly 69-77. See also Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses.
only by destabilizing the carefully crafted sense of retreat established in the home but also by
drawing attention to the symbiotic relationship the two spheres actually have. In crossing back
and forth from home to work, fathers and husbands engage in a set of quiet mental gymnastics as
they adjust themselves to the ethos each world demands. The parts of themselves that cannot be
voiced in one or the other realm or, in some cases, cannot be expressed in either realm, go
inward and the breadwinning father takes on the appearance of being not completely present, or
as if a part of himself is detained elsewhere.

All women in the nineteenth century, of course, were not happily ensconced in the home
virtuously guarding the “altar of affection,” just as all men were not engaged in besting each
other in brutishly competitive money-making schemes, only to be miraculously drained of their
savageness upon re-entering the home each night. In working-class and especially in immigrant
and African-American families, burdened by society's racial and ethnic prejudices, men's wages
were often too low or too sporadic to form a family's sole support, making it necessary for
women and even children to enter the job market as well. By the 1880s, in fact, 26 % of
Philadelphia's workers, 34% of Fall River, Massachusetts' workers, and 34 % of Atlanta,
Georgia's workers were women.\textsuperscript{11} Many women found ways to work from home, taking in
boarders, for example, or performing piecework for shoe and garment factories.\textsuperscript{12}

The widely promulgated ideology of separate spheres hurt low-income families by
making it possible for employers to pay female workers much less than male workers: married
women, they claimed, were just supplementing their husband's income while single women

\textsuperscript{11} See Sara M. Evans' \textit{Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America}, 130.

\textsuperscript{12} While these jobs allowed women to attend to domestic chores and to look after their children for at least a small
part of the day, working from home also had serious drawbacks: the tasks were arduous, the pay low, and these
isolated workers were subject to extremely high levels of exploitation. For more, see Evan's \textit{Born for Liberty}, 86, 131.
were only working to "help out" other family members or to accumulate a dowry. Erased altogether from the public's consciousness were the families where women were in fact the main or even sole family breadwinner.

While nearly all women workers struggled with low-wages and poor working conditions, white, native-born women had access to the best of the jobs available to women until well into the twentieth century. Still, many white women, apparently supported adequately enough by their husbands' wages, did not enter the paid workforce with the result that by the end of the nineteenth century the majority of women workers were non-white. This statistic reflects, no doubt, the great difficulty families of color had sustaining themselves on the wages of a single male breadwinner. It may also indicate that, in families where men were able to garner or come close to garnering a family wage, the organization of family life tended to be more patriarchal and, as such, the male breadwinner's permission had to be obtained before other members of the household, especially the female members, could enter the public world of work.

The experience of African-American families deviated most sharply of any group from the gendered notions of femininity and masculinity encapsulated in the ideology of separate spheres. As Herbert Gutman has shown, the majority of Black families, from slavery up to the post World War I period, were, like most other U.S. families during these years, comprised of two parents and their children. Despite sharing this structural similarity, the Black family diverges in unique ways from other U.S. families. Under slavery, for example, because plantation owners needed Black women to do strenuous, backbreaking work in the fields, differences between male and female slaves in terms of physical strength and endurance were

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14 See Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*. 
explicitly downplayed. Male slaves also did more of the domestic chores around the house than was common in non-slave families of the same time period. Though Eugene Genovese sees a "closer approximation to a healthy sexual equality" for Black men and women under slavery than existed in white or, for that matter, even Black families in the postbellum period and Angela Davis has argued that this sharing of work in both the fields and the domestic sphere paved the way for more liberatory relations between Black men and women after slavery, Jacqueline Jones makes the point that "if male and female slaves shared duties related to household maintenance . . . they were nonetheless reduced to a state of powerlessness that rendered virtually meaningless the concept of equality (42). 15 Although the effect of slavery on Black family life continues to be studied and debated, it is clear that the experience of slavery and the ongoing racial discrimination which followed have had profound effects on the shape and trajectory of African-American family life.

After freedom, Southern Black women expressed a strong desire to stay home and tend to their own families, a luxury not allowed under slavery. But though husbands generally supported this desire on the part of their wives, landowners, merchants and even the Freedman's Bureau all pushed for Black women to join the labor force where their labor was seen as key in transforming the economy of the postbellum South. Thus, like the immigrant women in the New England textile mills whose labor was transforming the economic fabric of the North, freedwomen were "considered exempt from the middle-class ideal of full-time domesticity" (Jones 45). As Southern Black families attempted to decide for themselves when and where family members would enter the paid labor force, one critic derided Black women's desire to stay

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home, labeling it the "evil of female loaferism" (qtd. in Jones 45). But despite the evident desire of Black women to spend more time tending to their own families, quasi-slavery conditions in the South after the Civil War allowed white landowners to coerce Black women, through threats of force, to work in their fields and, when not needed in the fields, to work as domestics for whatever remuneration the white family "hiring" them felt like paying.

Later, when Black families began to migrate out of the rural South, first to urban centers in the South and later, beginning around World War I, to the urban North, Black men encountered persistent racial discrimination in the job market. Regarded as "a labor force of last resort," they were hired on a temporary basis for domestic labor such as janitorial work or given only the worst, most menial jobs in factories where layoffs were regular and there was no chance of advancement (Jones 161). Black women, suffering from their own version of job discrimination, found themselves in high demand only as domestics. The chronic un- and under-employment of Black men paired with Black women's ability to always find steady work as maids and laundresses meant that "an extraordinarily high proportion of [Black wives and mothers] (relative to their working-class white counterparts) served as primary or supplementary breadwinners in their households, and unlike white women, they took home wages more nearly equal to those of their menfolk" (Jones 154).

16 Originally from John William de Forest's A Union Officer in Reconstruction, p. 94.

17 Here is how, in the early part of the twentieth century, a Black male worker from Mississippi explained the situation to an interviewer for the Commission for Race Relations: "A woman was not permitted to remain at home if she felt like it. If she was found at home some of the white people would come to ask why she was not in the field and tell her she had better get to the field or else abide by the consequences. After the summer crops were all in, any of the white people could send for any Negro woman to come and do the family washing at 75 cents to $1.00 a day. If she sent word she could not come she had to send an excuse why she could not come. They were never allowed to stay home as long as they were able to go. Had to take whatever they paid you for your work." (Jones 157)

18 In 1920, there were five times as many Black married women working outside the home than in any other racial or ethnic group (Jones 162).
A striking difference, at least in the nineteenth century but perhaps in the twentieth century as well, between Black family life and the middle-class ideal of family life as represented by the ideology of separate spheres is the way that in rural Southern Black families and communities after slavery the boundaries of the household were quite fluid, or as Jacqueline Jones has observed, "public-private, male-female distinctions were less tightly drawn than among middle-class whites" (100).19 As families decided for themselves how much work each member would do based on a calculation not just of money but also of less tangible concerns like a desire for autonomy or for more time with family members, and as social and economic support was extended to or accepted from an extended circle of community members instead of being confined largely to the nuclear family, "black people . . . rejected a future of materialistic individualism in opposition to the white, middle-class North" (Jones 57).

Despite the fact that the ideology of separate spheres and, more broadly, the ideology of the American Dream with its promise of being able to rise into the middle class and beyond, ignored many people's actual experiences, these ideologies took deep root during the period of U.S. industrialization, influencing the public's understanding and imagination of what could be as well as shaping individual people's perceptions of their own and their family's place in society and history. The powerful position these ideas occupied in U.S. culture is a testament to the very real desires and needs they touched upon. They enabled poor families, for example, to believe that a day would come when the man of the family would make enough to be its sole breadwinner and his wife would be able to stay home and care for the family. In middle-class families where mothers were able to stay home because fathers were able to function as the

19 Studying two Midwestern urban Black families that had migrated from the South, Carol B. Stack in All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community finds that these Black families continue, in the second half of the twentieth century, to have a highly fluid sense of boundaries: "domestic functions" she notes, for example, "are carried out . . . by clusters of kin who do not necessarily live together" (9).
family's sole breadwinner, the doctrine of separate spheres provided a cognitive coping mechanism for the double bind family members, especially fathers, found themselves in as the ruthless egoism necessary to prosper in the marketplace clashed with the “surge of sentiment” and communal spirit found in the haven of home and family. In short, the ideology of separate spheres provided a social narrative that both articulated the aspirations of the rising middle class and provided cover for some of the most glaring and uncomfortable contradictions of the socio-economic changes taking place under industrialization. This narrative not only swept under the rug those families, like the African-American family, that did not fit the general upwardly mobile storyline, but it also swept under the rug the growing gulf between rich and poor and the corresponding heightening of both class tension and, on the part of the working class, organized protest.

Even today, the ideology of separate spheres, with its sharp division between the public and the private spheres of life along with the belief that each individual family can, through hard work, elevate itself materially and socially still informs, albeit often unconsciously, a great deal of our thinking about family life and its relation to the larger society. The books that I examine in this dissertation, all written towards the end of the twentieth century, are of interest precisely because they bring a critical eye to what has been the dominant narrative of family life since industrialization. Their deconstruction of this narrative is, I believe, related to the inability of the hardworking male breadwinner in each novel, even though he is successful for a time, to achieve long-term economic security for his family: all three families are downwardly mobile by novel's end, an outcome that reflects the actual economic trend of U.S. families from the 1970s on. Each family's inability to hold on to its middle-class status becomes the crack through which a reassessment of the notion of middle classness itself is able to proceed. As fathers lose
economic power and as other members of the family are forced to interact more directly with the cash nexus, the standard narrative of middle-class life, generally inflected as white and native-born, begins to lose its aura of universality. Thus, there is an opening in texts like the ones I study—all popular texts written by Pulitzer-prize winning authors—to look more closely and critically at the dominant story of middle-class family life. In deciding to remark upon what has tended overall by society to be portrayed as so commonplace as to be unremarkable, these works bring to the fore a perspective about the role of the breadwinner father and about the relationship between family life and the larger socio-economic world that both draws attention to the dominant story of white, middle-class family life and allows alternative perspectives on the dominant story that have either been under-represented or pushed to the margins, to take center stage.

Before turning to a discussion of the literary response to the socio-economic changes wrought by the rise of industrial society described so far in this chapter, it will be helpful to get a basic overview of the way these changes in the economy affected the psychological life of individuals and families in the nineteenth century as well as a sense of how the emotional contours of family life changed as, beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, corporate capitalism developed.

Over most of the last nearly 200 years, men’s personal sense of self has been closely bound up in the character traits and roles described above which first emerge during the change from an agrarian to an industrial society. As breadwinning becomes widespread, being the sole economic provider for the family gives men a distinctive identity: they are the family's “head.” It is a position of considerable power, especially, as the word “head” connotes, in the realm of decision-making. But the status and privileges a man garners from being the sole or chief family
breadwinner is tempered by the grinding pressure to perform well. Moreover, performance becomes glaringly easy to measure: either the money flows into the household (in which case the man is a “good provider”) or it doesn’t (in which case the man’s masculinity and his merits as a father both quickly come under scrutiny). As sociologist Kathleen Gerson points out, patriarchal dominance under the breadwinner system, “could no longer be easily asserted as a male birthright; men now had to earn it through economic success in the marketplace” (19-20).\textsuperscript{20} The vicissitudes of the market with its upswings and downturns and its built-in pattern of unemployment made the steady breadwinning that a man was called upon to provide a source of tremendous anxiety.

The pressure to provide and the insecurity this responsibility bred took its toll on many an individual man who simply ran off from job and family. Jessie Bernard notes that “the annals of social work agencies are filled with cases of runaway husbands” (156). John Demos draws attention to “the notorious ‘tramp’ phenomenon” of the nineteenth and early twentieth century:

Demoralized and destitute wanderers, their numbers mounting into the hundreds of thousands, tramps can be fairly characterized as men who had run away from their wives. (They had, of course, run away from much else besides.) Their presence was mute testimony to the strains that tugged at the very core of American family life. (“American Family” 438)

Meanwhile, those men who were successful in the good provider role were given license to absent themselves in a different way from family life: good providers were not expected to take on household tasks, be overly involved in childrearing, or perform exceptionally well in the inter-personal or expressive/emotional sphere of the home.\textsuperscript{21} Bringing home “the bacon” was enough; women now assumed responsibility for these other areas of family life.

\textsuperscript{20} For a more thorough discussion of the perquisites and costs for men of the good provider role, see Bernard; see also Gerson’s \textit{No Man’s Land}, particularly Chapter Two.

\textsuperscript{21} See Bernard, 151-52.
Housewives found themselves in an even more vulnerable position than their male counterparts vis-à-vis the economy since, barred from directly entering the cash economy themselves, they had to stake their lot on their ability to secure—and keep on securing as the years of marriage continued—the loyalty of a man who would work in the marketplace for them. Women’s sense of identity and purpose under the male breadwinner system has thus also been shaped by their relationship to the economy, but that relationship is more obscure, mediated as it is through male family members. In addition, it is difficult to “see” the relationship between women themselves and the economy because the labor that women perform in the home falls outside the cash nexus: the reproduction of the labor force both through rearing the next generation of workers (the children) and through caring for and ministering to the needs of those family members who are wage-earners has generally gone unpaid. Without a cash marker to show for it, women’s provider status is erased. This kind of economic invisibility can lead to a feeling of being without an identity altogether, as Meredith Tax, writing in 1970, illustrates:

When I am by myself, I am nothing. I only know that I exist because I am needed by someone who is real, my husband, and by my children. My husband goes out into the real world…I stay in the imaginary world in this house, doing jobs that I largely invent, and that no one cares about but myself….I seem to be involved in some sort of mysterious process. (qtd. in Zaretsky, Capitalism 56)

Children’s—and most particularly boys’—sense of identity was also profoundly affected by the economic changes that began in the 1830s. In an agrarian economy, boys and girls took part in their parents’ work and most could assume that they would grow up to be somewhat like their parents. But as fathers left home to work in offices or factories, boys found themselves excluded from their father’s work lives and simultaneously without an economic function in the home, which was now defined more rigidly as female. Further, as urbanization accelerated, a

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22 Bernard describes the negative, even “crippling” effects that the male good provider role had on women (150-51). See also Zaretsky's Capitalism, especially Chapter Four.
boy’s “future course—including his adult vocation—[was] shrouded in uncertainty. The diversified economy of the city [opened] up many possibilities, and there [was] no reason to assume that what he eventually does will bear any relation at all to what his father presently does” (Demos, “American Family” 440).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, adolescence was recognized for the first time—in Western history, at least—as a distinct stage in the life course, and societal attention began to focus on the “special problems” of youth. Chief among these was the identity crisis, which, it was now thought, young people had to resolve in order to successfully cross over into adulthood. 23

But the sense that one’s identity must be consciously forged, that one must rethink, even piece together for oneself, the elements and parameters of a worthwhile life was not confined to adolescence. By the end of the nineteenth century, the quest for identity described the experience of most middle-class individuals. Psychologist Philip Cushman argues that the changes wrought by “urbanization, industrialism, secularism and immigration” sundered the American population’s sense of itself as a unified people with a set of shared assumptions and values.

Simultaneously it gave birth to the modern sense of individual identity as something elusive,

23 For more on the historical emergence of the concept of adolescence, see Demos’ “American Family.” Zaretsky in Chapter Three of Capitalism details the nineteenth century refiguring of both family and childhood under the impact of industrialism.

It is interesting to note that Freud’s ideas, which concentrate on the problems children, particularly male children, have in sorting out their identity as they seek to both reproduce their parents’ lifestyle and separate from it, can also be interpreted through the economic/sociologic lens. Freud saw the drama in terms of sexuality, emphasizing the boy’s fear of castration at the hands of his father as punishment for the illicit desire the boy feels for the mother, but one can equally read the crisis of identity as stemming from the anxiety that a boy will not be able to find his work identity and thereby, through success in the market place, be able to acquire the same cache of power that his father has been able to accrue. In a world of male breadwinners and the family wage, it is money that a man offers the woman he marries, as much as his penis. Beginning around the time of Freud’s work on the Oedipal complex and continuing right into the present, industrialization and urbanization have, in many cases, made it less and less likely that fathers can help sons establish themselves in the world. This lack of help might, indeed, seem like castration. Faludi, in her suggestively-titled book Stiffed, looks at the psycho-economic dynamic between U.S. fathers and sons in the post World War II era.
something that must be sought after and “found,” or, in contemporary language, as something to be “fashioned” or “constructed.” “The configuration of the self,” Cushman concludes, “would from [the nineteenth century] to the present be a ‘problem’ and a source of confusion and discomfort for the American public” (40).

As the American public wrestled with the “problem” of identity, economic changes increasingly channeled examinations of this question into the fishbowl arena of the family. Most important amongst these economic changes was the concentration of productive property such as farmlands and factories in fewer and fewer people’s hands with the result that the great majority of Americans came to depend upon wages for economic survival. Paralleling this rise of corporate capitalism in the early part of the twentieth century, a new kind of family, one that experienced itself as completely separate from the arena of goods production, came into being. These changes created the conditions for what Zaretsky calls “the rise of subjectivity”—a greatly expanded sense of personal life amongst the masses of people:

For those reduced to proletarian status from the petty bourgeoisie, one’s individual identity could no longer be realized through work or through the ownership of property; individuals now began to develop the need to be valued ‘for themselves.’ Proletarianization gave rise to subjectivity. The family became the major sphere of society in which the individual could be foremost—it was the only space that proletarians ‘owned.’ . . . Peasants and other precapitalist laborers were governed by the same social relations inside and outside of work; the proletarian, by contrast, was a “free” man or woman outside work. By splitting society between work and life, proletarianization created the conditions under which men and women looked to themselves, outside the division of labor, for meaning and purpose. Introspection intensified and deepened as people sought in themselves the only coherence, consistency, and unity capable of reconciling the fragmentation of social life.” (Capitalism 44-9)

The twentieth-century American family continued to uphold the previous century’s middle-class ideal of the family as a haven or a utopian retreat, but, as the century went on, the sense of what it was individuals and families were attempting to find shelter from changed: at
first it was the mechanistic and often brutal world of industrialization, then it was big business or “city hall” and finally, as corporate capitalism with its remote, often-absent set of owners made class relationships and the oppression of workers more difficult to perceive, it was the sea of anonymous, impersonal forces beyond the family. A defining feature of developed capitalist society, according to Zaretsky, is the sense that each person is “an isolated individual, ranged against a society he or she cannot affect” (*Capitalism* 41).

As alienation in the public sphere has increased over the twentieth century, the family has settled into its new function as the place from which the personal search for happiness, love and fulfillment can be launched. The new realm of subjectivity now located in the family as well as in the solitary self, offers individuals compensation for the power and pleasures that have been lost in being able to meaningfully influence the larger public world of work and politics.

The compensatory connection, however, has gone largely unrecognized. Instead, in the twentieth century, the heightened search for identity and personal fulfillment is experienced as something quite unrelated to the economic organization of society. This sense that the family and the economy inhabit separate realms is, Zaretsky argues, “specific to capitalist society” and further that “only under capitalism is the ‘economic’ function of the family obscured” (*Capitalism* 9-12).

But though consciousness about the connections between individual families and the over-arching socio-economic structure has been repressed, the connections themselves still exist. Even as individuals turn to the family seeking a haven from the impersonal, ruthless, and, at times, terrifying world around them, that world penetrates and informs the family, making the home a place haunted by unnamable forces and shadowy contradictions.24

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24 One example of this penetration of the economy into family life can be seen in the area of production and consumption. Early in the twentieth century, with the consolidation of industry and the great expansion of goods
Family members’ various quests for trust, intimacy, and self-knowledge have given the contemporary family a continued sense of meaning and purpose, but they have also caused relationships within the family to carry astronomical new weights. In the nineteenth century, women shouldered the main burden of the emotional or expressive side of life. In the twentieth century, women still absorb a large share of the emotional work within families, but the emotional load which the family overall is expected to shoulder, as it tends to the needs of members alienated from the social/economic world, has vastly increased. When the impersonal and objectifying forces of capitalist production penetrate and affect the workings of the family without being identified or acknowledged but are instead added to the swirl of intense emotions already present in the family, there arises the all too familiar feeling that the family may “explode…from within” (Zaretsky, Capitalism 18).

It is important to note that though much does change in the worlds of both work and the family over the course of the twentieth century, the basic pattern of the father functioning as a kind of absent presence in the lives of his children does not, as historian Robert Griswold makes clear: “Survey and psychological data from throughout the twentieth century suggest that . . . father-child alienation remains a defining characteristic of American family life” (3). In the last few decades of the twentieth century, with the collapse of men’s monopoly on breadwinning, the notion of father-as-breadwinner loosens its grip and other ways to define fathers and fatherhood production, new markets were desperately needed. In addition to going abroad, capitalists turned to the American home as a lucrative venue for their goods. The result was that by the 1920s the majority of American families had become centers of consumption rather than commodity-producing units. The effect of this economic change on both the family and on its individual members’ sense of purpose and identity has been profound:

As a result, American domestic and personal life in the twentieth century has been governed by an ethic of pleasure and self-gratification previously unknown to a laboring class. Working people now see consumption as an end in itself, rather than as an adjunct to production, and as a primary source of both personal and social (i.e. status) identity. This is often expressed within the middle class as “life-style,” a word that is used to defend one’s prerogatives regardless of the demands of society. (Zaretsky, Capitalism 51)
Even so, male breadwinning, according to Griswold, continues to be, in the last decade of the twentieth century, “the great unifying element in fathers’ lives” binding men across differences of race and class and shaping their sense of self and society (2).

II. The Rise of the Novel, Critical Responses to the Fictional Family, and the Call for a New Type of Literary Theory

The momentous changes taking place in social, economic and philosophical spheres of life in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were paralleled in the literary arena where there is a proliferation of a new kind of prose fiction: the novel. Prominent in these new fictional works is the depiction of the individual as autonomous. Consciousness and subjectivity take center stage, and characters’ lives are layered so thickly with detail that they seem simultaneously real and, because they are fictional, deliciously freed from the actual constraints of reality. The rise of the middle class is reflected in the novel’s subject matter, which focuses on the trials and triumphs of bourgeois life. Prior to this period, Wallace Martin reminds us, “literature portrayed all characters but the aristocracy as crude, comic, or unworthy of serious treatment” (19).

25 The economic changes that have caused men to lose their monopoly on breadwinning in the U.S. include the transition to a postindustrial economy after World War II and the stagnation of wages from the 1970s on, making it nearly impossible for a family to survive on a single wage.

26 See Catherine Gallagher’s “Nobody’s Story: Gender, Property, and the Rise of the Novel” for an engaging discussion of the impetus behind the creation of realistic characters in the early novels. In particular, she focuses on the effect that knowing that the characters in a novel were clearly fictional—i.e. nobodies—had on readers who first learned to let themselves go and deeply identify with fictional characters (another form of Shorter’s surge of sentiment) and then learned to cease “to feel the transferred emotions upon closing the book, because, after all, the characters are only fictional.”

27 See the introduction of Wallace Martin’s Recent Theories of Narrative for an overview of contemporary theories on the novel’s origin and development as well as for a discussion on the definition of the genre itself.
The origin of the novel is widely accepted as being tied to the changes that came with the advent of capitalism and the rise of the middle class.\textsuperscript{28} The connection between the origins of the novel and the origins of the modern nuclear family, however, is less well-thought out, having been made, according to Paula Marantz Cohen, “only obliquely by historians and literary critics” (192)\textsuperscript{29} This oversight on the part of scholars of the novel points to a continuing difficulty in conceptualizing the connection between the domestic sphere and societal-wide economic forces, a kind of unconscious acceptance of the doctrine of separate spheres, which while it may have achieved its most extreme form of expression in the nineteenth century, still informs our consciousness today.

Zaretsky argues that the notion that the family and the economy inhabit separate realms is, in fact, a signal characteristic of capitalist society: “It is only under capitalism that material production organized as wage labor and the forms of production taking place within the family have been separated so that the ‘economic’ function of the family is obscured” (\textit{Capitalism} 12).\textsuperscript{30} Writing in the mid-1980s, “materialist-feminist critics” Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt

\textsuperscript{28} See Ian Watt’s \textit{The Rise of the Novel}, Michael McKeon’s \textit{The Origins of the English Novel}, and Tony Tanner’s \textit{Adultery in the Novel}, particularly the final chapter, for descriptions of the social, political and philosophical conditions that are seen as both fertilizing and being reflected in the rise of the novel in Europe.

\textsuperscript{29} Cohen points out that Ian Watt in his work \textit{The Rise of the Novel} suggests a connection between the novel and the family only “in passing in his chapters on Samuel Richardson,” while Nancy Armstrong’s \textit{Desire and Domestic Fiction} examines “the relationship of the novel to the definition of sex roles in society...without linking these specifically to the structure and dynamics of the nuclear family” and that Georg Lukacs, T.B.Tomlinson, and Michel Foucault each deal “with related issues without making an explicit or detailed formal connection between the nineteenth-century family and the nineteenth-century novel” (192). Using family systems theory as a methodology, Cohen’s own work, \textit{The Daughter’s Dilemma}, correlates patterns of closure in the nineteenth century family and in the nineteenth-century novel. Cohen’s definition of what constitutes a connection between the study of the family and the study of the novel is somewhat narrow, focusing on the psychological and formalistic aspects of each, but it is nevertheless true that there are very few works of literary criticism which look closely at the connection between the novel and the family.

\textsuperscript{30} Zaretsky defines the forms of production taking place inside the family as “the socially necessary but private (i.e. unsocialized) labor of housewives and mothers. Child rearing, cleaning, laundry, the maintenance of property, the preparation of food, daily health care, reproduction, etc. constitute a perpetual cycle of labor necessary to maintain life in this and any society. In this sense the family is an integral part of the economy...under capitalism” (\textit{Capitalism}10).
point out that even most feminist literary critics ignore or divorce themselves from a consideration of the material contours of life:

Thus, despite our assumption that ideas, literature and culture are socially constructed, that mental oppression is rooted in the material conditions of our lives, much of our literary theory implies a version of the world in which women are oppressed, for the most part, by literary constructs or in which female counter-myths are more powerful than (or as powerful as) economics. Rather than elucidating the complex web of relations—social, economic, linguistic—all of which literature is a part, we disassociate ideas from material realities. (xvi)

Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton, also writing in the 1980s, broadens the scope by arguing that the kind of literary theory produced under capitalism in general divorces the study of literature from social, political, and economic life.31 Noting that literary theory finds it “natural” to use “very ‘aesthetic’ or ‘unpolitical’ language,” Eagleton argues that it assumes . . . that at the center of the world is the contemplative individual self, bowed over its book, striving to gain touch with experience, truth, reality, history or tradition. . . . [I]t is notable how often such individual consciousness, set in its small circle of relationships, ends up as the touchstone of all else. The further we move from the rich inwardness of the personal life, of which literature is the supreme exemplar, the more drab, mechanical and impersonal existence becomes. It is a view equivalent in the literary sphere to what has been called possessive individualism in the social realm, much as the former attitude may shudder at the latter: it reflects the values of a political system which subordinates the sociality of human life to solitary individual enterprise. (Literary Theory 196-7)

What Eagleton describes as the attitude and standpoint of literary theory since the advent of capitalism bears a striking resemblance to the attitude and standpoint of the passage quoted previously from Ladies Magazine. While the domestic viewer in that 1830 article reduces the

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31 In Literary Theory Eagleton examines, in turn, phenomenology, hermeneutics, reception theory, structuralism and semiotics, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis before concluding that what is needed is a radical approach to the study of literature which starts from “what we want to do, and then seeing which methods and theories will best help us to achieve these ends. . . . Any method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of ‘better people’ through the socialist transformation of society, is acceptable” (210-11).
public world outside the quiet enclave of the home to “a desolation of feeling,” Eagleton's personification of literary theory, ensconced in the "rich inwardness of the personal life," experiences the world beyond literature as "drab, mechanical and impersonal."^{32}

Ideology, the conglomeration of ideas and rules upon which a society both runs and reproduces itself, may be experienced as so seamless and all-inclusive to those inscribed within its sphere of influence, that it takes on the mantle of the universal. Newton and Rosenfelt remind us, however, that ideology is specific to each society, that it is “a structure of perception that helps maintain a particular set of social and economic relations at a particular juncture in history” (Newton xxi-ii). The repression of the connection between the function and feeling tone of the family and the larger economic structures of capitalism, for example, or, more broadly, between ideas and material realities is a particular ideological feature of capitalism.

Literature has also been implicated in helping to prop up the socio-economic status quo. Louis Althusser, for example, in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” identifies literature as one of the ideological apparatuses by which the social relationships necessary for maintaining capitalism are produced.

Like the purloined letter in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, ideological beliefs are generally hidden in plain view: they form a background of precepts that, seeming to be obvious and true, have passed beyond the realm of scrutiny and are simply taken for granted. Ideology itself is a confusing mixture of the real and the imaginary. According to Althusser, the system of representations—images and various other kinds of social/cultural discourse—which produces and perpetuates a given ideology present “not the system of the real relations which govern the

^{32} After surveying the major methods and schools of literary criticism, Eagleton concludes not only that literary theory has been “endlessly resourceful [in refusing] to countenance social and historical realities” but that “the great majority [of literary theories]. . . have strengthened rather than challenged the assumptions of the power-system” of late industrial capitalism (*Literary Theory* 195-96).
existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” (qtd. in Belsey 46). Another way to think about this is that ideology allows people to act in the world without fully understanding the roles that they are playing or being encouraged to play. It is not that ideology paints a blatantly false picture. Rather, according to literary critic Catherine Belsey, ideology “obscures the real conditions of existence by presenting partial truths. It is a set of omissions, gaps rather than lies, smoothing over contradictions, appearing to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades, and masquerading as coherence in the interests of the social relations generated by and necessary to the reproduction of the existing mode of production” (46).

In addition to orienting people in a specific way to their material surroundings, ideology shapes the way people think about themselves, or, in other words, the way they construct their subjectivity. As we have seen, capitalism ushers in a new sense of what it means to be human as people begin to separate themselves off from their communities and families and to “freely” exchange their labor power for wages. The notion that human beings have the ability to exercise independent choice, whether in conscience or commerce, begins to seem natural during this period as does the idea that each individual’s identity or personality is not only unique but also innate or fixed. These new understandings of self and society complement an economic system that requires people to be extremely flexible, moving from place to place and/or job to job since workers and families that have an autonomous, stable sense of themselves are better able to manage the isolations and upheavals of the marketplace.

The notion of the individual as separate and separable from societal and economic forces and, at the same time, as internally sufficient or complete helps to make fundamental change either on the individual or the social level difficult to envision, a state of mind which, in turn,
contributes to the overall atmosphere of sterile rigidity which is so characteristic of bourgeois life.  

Liberal humanism, the Enlightenment ideology that emerges alongside the development of the bourgeoisie, collates and codifies these ideas about human nature by assuming “a world of noncontradictory (and therefore fundamentally unalterable) individuals whose unfettered consciousness is the origin of meaning, knowledge and action” (Belsey 51). As the nineteenth century draws to a close, this sense of the self as noncontradictory is challenged by Sigmund Freud, who shores up the idea that each individual is the author of his/her own unique story of origin, but also offers a view of the self as being riven with competing needs and desires and therefore as being capable of change and development. The notion of the self and, by extension, the family as a hothouse of contradictory forces grows exponentially over the course of the twentieth century reflecting social and economic changes, most especially the rise of a consumerist society.

Belsey argues that the realistic novel, which emerges in tandem with capitalism, helps to produce and consolidate the notions of self described in the paragraph above by presenting through characterization and plot “a world of consistent subjects,” who are themselves the “origin of meaning, knowledge and action” (52). As the nineteenth century goes on, authors and playwrights refrain more and more from directly addressing the reader or otherwise intruding into the text so that these art forms begin to seem mimetic of life itself, recording events as they might actually have occurred or rendering in an apparently objective manner people’s thoughts

Fredric Jameson, writing on this subject with characteristic intensity decries the “structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the ‘individual,’ which—the tendential law of social life under capitalism—maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself.” To imagine that one can find refuge and salvation from the social, he goes on, in such things as “the microscopic experience of words in a text . . . only [strengthens] the grip of Necessity over all such blind zones in which the individual subject seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation. The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political.” (“The Political Unconscious” (excerpt) 402)
and actions. As the author disappears, space is opened up for the reader to step forward and make meaning of the text. In doing so, Belsey points out, the reader’s own sense of being an autonomous subject able to create “meaning, knowledge and action” is stimulated making the very act of reading classic realist texts an exercise which reinforces liberal humanist subjectivity in the reader. The choice of which meaning or meanings to draw from the text, however, like the choice workers have under capitalism, is, Belsey argues, largely illusory: the text itself, while allowing access to alternative meanings, nevertheless privileges the dominant ideology, making it the one readers are most likely to retrieve or “choose.”

Nevertheless, just as in any dialectical process, the freedom to question and make up one’s own mind which liberal humanism promotes, however superficially, does, in fact, lead to critical thinking on the part of some subjects. Rachel Blau DuPlessis joins a host of contemporary literary critics when she writes that novels are the “place where ideology is coiled” (5) but that, simultaneously, novels also contain places where readers can both unearth alternative ways of thinking about the world and achieve more clarity on the workings of the dominant ideology.

Narratologists, beginning with Mikhail Bakhtin in the 1920s and 1930s,

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34 For more on how classic realism works to support the status quo as well as a discussion on the relationship between realist texts and the development of subjectivity under capitalism, see Catherine Belsey’s "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text." See also Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production*. For an overview of theories on the question of the relationship between author and reader including reader-response theories, see Wallace Martin's *Recent Theories of Narrative*, especially Chapter Seven.

On the subject of liberal humanism and its notion of choice, Terry Eagleton points out that “liberal humanism is a suburban moral ideology, limited in practice to largely interpersonal matters. It is stronger on adultery than on armaments. . . . Its view of democracy . . . is the abstract one of the ballot box, rather than a specific, living and practical democracy which might also somehow concern the operations of the Foreign Office and Standard Oil” (*Literary Theory* 207). Elsewhere Eagleton writes “[t]he ‘unique individual’ is indeed important when it comes to defending the business entrepreneur’s right to make profit while throwing men and women out of work; the individual must at all costs have the ‘right to choose,’ provided this means the right to buy one’s child an expensive private education while other children are deprived of their school meals, rather than the rights of women to decide whether to have children in the first place” (*Literary Theory* 200).

35 Newton and Rosenfelt write, for example, “Literature and culture, of course, as sites at which ideology is produced and reproduced, are also sites on which the outlines and contradictions of ideology may be made visible”
have explored how novels in particular, though not exclusively, provide a forum for the interaction of competing voices or discourses, both hegemonic and dissenting. The sense of the novel’s polyvocality has been deepened in the past two decades by the discovery that texts written by women and ethnic authors are often “double-voiced,” meaning that these works contain hidden meanings or plots about gender and ethnicity. Another way a text may be double-voiced is through the inflection of its author’s class interests and sympathies, a hidden plot which I draw out and examine in some detail in this dissertation, since questions of class are inextricably woven into the literary figuring of the breadwinning father.

Having explored the correspondence between the rise of capitalism and the birth of the novel, and having explored, as well, a representative sampling of theories literary critics have produced to describe the relationship between the novel, with its emphasis on the interior world of personal development and intimate relationships, and the larger socio-economic structure of the society out of which it springs, it is time to turn to a more detailed look at how literary critics have analyzed the domestic world portrayed in novels.

Two critical trends become apparent: one in which critics rely upon various psychological theories to describe subjectivity and family life and one in which critics look for, but have not yet found, a theoretical approach to the intimate family relationships found in novels which integrates what is known about both the public and the private realms rather than continuing to keep them separate.

(xxiii). Marianne Hirsch finds the novel “the optimal genre in which to study the interplay between hegemonic and dissenting voices” (Mother/Daughter Plot 9).

36 See Mikhail Bakhtin’s The Dialogic Imagination, particularly “Discourse in the Novel” for a sense of what is meant by polyvocality. On the subject of the double-voiced text, see Henry Louis Gates' The Signifying Monkey, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic, and Nancy Miller's “Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women’s Fiction.”
To date, the bulk of critical work on the literary figuring of the family and the domestic sphere has focused on the eighteenth and nineteenth-century realist novels of Western Europe and the United States. These studies, written largely in the 1970s and 1980s by literary critics who began re-reading these texts through the lenses of feminism, new historicism, and deconstruction, have led to rich insights not only into the realm of nineteenth-century social, political, economic, and artistic configurations but also into the structure and underlying ideology of contemporary life—including family life—and art.37

Influenced by the tenor of the times—the civil rights’ and women’s movements as well as a growing consciousness of anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggles—U.S. literary critics began to examine the way themes and entire categories of literature had been repressed under the weight of a canon selected and shaped by white, male, bourgeois, nationalist, and heterosexual perspectives. One new area of study prompted by these political concerns was the discovery and examination of the vast outpouring of popular and domestic literature written during the nineteenth century in the United States. Important books produced on this subject include Jane Tompkins’ path breaking Sensational Designs which was among the first to examine nineteenth-century domestic literature and argue for its inclusion in the canon, David Reynolds’ Beneath the American Renaissance, which locates and describes the wealth of popular literature, including many works by women, which infused and informed the work of canonic male writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, and Gillian Brown’s Domestic Individualism, which

37 A number of critics have drawn parallels between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of domesticity in literature and the contemporary structure of society. Nancy Armstrong, for example, writes that she is “convinced that the household Richardson envisioned for Pamela has grown more powerful during the time that has passed between his day and ours,” adding that the “ideal of domesticity has grown only more powerful as it has become less a matter of fact and more a matter of fiction” (Desire and Domestic Fiction 251). Paula Marantz Cohen, studying the enclosed fictional families in nineteenth-century British literature, concludes that “as a culture we are still linked to a nineteenth-century ideology of closure even as that ideology is being revised” (Daughter’s Dilemma 5).
traces the reciprocal, even symbiotic, relationship between domesticity and capitalism in
nineteenth-century art and literature. In conjunction with this critical work, feminist scholars
have also republished domestic novels that, while they were some of the most popular books of
their time, had become virtually unknown to late twentieth-century readers.  

In addition to critical projects which sought either to recover nineteenth-century domestic
literature or to situate it within the larger workings of U.S. cultural and political formations, a
handful of feminist critical studies emerged during the 1980s and early 1990s that looked closely
at the internal workings of the nineteenth century Euro-American fictional family, examining the
gendered division of emotional and physical labor within the home and exploring the way that
these divisions shape the scripts of family interaction. In many of these critical works, as titles
like The Daughter’s Dilemma or The Mother-Daughter Plot intimate, the roles women and girls
occupy in the fictional family are more extensively parsed than those occupied by men and
boys.  

Much of the work done on the nineteenth-century domestic novel is overlaid with late
twentieth-century feminist perceptions and preoccupations. Analyzing the workings of the
domestic sphere dovetails, for example, with a guiding principle of second wave feminism—the
idea that “the personal is political.” By placing women authors, their texts, and the stories of
women and of the domestic sphere at the center of inquiry, feminist literary critics follow another

38 Two such examples are Susan Warner’s The Wide, Wide World (1850) and Maria Susanna Cummins’ The
Lamplighter (1854). The Wide Wide World was reprinted by the Feminist Press in 1987; The Lamplighter was
reprinted as part of Rutgers’ “American Women Writers Series” in 1988. During the 1850s they were, along with
Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the most popular novels of the period. For more on the way these
novels construct gender and align the relationship between the private and the public world, see Nina Baym’s
“Introduction” to The Lamplighter.

39 Paula Marantz Cohen is the author of The Daughter’s Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century
Domestic Novel; Marianne Hirsch wrote The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism. Hirsch’s
book is one of the few feminist explorations of the fictional family that studies both nineteenth and twentieth century
novels.
key precept of feminism: putting women in the subject rather than the object position. In addition, many feminists, particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s, viewed the family itself as the chief site and principal cause of women’s oppression. Studying the nineteenth-century family, where dynamics of gender that, many critics argue, still obtain today were writ so large, has helped feminists develop insight into the modern family and especially into the way that male and female subjectivity is socially constructed and reproduced.40

“The object of the critic,” writes Catherine Belsey in 1985, “is to seek not the unity of the work, but the multiplicity and diversity of its possible meanings, its incompleteness, the omissions which it displays but cannot describe, and above all its contradictions. In its absences, and in the collisions between its divergent meanings . . . it can provide a knowledge of the limits of ideological representation” (57). As has already been discussed, the practice which Belsey outlines of separating out the hegemonic and dissenting voices in a text has been a focus of contemporary literary criticism in its study of the eighteenth- and particularly the nineteenth-century novel. The emergence of the middle-class woman author and the growth of a large female readership over the course of the nineteenth century have helped to make both the imposition of bourgeois ideology and a subversive resistance to it, generally by women authors and generally along gender lines, tantalizingly close to the surface in these works.

40 For an early articulation of the idea that “our personal problems are political” see Deborah Babcox and Madeline Belkin’s Liberation Now!: Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement (1971), especially the introduction (2). Elaine Showalter describes how feminist literary critics have imported this sentiment into their academic work when she notes that there is often an “insistence on the relationship of literature to personal experience” (“Introduction: the Feminist Critical Revolution” 4). Marge Piercy’s novel Woman on the Edge of Time (1976) presents a case for the feminist position that the oppression of women (and men and children) is inherent in the structure of the nuclear family itself. In the novel, she provides an alternative, utopian society in which the nuclear family has given way to far more egalitarian and communal structures. For critics who argue that the gender divisions of the nineteenth century still inform the shape of our world today, see footnote 37 of this Chapter. See also Rotundo, who argues that “[s]ince we still inhabit [the] professional and public institutions” built by the men of the nineteenth century, “nineteenth-century manhood of the Northern middle-class variety is still impinging on us daily” (9).
Critics have shown how the techniques of classic realism—closure and a hierarchy of discourses—work to both uphold and question the status quo, reinforcing normative behavior and bolstering dominant forms of social and familial organization while at the same time giving voice to alternative structures. Tony Tanner, for example, in *Adultery in the Novel*, describes the novel as having had from its inception a “conservative drive,” bolstering the middle-class family by supporting “the best morals and manners and values of the period” (369). But he also argues that the novel “discovered” early on that its primary subject—the enclosed, boundary-ridden modern family—contained “potentially antagonistic and disruptive elements [making] it a center that cannot hold, an illusory center, or perhaps not a center at all” (373). Pondering the widespread theme of adultery in nineteenth-century European novels, Tanner concludes that the novel is particularly “aroused by the weak points in the family, the possible fissures, the breaches, the breakdowns” (371). It is the existence of these fissures embedded within the structure of the novel itself that has drawn feminist critics seeking to pry open the critical discourse about literature and make room for alternative, subversive, and suppressed voices.

The critical work on the nineteenth-century novel produced during the 1970s, 80s and early 90s has led to a spirited discussion of the role that literature itself plays in the construction and maintenance of the status quo of family life as well as the ways in which even in the most apparently bourgeois text, liberatory themes and ideas can be mined and brought to the surface by readers and critics. In the process of these debates, many critics have found ways to look through the scrim of intimate and familial relationships upon which these novels center themselves and bring into focus the outlines of the society beyond the family, especially highlighting the effect of capitalism and the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution on both public and private spheres.
Marianne Hirsch, for example, argues in *The Mother-Daughter Plot* that the novel can and does articulate progressive change by allowing authors to create “feminist” family romance plots that alter or revise the standard patriarchal Freudian model of family interaction. Christine Van Boheemen, on the other hand, argues in *The Novel as Family Romance* that the Freudian family romance cannot be revised in novels to reflect a more feminist sensibility because “the novel is the instrument of patriarchy, giving presence to its predominance in the act of utterance” (qtd. in Hirsch 202). Nancy Armstrong joins the debate about the relationship between literature and the non-fictional world by arguing in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* that literature is an active historical force that, by schooling people in what is normative, doesn’t merely reflect or reproduce social reality but actually creates it. She asserts, for example, that domestic literature preceded and therefore supplied the prescriptive blueprint for the kind of domestic womanhood that actually emerged in the nineteenth century. And she argues convincingly that the division of the world into gendered spheres supported and even spurred the development of industrial capitalism.

Catherine Gallagher agrees with Armstrong, writing that the novel is a “benign instrument of self-discipline, at once regulating, normalizing, and individuating its readers” that takes the place of more public and “inhumane” forms of state punishment, but adds, based on her analysis of eighteenth-century British novels, that “the disciplinary impact of the novel relies on readers who understand that they are reading fiction.” Pondering the fact that sentimental novels begin at a certain point towards the end of the 18th century to satirize female characters who become so wrapped up in the predicaments of fictional characters that they neglect their own families, Gallagher theorizes that these characters are actually training readers in a new “emotional practice . . . [that] of sympathizing with characters because they are fictional and then
ceasing to feel the transferred emotions upon closing the book, because, after all, the characters are only fictional. This deliberate creation of emotional discontinuity allowed for a separate dimension of affective life, one in which emotions are only ‘practiced,’ in which the feelings themselves take on [a] suppositional, conjectural status.” Gallagher posits that this skill of “emotional extrication” probably gave eighteenth-century women a way to cope with the emotionally taxing position of being situated between two worlds: married under the auspices of the older aristocratic system in which marriage was understood to be an economic and status transaction and yet aware, even envious, of the modern family system coming into being in which marriage and family were seen as being based on affective bonds. Taking Gallagher thesis one step further, being taught in novels how to dissociate from the problems of people—especially poor people—outside the reader’s own family was also probably useful in quelling the urge to political action and in helping to cement the ideological premise of the new, isolated middle-class family that it was, to borrow a phrase from Christopher Lasch, a “haven in a heartless world.”

Yet if the nineteenth-century domestic novel has provided contemporary feminist critics with numerous examples of the way literature can both prop up the status quo and offer readers and critics the means to better understand the hidden currents of authority that inform both society and its works of art, a paradox emerges in the critical works that have looked most closely at the workings of the fictional family. While the authors of these works acknowledge the “public” world and its involvement in the workings of the domestic sphere, they have had less to say about the ways in which the social, the political, and the economic actually function in the private sphere than one would expect given the feminist perspective with which these critics approach their subject.
This is so partly because the literary critics who have undertaken the closest analysis of the internal workings of the family have, in the main, relied upon psychological theories to guide their inquiry. Dianne F. Sadoff, for example, whose book *Monsters of Affection* (1982) is one of the few full-length feminist studies of the figure of the father in literature, chooses Freudian psychoanalysis as the theoretical framework through which to explore the novels of Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte. In *The Daughter’s Dilemma* (1991), Paula Marantz Cohen also draws upon the psychotherapeutic realm for insight into the familial role of the daughter in nineteenth-century British literature. Instead of Freud, however, she turns to family systems theory.

Sadoff and Cohen believe that psychological theories enhance their investigation into both the “private” and the “public” world, helping them understand the intricate workings of the family and the development of individual subjectivity as it is depicted in the novels they study and at the same time illuminating the broader social, cultural, and political framework into which fictional characters and even the novel itself fit. Each critic argues that the psychological theory she has chosen is so deeply in tune with the social and political milieu out of which these novels spring that the theory becomes a key able to unlock the room in which each fictional family lives.

Sadoff, for example, finds psychoanalysis “particularly well-suited to the interpretation of nineteenth-century narrative” because Freud’s theories are completely inflected with the political, social, cultural and historical structures of the nineteenth century (7). She locates Freud’s interest in the question of authority in the family in Enlightenment philosophy, the revolutionary challenges to political authority that swept Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and, most particularly, in the economic changes wrought by industrialization and
urbanization which “allowed sons to compete with fathers, rather than to identify with, imitate, and follow them in class status, vocation, and marital advisement” (6). Freud’s “attention to the relationships between fathers and sons and the structures of the Oedipus complex” gives voice to these socio-economic tensions, just as do the Victorian novels Sadoff examines where battles between fathers and sons abound (6-7).41

Like Sadoff, Cohen relies upon a psychological theory—in this case family systems theory—to illuminate both the novels she is studying and the historical, social, and economic context surrounding these works.42 Even though family systems theory was developed during the 1940s and 50s, Cohen argues that it can help parse the nineteenth-century British novel because the ideology of closure upon which family systems theory is based also informs both the nineteenth-century British family, which retreats from the outside world during these years and seeks to create a world unto itself, and the nineteenth-century realistic novel, which creates a similarly unified portrait of the world, tying up loose strands into plot endings of either marriage or death.

What this ideological dominance of closure in both nineteenth-century domestic novels and nuclear families suggests is that the novels not only have families as their subject-matter, but also operate like the families they represent: both are systems with boundaries seeking to maintain closure. It would follow that if we can study the interactive patterns that govern the novels, we may apply them to the families they represent and through extrapolation, learn more about how our own families operate. (Cohen 4)

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41 Sadoff notes that in “Freud’s masculine and patriarchal view of a paternalistic culture…the daughter has no function; unlike the son, she cannot question the father’s authority, nor can she as an adult free herself from her self-definition as ‘daughter.’” As with the other aspects of Freud’s theories, Sadoff ties Freud’s repression of the female and the feminine in his theoretical work to the fact that “his culture [also] did so” (7).

42 Family systems theory, influenced by biological and ecological models, views the family as a integrated unit wherein individual family member’s actions and/or reactions cannot be viewed in isolation, but, rather, must be understood as part of the family’s overall attempt to maintain balance and/or adapt to changing conditions. See Lynn Hoffman’s Foundations of Family Therapy for more on family systems theory.
Like Sadoff and Cohen, Marianne Hirsch believes that psychological theory takes its shape from the cultural and social milieu in which it is embedded. As such, she rejects the idea that Freud’s family romance reflects a universal pattern of human nature and interaction, and argues instead that “patterns of family romance can and do vary, for male and female writers, during different periods and for different cultural traditions” (10). In The Mother-Daughter Plot (1989), Hirsch explores the relationships between mothers and daughters—figures she defines as “neglected by psychoanalytic theories and submerged in traditional plot structures” (3). In Euro-American novels written by “feminist” women authors from the Victorian era up through the 1980s, Hirsch shows how Freud’s family romance undergoes constant revision, generally in ways that reflect concurrent feminist theorizing about the family.44

In the end, Hirsch finds the relationship between psychoanalytical theory and a century and a half of feminist novel-writing extremely troubling. Feminist novelists, theoreticians, and literary critics may have succeeded in slightly revising the Freudian master plot, but they have not, Hirsch concludes, been able to go beyond the parameters of traditional psychoanalysis and patriarchal family structures to create either a theory or a fictional representation of non-patriarchal family interaction. Instead, there is a “persistent adherence of women’s plots to the

43 The family romance is a concept put forward by Sigmund Freud and describes the imaginative search for origins that individuals use to liberate themselves from their actual family of origin. Hirsch defines the family romance as “the story we tell ourselves about the social and psychological reality of the family in which we find ourselves and about the patterns of desire that motivate the interaction among its members” and argues that the existence of a family romance inextricably links the act of narrative with the experience of family life (9).

44 While reserving the word “feminist” for “an aesthetics connected to the feminist movement of the active social resistance in the 1970s and 80s,” Hirsch considers all the female authors she examines as partaking of the ethos of feminism in that they “define themselves by their dissenting relation to dominant tradition” (8).

Tracing the changing structure and storyline of the revision of the family romance in novels from three literary periods—the Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern—Hirsch finds that daughters in nineteenth-century novels repress their mothers completely in order to develop themselves but that in the early twentieth century, fictional daughters turn back to recover and include the story of the mother in their narratives. In the postmodern period, a few rare novels appear that feature a mother who speaks in her own voice or in dialogue with a daughter.
terms identified in classical mythology and psychoanalytic theory,” including the notion that family is a “static structure” in which “triangles as fundamental figures in familial interaction” predominate (10). Numbering herself amongst those thinkers and writers who cannot seem to break free of the influence of the Freudian psychoanalytic framework, Hirsch admits that she is too embedded in its worldview to do more than “[long] for other economies and other figures”; she feels especially cut off from “the means of politicizing the psychological and the familial” (11).

During the 1980s two non-feminist literary critics also explored the dynamics of the fictional family through the lens of psychoanalysis. In 1981, Robert Con Davis edited The Fictional Father, a collection of essays that he hoped would help to introduce the American literary community to the theories of French Freudian critic Jacques Lacan. In 1986, Francesco Aristide Ancona’s book Writing the Absence of the Father used Lacan’s theories to ponder the father-son dynamic in a number of contemporary U.S. novels. The authors of these works assume that family dynamics are propelled by primal, non-historical forces, an assumption that makes each of their works lean towards a conservative propping up of both patriarchy and the status quo.

Con Davis, who sees Lacan as producing “the best theoretical criticism on the subject of the father,” begins his book with a detailed analysis of Homer’s Odyssey followed by articles on novels by Charles Dickens, James Joyce, William Faulkner and Donald Barthelme (2). Con Davis believes that “the psychoanalytic subject and the text are synonymous” and that “many of the same laws govern both” (3). In fact, he argues that narrative itself has its origins in the son’s
discovery of his father’s absence. In this scenario, the son, experiencing both his own lack and his desire for that which he lacks, embarks upon an active quest for his father and, more particularly, for the meaning that the father seems to hold out to him. The tension between the opposition the father sets up by wielding authority over the son—which the son experiences as a kind of distancing or absence or prohibition—and the desire for unity the son feels for his father is what moves the narrative forward, giving it its twists and turns. In the end, the knowledge that the son acquires is not of his real father but of the “symbolic father” who stands behind every narrative. By aggressively imposing his authority, this abstract paternal figure forces the son to learn to mediate between his desire and “the law”—the compact of rules and mores that organize and govern society. As he does so, the conditions are created that allow both sons and fathers—since without sons there can be no fathers—to survive: “in this way, knowledge of the father and of the world comes into being” (20).

For Con Davis, the role the father plays both in literature and in the development of the child is enormous. “One comes to literary texts to find and take hold of the father,” he asserts; or again, the father is the person in the family who makes “subjectivity . . . possible” (188-89). This sense of the father’s centrality recalls Roland Barthes’ famous question: “If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories?” (Pleasure 47).

Lacanian critics can explicate the father’s absent/present role in literature only at the expense of a more historically or politically situated analysis. Thus, Con Davis asserts “father figures may seem to march along discretely in time, but desire for the father’s function transcends every order of succession” (188). The fact that the father must remain remote in order

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45 Con Davis boils the “literariness” of the father as he appears in fiction down to three “closely linked axioms of Lacanian thought: (1) that the question of the father in fiction, in whatever guise, is essentially one of father absence; (2) that each manifestation of the father in a text is a refinding of an absent father; (3) and that the father’s origin is to be found in the trace of his absence” (3).
to fulfill his function, encourages Lacanian critics to avoid an analysis of specific fathers in their cultural, social, and economic matrices. When Con Davis asserts “[d]irect knowledge of the father . . . is outside of articulation and impossible,” he clears the way for the articulation of a universal father figure who conveys the same meaning in generation after generation of texts from the *Odyssey* right up to the present (189).

Lacanian critic Francesco Aristide Ancona in his book *Writing the Absence of the Father* seems at first more interested in engaging the social and political circumstances surrounding the production of fathers in fiction, but in the end he follows Con Davis, drawing a line around the study of the family and allowing only psychoanalysis to enter fully in and make sense of the dynamics there. Ancona’s study focuses on a set of U.S. novels published between 1953 and 1981. Taken together, the novels offer a broad palate of U.S. father-son relationships in terms of the ethnicity, religion, race, and class of the families depicted. Ancona finds in every case that these fictional fathers and sons are unable to “successfully” resolve the Oedipal drama. Ancona’s thesis—that postwar U.S. novels enact a particular culturally-induced form of the Oedipal drama—seems to promise a historically-rooted analysis of the texts. He notes, for example, that at least three of his authors—E. L. Doctorow in *Loon Lake*, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and Joyce Carol Oates in *Expensive People*—create plots wherein money and particularly the capitalist relationship to money is a major part of what keeps fathers unable to fulfill their function and sons frustrated, guilt-ridden, alienated, or narcissistic. But in the end Ancona opts for a non-historical explanation: rather than delving into the particularity of the American situation as the novels themselves do, he veers away from an analysis of the social and

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46 Ancona examines Pat Conroy’s *The Great Santini*, Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*, James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, E.L. Doctorow’s *Loon Lake*, John Updike’s *Rabbit Is Rich*, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Joyce Carol Oates’ *Expensive People*, and Donald Barthelme’s *The Dead Father*.
political world and falls back upon such “universal” explanations as the fear of death, the urge to sublimate, and the Oedipal conflict. His psychological analysis even extends to U.S. readers who, he argues, generate and support this particular kind of father-son narrative because, like the characters they like to read about, they themselves are ridden with an inordinate fear of mortality.

The portrayal of men in literature and in life becomes a focus for some politically progressive literary critics in the mid-1980s. In 1985, Newton and Rosenfelt use Black feminist Barbara Christian’s argument about “the need to recognize variations among black communities and to avoid ‘a homogenized picture of black culture’” to urge cultural and literary critics to fight against “the notion that men are a monolithic, totally different and controlling out-there” (qtd. in Newton xxxviii; xxvi). Materialist-feminists, they write, should strive to view men “not in terms of gender ideology and relations alone but also in terms of class and race ideologies, class and race relations” (xxvi).47

By the late 1980s, some critics heed the call and begin to focus specifically on the silence that seems to surround fictional fathers. In 1989, Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, the editors of Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy, call for literary critics to draw back the curtain which has shrouded the figure of the father in literature, keeping him mysteriously remote and therefore overly endowed with power. Feminist critics, in concentrating on understanding the complicated construction of women’s identities, have developed an attentiveness to the way identity is not fixed but rather is shifting and multiple, inflected and intersected by such things as gender, race, sexuality, class, and language. Noting

47 Newton and Rosenfelt emphasize the benefits to women: “writing about men may well seem essential both to an understanding of women and of women’s culture and to an understanding and transformation of our gender systems” (xxvii).
that “Lacanian theory has demonstrated little interest in actual fathers” (xiv), Yaeger urges that the insights developed in the analysis of female characters begin to be applied to the study of fathers in order to seek “not simply the discourse of the oppressive father whose words are like death, but also the silent voice of the repressed or hidden father who will not show his face, his class affiliations, his economic interests, his homoerotic goals. We should try to locate not only the abstracting force of patriarchal law, but the all-too-particular force of an anxious father figure who has specific material weight” (19).

A little over a decade later, in an anthology of articles edited by Eva Paulino Bueno, Terry Caesar, and William Hummel entitled *Naming the Father: Legacies, Genealogies, and Explorations of Fatherhood in Modern and Contemporary Literature* (2000), the authors endorse Yaeger and Kowaleski-Wallace’s call for literary artists and critics to seek out a father figure that is “at once a more divided and a more plural figure. Theoretically,” the editors of this collection go on, “we might endorse this same claim, and offer the following collection of essays as a test of how far it might have advanced during the past decade. Because we feel that it has not advanced enough, however, we offer our collection more urgently” (2).

“At century’s end” they write, “one thing seems clear about fatherhood: although we miss it, we can recreate its authority only either as an absence or as a failed relation” (2). Noting that Lacan is cited by their contributors more than any other theorist, the editors conclude that “[d]espite the fact that the figure of the father emerges in [the essays of this collection] as nothing if not divided or plural. . . his function seems to be more “idealized” than ever—fraught with outright absence, vivid with enormous elusiveness, and rich with the most provocative kinds of undifferentiated energies” (3). The fact that contributors to *Naming the Father* continue to rely so extensively on the theories of Lacan is another indication of the hold that the basic
constructs of psychoanalytic theory continue to have on their imaginations and on the literary depiction of the family.

When one takes into account the history of the study of the family it becomes easier to see that the Lacanian approach to fathers in fiction is itself the product of a particular historical development. Eli Zaretsky observes that it is only with the advent of industrial capitalism that the family and the economy begin to be seen by scholars as separate realms of life. This ideological shift is apparent in the changing way the family has been studied by historians over the past two hundred years. In the nineteenth century, historians used such disciplines as political economy and ethics to investigate the family. By the early twentieth century, however, the emerging fields of psychology and psychoanalysis replaced these earlier methods. Those twentieth-century historians that did continue to study the family either in Europe or in the United States tended to focus on the family’s internal structure with the result that the major historical theories of the family—at least up until the mid-1980s—stress “the slow, almost imperceptible evolution in the internal constitution of the household” (Zaretsky, Capitalism 16). Against the seeming inertia of the family that these histories paint, the rapid pace and constant upheaval taking place in political and economic history have “lent plausibility to the view that history is the realm of politics and economics while the family is confined to ‘nature’” (Zaretsky, Capitalism 17).48

48 The domain of ‘nature’ in this view includes the most basic bodily functions in life—“eating, sleeping, sexuality, and cleaning oneself, with the agonies of birth, sickness, and death, and with the unremitting necessity of toil” (Zaretsky, Capitalism 12-13).

For an in-depth discussion on the separation of the “spheres” of family and economy under capitalism, see Zaretsky Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life, especially Chapter Two. For examples of historical works that begin in the 1970s and 1980s to reconnect the family to the political and economic world see Edward Shorter The Making of the Modern Family (1975) or Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg Domestic Revolutions (1988) in which the authors argue that “[a]lthough the family is seen as the social institution most resistant to change, it is, in fact, as deeply embedded in the historical process as any other institution. The claim that it is essentially a conservative institution—an island of stability in a sea of social, political, and economic change—is largely an illusion” (xiv).
Despite the conservative thrust of Lacanian theory, especially evident in the naturalization of the patriarchal father, feminist literary critics in the 1980s and early 1990s tended to rely heavily on Lacan’s theories because they felt Lacan’s insistence on the importance of the acquisition of language in the Oedipal drama offered space for a progressive investigation of the family. As Terry Eagleton explains, “by reinterpreting Freudianism in terms of language, a pre-eminently social activity, Lacan permits us to explore the relationship between the unconscious and human society” (*Literary Theory* 173). The hope was that Lacanian theory could forge a bridge between the unconscious world of the individual and its theater—the family—and the larger socio-economic setting.

This hope fades, however, by the end of the 1990s as literary theorists lose interest in both Lacanian and other kinds of psychological theories. During this same period there is also a notable dropping off of in-depth literary analyses of the fictional family in general, a situation that obtains right up to the present.

Perhaps what happens in the 1990s is that the limitations of a predominantly psychological approach become too apparent to be ignored. Psychological theories speak to the workings of the family and the development of subjectivity, but because they generally do so in a vacuum, without the aid of other, more socially-based modes of analysis, they tend, as Zaretsky reminds us, to “distort our understanding of personal life by assuming that it is governed by its own internal laws (for example, the psychosexual dynamics of the family, the ‘laws’ of the mind or of interpersonal relations) rather than by the ‘laws’ that govern the human order as a whole—an order that can be conceptualized neither as ‘material practices’ nor as ‘unconscious meaning’ alone” (*Capitalism* 15).
One can see this distortion of personal life in the way that psychological theories write the gender dyad so large that other dynamics are squeezed to the margins. When the focus is kept so tightly on internal familial dynamics, as psychological theories tend to do, gender is necessarily highlighted because the largest opposition within the closed world of the heterosexual family, the point that draws the attention and simmers with both tension and the possibility of resolution, is the male/female dyad. A second oppositional or focal point in the family is the generational one, between parent and child, old and new, past and future. But this dyad also often takes on the coloration of gender, as sons or daughters search in ways “explained” by their maleness or femaleness for connection to or separation from their mothers and fathers. The hierarchical and therefore segregated nature of capitalist society gives gender a further boost since the bringing together of different classes or races or other broad categories of social difference within one household tends to be rare. As “like marries like,” individual families appear like homogenous bubbles floating in a more diverse social sea. When the internal workings of such families are scrutinized, the impact of class or race on family dynamics and on the development of individual subjectivity is seen as negligible compared to the impact of gender: these other social factors are thought of as being part of the extra-familial world, fashioned by forces and laws about which psychological theories have little to say.

Literary analysis, psychological theories and fiction itself have all been heavily inflected by the prominence of the gender dyad. Its ideological handprint can be felt, for example, in the fact that five critical works from the 1980s and early 1990s which look closely at the interactions amongst family members in novels all diverge, in terms of approach, along gender lines: the three female literary critics, Sadoff, Cohen, and Hirsch, seek ways to use psychological theories to bridge the gap between home and the outer world while the two male critics, Con Davis and
Ancona, seem content to keep the two worlds quite separate.\(^{49}\) Such different approaches to literary theory dovetail with emerging feminist psychological theories during this period, such as those put forth by Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow which emphasize radical differences between male and female personality structures. Chodorow, for example, though she argues for a social not a biological basis for the differentiation between the sexes, observes that “[t]he basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate” (169). During these same years, novels about the family written by men and women also seem to diverge more drastically than in earlier literary periods. Marianne Hirsch finds, for example, that the questions raised by female post-modernist texts “remain more separate, less directly engaged with those raised by male post-modernist texts” than what she finds to be the case in either the realist or modernist periods of fiction-writing (140).

In addition to promoting the supremacy of the gender dyad, another problem with using psychoanalysis or other psychological theories as the main methodological avenue into the study of either the actual or fictional family is that such theories tend to reinforce the notion that the private sphere and its workings are separate from the surrounding “public” world. When the critical borders and boundaries are narrowed to focus so tightly on the representation of personal life as to give one a feeling that the public world is of little or no importance, critics—even feminist critics—run the risk of reinforcing in their own work the very message of separate spheres that the domestic novels of the nineteenth century were so intent upon promulgating. Rather than bridging the gap between the personal and the political, the notion of the family as a static entity where timeless rhythms of life, love, and death play themselves out almost independent of the larger society is reinforced. Under these circumstances, contemporary critics

\(^{49}\) It's also interesting to note that all the authors in Con Davis’ anthology are male.
find themselves unintentionally furthering the very ideologies they seek to understand and demystify.\textsuperscript{50}

Finally, the cultural dominance of the psychoanalytical approach to family life has had the effect of silencing the voices of both mothers and fathers since, as Marianne Hirsch points out, Freudian theory is “so profoundly child-oriented that it has difficulty . . . theorizing, beyond childhood, the experience of adulthood” (12). Reliance—whether conscious or not—on the basic outlines of the psychoanalytic plot has resulted in most authors choosing to narrate family life through the child’s perspective. Instead of speaking in their own voices, fictional mothers and fathers figure as remote objects of desire in these works. Their stories become the material that children must seek out in order to construct an understanding of their origins. Parents also operate as restrictive lawgivers whose prohibitions children must overcome, erase, alter, and/or incorporate in order to enter adulthood themselves.

In general, literature and literary critics have followed the gender bias of the Freudian paradigm and posited the father as the source of a child’s identity: it is the father that the child sets out questing to find, the father’s absence and/or prohibitions that spur the child toward self understanding. While the figure of the remote, absent, or forbidding father continues to loom large in Euro-American fiction as a whole, the figure of the mother has acquired a similar valence in a small group of twentieth-century novels where women writers, responding to feminist stirrings in society, have produced female versions of the Freudian family romance. In the modernist version, a female protagonist—Colette, for example, in \textit{Break of Day}—seeks out

\textsuperscript{50} On the point of furthering the very discourse feminist literary critics have sought in their studies of the nineteenth century to deconstruct, see Hirsch, especially her Introduction and Chapter Five. Nancy Armstrong also makes the point: “I . . . conclude that in concerning itself with writing by and representations of women, literary criticism has not destabilized successfully the reigning metaphysics of sexuality. Clearly, by generating still more words on the subject, it has invigorated the discourse that sustains such a metaphysics” (25).
her mother and pieces together, from the submerged maternal story she discovers, a way forward for herself. In the postmodern “feminist” family romance, exemplified by Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing*, the daughter seeks to understand her identity and future path both through recovering/reconstructing her mother’s life and through an understanding of the political, historical, and social context in which both her mother’s and her own story are situated. The dynamics between mothers and daughters in these contemporary texts differ from those of the modernist period, but they share one important trait in common: the stories are told chiefly from the daughters’ point of view causing Hirsch to conclude that “[p]sychoanalytic theory and a feminism heavily based in psychoanalytic terminology, cannot . . . present . . . the voice or the subjectivity of the mother” (160).

Paula Marantz Cohen sees signs that in the future consciousness will shift from the daughter to the mother. Hirsch finds some evidence for this prediction, notably in the fiction of German writer Christa Wolf, whose work allows the mother’s voice to begin to be articulated, as well as in the writings of such African-American authors as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

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51 Hirsch, writing in 1989 in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, sees contemporary feminist fiction as continuing to be dominated by psychoanalytical constructs including especially the tendency to see the family in terms of triangulation, a privileging of the male-female sexual connection over other forms of sexual expression (see Adrienne Rich’s much-reprinted essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience” for more on this), and an acceptance of the male bias of psychoanalytic theory in too readily attributing to fathers the dominant role in the stimulation of narrative.

52 Cohen writes that “[w]e are simply riding an ideological wave that is transferring women inevitably from the daughter’s to the mother's position.” This shift towards the mother’s perspective reflects a “cresting of an ideology of the family [from 19th-century closure to something more open and less exclusionary] within which we are struggling to keep our footing before the wave crashes. When that happens, “the maternal” may become so diffused or so radically transformed as to cease to be a meaningful idea” (183). Cohen believes that the mediating abilities that daughters acquired by dint of their special position in the nineteenth-century closed family system and which made them best able to interpret a world of meaning in flux is now being acquired by mothers and, through them, by women in general. As the structure of the family changes in the late twentieth century with “the greater distancing of fathers” and “new family arrangements such as single parent homes, new kinds of extended families . . . and greater reliance on day-care centers,” the ability to mediate everyone’s experience which Cohen argues has led, first in daughters and now in mothers, to a creative and flexible stance vis-à-vis relationships both within and without the family, will in the end pass from women and “become accessible to everyone, as individuals are made to create and interpret their own relational arrangements” (184). Such a change will signal that the family has moved completely beyond the nineteenth-century structure and ideology of closure and stability.
But though Hirsch sees postmodern feminist fiction as presenting “a greater spectrum of maternal experiences,” she nevertheless concludes that even in such fiction “maternal stories are mediated and suppressed, especially if they involve anger” and the maternal plot continues to remain “unspeakable” (39).53

Catherine Belsey notes that “[o]ne of the central issues for feminism is the cultural construction of subjectivity” (45) and Paula Marantz Cohen writes that “[f]eminist criticism has as its most generalized ideological agenda the deconstruction of a once-accepted idea of the self” (190). Feminists have worked especially hard to explore how women’s subjectivity is molded and shaped in the cauldron of family life. While the voices of mothers in fiction may be rare, the subject of motherhood itself, thanks largely to these investigations, has been studied from just about every angle: sociologically, psychologically, historically, and through the lenses of political, cultural, and literary theory. A rich understanding of the construction, functioning, and silencing of mothers and motherhood has accrued.

As the less-developed area of fathers and fatherhood begins to be studied, this body of feminist research is proving to be an invaluable source of insight and ideas. Positing that deeper, more accurate understandings of subjectivity can only emerge when individuals and situations

53 There are some rare examples in postmodern feminist narratives, such as in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, where Sethe speaks for herself and struggles to find her own subjectivity as a mother and where her anger, while present, is folded in with other, less threatening emotions such as love and nurturance. By and large, however, Hirsch rightly observes that the voice of the mother in contemporary fiction is muted if not silenced altogether. Even African-American feminist authors are able to produce only a partial rendering of the mother’s point of view—what Hirsch has called the “black feminist family romance which at once creates space for maternal voices and suppresses them” as, for example, is illustrated by the maternal figure Eva’s simultaneous ability to voice and not voice the story of her life in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (185).

Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) does include the voice of the mother in her depiction of a missionary family in the Congo, but the mother’s voice is abbreviated, appearing in a dreamy, retrospective tone at the start of each section. It is the daughter’s voices, however, that comprise each section and form the heart of the narrative.
are viewed through multiple lenses, for example, has helped feminists argue that the mother
cannot be conceived of as a single identity: she is always both mother and daughter. This concept
of inhabiting more than one standpoint at the same time—an example of the application of the
theory of intersectionality—can also be applied to the study of the father, who is also always
both a father and a son.54

The notion that parenthood is—at the very least—double-voiced draws attention to
another problem with the psychoanalytic model of subjectivity and points towards new ways to
study both motherhood and fatherhood. Freudian theory posits separation or autonomy from the
family of origin and specifically from one’s parents as the sign of maturity. But a different, more
communal paradigm of development begins to emerge when subjectivity is conceived of as a
complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon in which parents, for example, are also always
daughters or sons. The concept of stand-alone individuals who can somehow extricate
themselves from both relationships and their environment or who can fashion a new identity
through sheer will gives way in this new paradigm to a concept of individuals who can only be
known or come to know themselves—i.e., achieve identity—through understanding the rich web
of circumstances and relationships in which they are embedded.

Hirsch argues that what is needed is a “more complicated model of identity and self-
consciousness” than the one we have inherited from Freud. A more accurate description of
selfhood, she writes,

would have to balance the personal with the political, the subjective experience
with the cognitive process of identification with various group-identities. It would
have to include a consciousness of oppression and political struggle. It would

54 For a discussion on the question of mothers being double-voiced, see Hirsch, Chapter Five: “Feminist
Discourse/Maternal Discourse: Speaking with Two Voices,” especially pages 196-199.
have to be both familial and extra-familial. As such, it would be post-modern in a political rather than merely an aesthetic or epistemological sense. . . . [By beginning] to describe more than one dimension of maternal subjectivity, and to imagine plots that transcend familial models . . . [w]e can explore the historical, economic, and political circumstances that have profound effects on familial interaction. And we can begin to map the topography of a subjectivity based not on autonomy but on a fundamental connectedness. (194-196)

A theory of subjectivity based on “a fundamental connectedness” has, in fact, been making slow advances in psychological, sociological and political circles since the 1990s. 55 There remains, however, a stubborn and troubling holdover to the Freudian notion of subjectivity in the realm of contemporary fiction where authors continue to have difficulty making mothers and fathers speak with their own voices. As we have already seen, a handful of contemporary feminist authors have managed to include snatches of the mother’s story in their works, but by and large the mother’s voice is still muted.

Even more repressed is the voice of the fictional father. No doubt partially to blame for this state of affairs is the fact that a feminist vision of how boys develop into men and into that complicated subset of men who are both fathers and sons is still in its infancy. The lack of development in this realm limits the knowledge and insight fiction writers have at their disposal as they depict fathers and fatherhood. In fact, the greater absence of fathers’ voices in recent fiction may partly be a chicken-and-egg phenomenon: the subjectivity of fathers being less

55 In the psychological realm, for example, see Philip Cushman’s Constructing the Self, Constructing America (1995) in which he shows how the psychological definition of self changes to match different historical periods. He proposes a new way of imagining the self which involves adding in a “third player” (the first two being “I” and “you”). This third player is the “ever present, interpenetrating social realm” (350). With this third player in place, a new understanding of self would include the “vision of humans as swimming in a sea of culture that is both given to us and continually reconstituted by us” (352). In the political realm, a more communal sense of self is emerging both in contemporary theories about globalization and in theories about the environment where it has become increasingly apparent that we are all connected. Indeed, in the case of global climate change, the very survival of the human race depends upon us recognizing the interconnectivity of life on the planet.
studied in other academic realms makes their fictional portraits harder to create, while their absence in fiction makes them more likely to slip through the cracks in other academic realms.

The suppression of the father’s voice in both literature and feminist theory in a patriarchal society where men’s voices generally predominate is not as contradictory as it first seems. The suppression of both mothers’ and fathers’ voices points to a larger suppression, one having to do with the family as a whole: no family member’s subjectivity can be fully explored in a society that compartmentalizes off the realm of production from the realm of the personal and draws a dividing line between the extra-familial and the familial. Hirsch speculates that the contextualizations which begin to occur in the fiction of “the feminist family romances” of the 1970s and 1980s as economics, politics, and the psychological are brought together “might perhaps make it possible to take the maternal out of the realm of silence and unrepresentability and to include . . . the voice of mothers” (153-54). In the same way, bringing together the public and the private worlds that the father routinely slips back and forth between may make it possible for fiction writers to more fully and accurately articulate the father’s voice.

While the psychoanalytic paradigm, with its tendency to view the parent from the child’s point of view, to rule out the influence of the extra-familial in parent-child dynamics, and to subsume all other contradictions into that of the gender dyad, certainly suppresses mothers’ and fathers’ voices in literature, there is also another powerful force silencing parental voices: the impact of living in a male-dominated society. Giving voice to the subordinate position mothers occupy in family and society means having to confront the way mothers are both complicit with and victimized by patriarchy. Feminists have generally shied away from this knowledge, finding
it easier to distance themselves from the mother’s voice than to bring this painful part of the story to the surface.\textsuperscript{56}

The father’s voice also conjures up painful experiences of oppression. In a society that allows itself to naturalize the father’s power, so readily accepting, for example, the Lacanian notion that the father represents the “law,” every father who speaks raises the worry in listeners’ minds that the patriarchal voice is being allowed to dominate yet again. In addition, perceived as both enforcers and beneficiaries of the status quo, fathers who speak often arouse the suspicion that they are trying to manipulate listeners into endorsing projects that go against the listeners’ self-interest. Further, men, by virtue of their place in the gender dyad, have been encouraged from early on to repress their emotional/personal side and concentrate instead on their mastery of the material/public world. This silence about the personal becomes part of the male apparatus of oppression; as Jack Sattel, examining the way that men use verbal silence to accrue power, points out, “[b]eing impersonal and inexpressive lends to one’s decisions and position an apparent autonomy and ‘rightness’” (qtd in Johnson 17). Faced with this conglomeration of worries and suspicions on the listeners’ part and power-accruing strategies on the speakers’ part, it is not surprising that writers, particularly feminist writers, have had a difficult time articulating the father’s voice.

Hidden beneath the silence of both mothers’ and fathers’ voices are the unspeakable aspects of their lives. Marianne Hirsch finds anger “one of the primary markers of maternal

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\textsuperscript{56} Hirsch has called feminism’s “matrophobic” silencing of the mother its “underside.” The reasons she posits for the feminist urge to suppress the mother include 1) the perception that motherhood is itself a patriarchal construction and thus suspect 2) a “discomfort with the vulnerability and lack of control” that mothers often experience in society 3) discomfort with and fear of the body itself, which the process of giving birth to and nurturing infants and young children constantly recalls, and 4) feminism’s “complicated ambivalence about power, authority, and … anger” which imbues feminist theoretical writing with “fears of maternal power and with anger at maternal powerlessness.” For a more detailed discussion of each of these four points see Hirsch, pages 165-167.
subjectivity” in fiction (39). This rage is uncomfortable and characters, readers, and authors often attempt to suppress it. But the rage stands in for something even more disturbing: the helplessness of mothers who, in a patriarchal society, have so “little control over their children’s paths to maturity” (39). The father’s fictional voice, when he is not speaking in the abstract voice of the lawgiver, is also often marked by rage. But underneath the anger he exudes is an even more terrifying discovery than that which underlies the mother’s rage: stripped of his patriarchal mask, the father’s voice, like the mother's, tells a tale of vulnerability and victimization, but sexism charges what the father has to say with an even more radical meaning.

Knowledge of the father’s vulnerability leads inevitably to the conjecture that the father may not be able to protect those under his “care” from the cruelties and vicissitudes at play in the world beyond the family. From this discovery, many others follow. When the father stops being viewed as the powerful mediator between family and society, it forces other members of the family to become more engaged in the world around them and, in the process, to assume a less innocent relationship to it. Ambivalent or negative feelings about becoming an adult and taking one’s place in a world that seems to run on the antithesis of “family values” ceases to be mainly the province of the male breadwinner. Instead, a wider range of family members must take up and grapple with the contradictions compressed into the ideology of separate public and private spheres. Somewhere in the process of coming to consciousness about how the private and the public actually interpenetrate each other, a way is cleared for a different understanding of subjectivity, one that moves away from the Freudian notion of the autonomous, separate self and toward a model where the self derives its definition from its relationship to others and to the overall social, economic and political environment.
Eli Zaretsky argues that what is needed if we are to better understand the family and the development of individual subjectivity is the ability to view the family through both the psychological lens of “unconscious meaning” and the historical lens of “material practices.” But literary critics have had difficulty in carrying out this dual-pronged research: because of the withdrawal of the historical disciplines from the study of the family, there is an absence of theoretical models that can help critics situate individual families in the broader socio-political landscape. A second difficulty literary critics have had in studying both the unconscious and material aspects of the family as they are presented in the novel lies in the history of the novel itself which, as we have seen, is so tightly bound up with the rise of capitalism and the middle classes as to be compromised by that association. The novel may offer clues about the family’s relationship to the rest of society but it offers those insights as a suspect witness, more interested in shoring up the status quo than in illuminating it or setting it into a broader, more critical perspective. In this way, the novel joins forces with psychological theory as both obfuscate the link between individual families and the economic and political world surrounding them while at the same time riveting our attention on its greatest “discovery”—the realm of individual subjectivity.

Nancy Armstrong ties together the gender dyad and the compromised role that literature and literary criticism play in supporting the status quo in her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987). Fiction, she argues, is both “the document and . . . the agency of cultural history” (23). Often it exerts a kind of political power about which we—readers, authors and critics—are largely ignorant. Tracing the construction of the “domestic woman” in British literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Armstrong shows how the new definition of womanhood that arose at this time served clear political and class interests.
and was integral to “the economic triumph of the new middle classes” (10). In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, domestic fiction helps to suppress protest by portraying the problems of the newly organized working classes as personal rather than political:

Numerous authors sought out the causes of poverty, illiteracy, and demographic change, not in the rapidly changing economic circumstances that had impoverished whole groups of people and torn their families asunder, but within those individuals themselves whose behavior was found to be at once promiscuous and insufficiently gendered. In analyzing the condition of the working classes, authors commonly portrayed women as masculine and men as effeminate and childlike. By representing the working class in terms of these personal deficiencies, middle-class intellectuals effectively translated the overwhelming political problem caused by rapid industrialization into a sexual scandal brought about by the worker’s lack of personal development and self-restraint. (20)

Armstrong argues that literature played a crucial role in appropriating political resistance and maintaining state order because it was able to do so without having to resort to the kind of brutal physical oppression that might have aroused popular opposition. Key to “the great nineteenth century project that suppressed political consciousness,” was the “thematics of gender” which the domestic novel hammered home in work after work (261, 25). In these novels “political information” was supplanted by “the discourse of sexuality” with the result that the view of subjectivity that figures the intimate self and its most important relationships almost completely in terms of gender became widely accepted (21). As the division between men and women was highlighted, other political ways of viewing both the world and the self were

57At first, Armstrong argues, the idea promoted in domestic literature of each woman’s worth devolving from her femaleness—that is, from the special virtues attributed to women under the doctrine of separate spheres—worked to challenge the aristocratic notion that an individual’s status derives from rank, birth, or title. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, a shift in the discourse of domesticity occurred: no longer so interested in critiquing the aristocracy which had become less of a political threat to the middle classes, fiction turned its attention to the working classes.

58By sexuality Armstrong means the total package of characteristics attributed to one or the other gender. While often thought about as being outside of history and therefore natural, Armstrong argues that sexuality does, in fact, have a history and that there is nothing “natural” about viewing men and women as having different, distinct and, in many cases, opposite “qualities of mind” (4). It is this history of sexuality, she argues, that the novel obscures.
eclipsed in favor of the “deeper” realms of life which could be found in romantic, heterosexual love, home and family life, and the pages of the domestic novel.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, feminist literary critics began expressing dissatisfaction with the methods of studying the fictional family available to them. Armstrong, for example, writes that she wants to further the work of “creating a new political literacy” by joining with other critics in seeking to understand “our own status as products and agents of . . . hegemony” (27). Marianne Hirsch, acknowledging that she “longs . . . for the means of politicizing the psychological and the familial” (11), calls upon feminists to invent “new theories and new fictions. . . .[that will] integrate psychoanalysis with other perspectives—historical, social, economic. . . .[and] oppose, as rigorously as possible, mystifications of maternity and femininity, by creating ways to theorize adult, maternal as well as paternal, experience” (198-99). Writing a few years later in 1991, Paula Marantz Cohen sees signs that “we are about to enter a new literary moment” in which the differences between male and female writing and between male and female literary critics will become “blurred” as men learn the “mediating capabilities” that women have already learned from their experiences in the enclosed space of the modern family. Cohen believes that in this new literary moment Armstrong’s “reigning metaphysics of sexuality,” which keeps other modes of interpretation and understanding at bay, will begin to loosen its hold on the cultural imagination of U.S. and European writers. In its place, Cohen predicts, a new kind of literary criticism, in which “emphasis will be placed more on ecological structure and design—on ‘differences’ and ‘contexts’—than on gender opposition,” will begin to emerge (184-85).

In the ensuing years a general theoretical shift amongst feminist and progressive critics has, in fact, begun to move the analysis of the family towards a methodology that seeks to
understand the connections between the personal and the political. Much of the work has a
tentative feel and little of it has translated into critical analyses of specific literary works. Instead,
critics seem to be working to clear away the underbrush, establishing terms and positioning
themselves against existing theories. In this way, they edge closer to understanding the
relationships between various kinds of families and the larger socio-political world. As this work
has gone forward, two areas of consensus have emerged: the need to jettison monolithic
narratives such as those proposed by Freud and Lacan and the dyadic thinking along gender lines
which often accompanies such narratives and the need to connect—or, in many cases
reconnect—literary theory to the “real” world.

Dana Heller, for example, in her book *Family Plots: the De-Oedipalization of Popular
Culture* (1995) argues that in the “post-family romance”—a term she coins for what she calls the
“recodification” of the family romance produced by U.S. novelists, theorists, and filmmakers
during the postwar period—what is most apparent is “our waning faith in the concept of unified
narrative itself.” These post-family romances, which become prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s,
bring to light rather “nervously” the information that “the plot for origin need not inevitably lead
us to the discovery or invention of a paternity, the privileged trope of Freud’s family romance.”
Nor does it necessarily become centered on an “alternative romance”: the “unified myth of
maternity.” 59 Instead, according to Heller, post-family romances reveal that “origins, once . . .

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59 See Marianna Hirsch’s *Mother/Daughter Plot*, particularly the third section “Postmodernist Plots/Maternal
Subjects,” for a description of “feminist family romances,” written either as novels or as theoretical works, that
place the mother rather than the father as the object of quest and the site of origin.

Among Heller’s examples of literary works that “redescribe” the family romance thereby turning it into what she
calls the post-family romance are Evan Connell’s *Mrs. Bridge*, Ann Tyler’s novels, Jane Smiley’s *The Age of Grief*,
Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*, and David
Leavitt’s *The Lost Language of Cranes*. 
de-Oedipalized, are never neutral, never innocent, but always contextual and relentlessly demanding.” (19)

Heller’s finding that postwar cultural representations of the family are no longer producing monolithic models, matches sociologist Judith Stacey’s observation, based on her study of U.S. families in California’s Silicon Valley in the 1980s, that there is “no longer. . .a single culturally dominant family pattern.” The modern family model, consisting of a male breadwinner, a female homemaker and their dependent children, has given way as Americans craft “a multiplicity of family and household arrangements, which we inhabit uneasily and reconstitute frequently in response to changing personal and occupational circumstances.” Stacey settles on the term “postmodern” to describe this “contested” and “tumultuous” chapter of family history because it is an in-between time: “a period after the modern family order, but before what we cannot tell.” Containing both experimental and nostalgic elements, the postmodern family “lurches forward and backward into an uncertain future” ("Backward" 93-94).

Stacey’s description of contemporary U.S. families as “diverse, fluid, and unresolved” is echoed by literary critic John Brenkman ("Backward" 94). Pondering the difficulty of formulating a theory of the family that will allow in the political, Brenkman comes to the conclusion that “[f]amily life is much more ragged, tentative and fluctuating” than Freudian, structuralist, Marxist or Hegelian concepts and metaphors admit. “Modern families and family relationships are indeed caught up in the social . . . and political relations . . . which organize the society at large, but there is no singular 'logic' which determines what those many-layered relations actually are” (230-31).
As the old monolithic models crumble, some critics see the way being cleared for a more inclusive, even creative, approach to family both in real and fictional realms. Stacey, for example, argues that “[b]ecause the postmodern family crisis ruptures [the] seamless modern family script, it provides a democratic opportunity. Efforts to expand and redefine the definition of family by feminists and gay liberation activists, and by many minority rights organizations, are responses to this opportunity . . . ” (“Backward" 109). Heller’s observation that the postfamily romance demands “that we—as readers and participants in discourse—make choices and constantly reevaluate those choices” also draws attention to the egalitarian possibilities afoot: as we encounter the “many-layered” artistic representations of the contemporary family, Heller sees all of us—readers and critics alike—being called upon to organize and add to the inquiry (19).

While Brenkman, Heller and Stacey zero in on the breakdown of the “seamless modern family script” in their arguments for a more politically-situated reading of the family, other theorists have been busy expanding Nancy Armstrong’s insights about the problem of relying so completely on the male/female gender dyad to analyze the family and its place in the world. Feminists of color have led the way in developing a new perspective which has put dyadic thinking in general under considerable scrutiny. Known as “intersectionality,” this theoretical approach argues that the interactions of gender or race or sexuality are not simply additive—that is, Black women are not “doubly oppressed” and Black lesbians “triply oppressed”—but that, rather, the axes of oppression and privilege intersect in more complex ways.60 Women of

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60 See, for example, an exploration of the intersections of race and gender as they played out in the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Judge Clarence Thomas in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “Whose Story is it Anyway? Feminist and Antiracist Appropriations of Anita Hill.” See also Evelyn Nakano Glenn's “The Social Construction and Institutionalization of Gender and Race: An Integrative Framework” in which she studies the way race organizes the “gendered labor” of social reproduction (caring for other people’s physical needs) in both private households and in public workspaces such as restaurants, hospitals and hotels. Glenn explores the interdependence between white, middle-class professional women and working-class women of color who, it turns out, do most of the menial work in these settings (20).
different races or ethnicities who share the same class location, for example, sometimes have
more in common with each other than they do with women of their own race or ethnicity but of a
different class.⁶¹

*American Literature* devoted its Spring 2005 issue to the theory of intersectionality.
Declaring that “enactments of race, gender, class, sexuality, and . . . region cannot be
separated,” Margo Crawford argues in the introduction to the issue that the commas separating
these social terms need to be erased so that the way that “constructs of race, gender, class,
sexuality, and region construct *each other*” can be better understood (1). These “proverbial
commas” are superficial gestures towards connectedness; in reality, they mask the fact that in
“the standard script” theorists often add a second or third term merely to “reinforce the imagined
master term” (2).⁶² The result is a “recreation of the old tired binaries” as, for example, when a
study of white women in the antebellum South automatically assumes that whiteness or maleness
(the imagined master terms) are dominant rather than looking, as the theory of intersectionality
urges, in a more nuanced way at white women’s simultaneous subversion and complicity with
racism (1).

Postmodernism, which Clive Dilnot defines as “characterized by the process of the
linking up of areas and the crossing of the boundaries of what are conventionally considered to
be disparate realms of practice,” also supports the attempt to reconfigure another ‘old tired
binary’: the personal/political split (qtd. in Stacey, "Backward" 94). Marianne Hirsch argues that
postmodernism has an explicit interest in linking the individual to his or her political roots. She

⁶¹ For an excellent exploration of the way that class intersects with race, gender, and sexuality, see Johanna
Brenner's *Women and the Politics of Class*, particularly the final chapter entitled “Intersections, Locations, and
Capitalist Class Relations: Intersectionality from a Marxist Perspective.”

⁶² Crawford credits the phrase “proverbial commas” and an early discussion of the problem to Judith Butler's *Bodies
That Matter* (168).
defines the postmodern as the literary period in which “the subject returns from its dispersal and disappearance in poststructuralist and deconstructive fiction and theory . . . to raise the political, historical, and social question of subjectivity. It returns as a tool of social transformation” (139). In postmodernist texts like Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, Marguerite Duras’ *The Lover*, and Christa Wolf’s *Patterns of Childhood*, Hirsch explores the mixing and melding of public and private realms as she probes the way the “process of subject-formation [becomes] a major preoccupation for the narrator/protagonist who sees herself as part of a newly emerging feminist generation” (138-39).

It should come as no surprise—considering its rejection of unitary “grand narratives”—that postmodernism itself is subject to a wide array of interpretations. Terry Eagleton, for example, sees postmodernism as having played a key role in eviscerating politics from both theory and everyday life over the past few decades. His book, *After Theory* (2003),—which sports a picture of two armchairs on its cover, one in a reclining position and one in a more upright mode—urges readers and critics alike to move beyond the apolitical type of cultural theory produced in the 1980s and 1990s to take up the “taxing business of trying to grasp what is actually going on” (223). Cultural studies arose in the 1960s when scholars in the humanities, stimulated by the political upheavals of the time, sought a methodology that could help people become self-conscious of the role that culture itself plays in supporting capitalism and the bourgeois status quo. In the 1980s, however, as political resistance to capitalism wound down and postmodernism—“the theory which assured us that grand narratives were a thing of the past”—began to dominate the intellectual landscape, cultural studies, according to Eagleton, lost

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63 For more on the postmodern as a movement towards historicizing subjectivity, see Andreas Huyssens’ “Mapping the Post-Modern,” Craig Owens’ “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post-Modernism,” and Edward Said’s “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology and its Interlocutors.”
its nerve, burying its political insights in the sands of minutiae (221). The result has been that in the first years of the twenty-first century, as “the grand narrative of capitalist globalization, and the destructive reaction which it brings in its wake, unfurls across the planet,” cultural theorists are unable to respond because “many of them have almost ceased to think in political terms at all” (72). Arguing that intellectuals can learn from the anti-capitalist movement which is demonstrating that “thinking globally [is] not the same thing as being totalitarian,” Eagleton urges cultural theory to return to its roots and “make sense of the grand narratives in which it is now embroiled” (52, 73).

While Eagleton is correct in the main, it is not quite as bleak as he makes out. As is evident from the examples I have given above, theory that seeks to understand the connection between the personal and the political is, in fact, being created in a number of fields. Moreover, a few theorists are beginning to go further, insisting that theory must be linked to practice. In

64 Eagleton includes the following examples of contemporary students’ apolitical handling of subjects in the field of cultural studies: “an interest in French philosophy has given way to a fascination with French kissing. . . . Socialism has lost out to sado-masochism. . . . There is a keen interest in coupling bodies, but not in laboring ones. . . . [S]tudents huddle diligently in the libraries, at work on sensationalist subjects like vampirism and eye-gouging, cyborgs and porno movies. . . . [Students] write uncritical, reverential essays on [the tv show] Friends.” (After Theory 2-5)

65 John Brenkman, for example, argues in Straight Male Modern: A Cultural Critique of Psychoanalysis (1993) that though psychoanalytical theory is a product of the modern historical moment, the ability to process or become aware of the specific political influences encoded in the Oedipus complex is thwarted by psychoanalysis itself, which refuses to acknowledge that “the Oedipus complex is inseparable from the social and political world in which parents and children live” (241). Injustices and inequalities abound in the male-dominated, heterosexist system out of which the concept of the Oedipus complex springs, injustices that profoundly affect the psyche. Psychoanalysis eschews this “moral-political dimension,” Brenkman observes, when it asks patients “to ‘take responsibility’ for the desires formed in the remote past of the Oedipus complex” but turns a blind eye on dilemmas in the patient’s present-day life such as the oppressive effects of male domination (243). While valuing the “ethic of introspection” which has sprung up as a result of psychoanalysis, Brenkman concludes that as long as psychoanalysis remains remote “from urgent questions of community welfare and social reform,” it cannot help people heal (246-47). Specifically, he urges therapists to allow the knowledge of political and social inequalities to surface during the therapy session.

In a different field, political theorist Joanna Brenner embraces intersectionality not only because it helps her analyze the socio-political workings of the world but because she sees, in its outlines, a blueprint for real-world solutions.
creating theory that is both progressive and activist, these scholars are chipping away at the barrier between the domestic armchair—the quiet, interior space where ideas are hatched and nurtured—and the busy, public world where “things happen.”

Their example is germane to my own study which seeks, using the figure of the breadwinning father, to bring the domestic world of the family and the socio-economic world "beyond" into a single conversation.

III. THE SILENCE OF THE FATHER IN LIFE, LITERATURE, AND LITERARY CRITICISM

By the 1990s, when most of the works I examine in this dissertation were published, the country was in the grips of a contentious political discussion about the changing nature of the American family. A key focus in these discussions was the absence of fathers from family life and their avoidance, in many cases, of their fiscal as well as emotional responsibilities to their children. Male disenchantment with family life and the male breadwinner role, as Barbara Ehrenreich has shown in The Hearts of Men, began decades earlier in the post World War II noting that environmental groups have begun working with trade unions, that labor movements are beginning to organize across borders, that immigrants in the U.S. are organizing and that gay and lesbian and feminist and anti-racist concerns have become part of workers’ rights struggles, Brenner concludes that “[f]or the first time there is a real possibility for a coalitional politics, for a rainbow movement organized around a broad agenda of social and economic justice” (318).

Returning to the field of literary study, Robert Scholes has urged a more activist political role for cultural and literary critics. In his 2004 Presidential Address to the Modern Languages Association, Scholes concludes that the “failure of theory . . . represents the larger failure of the humanities, as a whole, to justify their place in the . . . larger world” (730). The humanities, he argues, must play a key role in combating the values and practices of what has become “not so much a posthumanist world as an antihumanist world . . . . [W]e cannot serve this culture by acquiescing in its aims and values” (731). Scholes specifically argues that those working in the humanities must resist the two dominant sources of political power in the world today—pragmatism and fundamentalism. “[W]e must . . . in our teaching, generate new human standards that reject the fundamentalist leap to absolute truth and the pragmatist denial that such standards are possible” (731).
years. What started as a vague sense of unease in the 1940s and 50s, became, several decades later, helped on by economic changes and the rise of feminism, the actual physical exodus of large numbers of fathers from the family. Between 1970 and 1985, the number of single women heading up families with children increased 77 percent; by the mid-1980s, 43 percent of all Black families, 23 percent of all Hispanic families and 13 percent of all white families were female-headed (Griswold 231).

The changing nature of fatherhood reflected in these statistics garnered considerable public attention. The poet Robert Bly helped to launch what came to be called the mythopoetic men's movement when he argued in his bestselling book Iron John (1990) that "the love unit most damaged by the Industrial Revolution has been the father-son bond" (19). Asserting that “only men can initiate men” into the masculine role, Bly encouraged men to learn and then begin to pass on to the next generation of men the knowledge of manhood that he believed had been severed when men began to spend so much of their waking hours away from home (16). Inspired by Bly's ideas and his passion, men began flocking to conferences, workshops, and all-male weekend retreats designed to help them get in touch with their “authentic male self.”  

In May of 1992, Newsweek magazine reflected the tenor of the times when it ran an article about deadbeat dads: on the cover was a wanted poster of a man who owed some $22,000 in child support (Waldman). Around the same time, The New York Times reported that President Bush's advisers were planning to make the decline of the two-parent family a major campaign issue (Griswold 335, n. 44). By the mid-1990s, concern about the absence of men in families began taking the form of massive demonstrations. In 1995 Louis Farrakhan organized the Million Man March in Washington, D.C. to inspire African-American men to assume greater responsibility

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66 For an analysis of the mythopoetic men’s movement, see Michael Kimmel The Politics of Manhood.
for their families and communities. Beginning around the same time, the Promise Keepers, whose goal, organizers said, was “to reverse the moral and social deterioration caused by men abandoning their family responsibilities,” organized largely white gatherings of Christian evangelical men to attend rallies across the country (Goodstein 24).  

During the late 1980s and the 1990s sociological books about the changing nature of the U.S. family, written largely for popular audiences, began springing up like mushrooms on either side of the family values debate. Conservative authors argued that the dissolution of the family and, in particular, the absence of the father or—when he was present—his demotion from family head to a less authoritative role was the root of all manner of social ills. On the other side, progressive authors maintained that the U.S. family had always been more diverse than dominant cultural narratives had allowed and that, in fact, the dissolution of the modern family type, which posited the husband/father as the head of household, offered liberatory possibilities for families as a whole as well as for individual members.  

Children’s books also entered the fray with picture books like *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman and *Daddy’s Roomate* by Michael Willhoite presenting positive portrayals of children living with gay parents and Vera B. Williams’ series about a single,  

67 While there was some debate at the time of the Promise Keepers’ massive 1997 march on Washington as to the politics of the group, Gloria Steinem was not in doubt as to its essentially conservative thrust: “The Promise Keepers advocate a return to patriarchy (man obeys God and woman obeys man), not the equal partnership that many men, both secular and religious, work toward” (A30). The public concern about men's role in the family has continued into the new century: according to Paul Zakrzewski, the Promise Keepers, “after years of dwindling attendance due to financial problems are staging a comeback this summer [2005], hoping to fill 20 stadium rallies across the country.”  

68 For the conservative point of view, see David Popenoe's *Disturbing the Nest* (1988/89) or David Blankenhorn’s *Fatherless America* (1995). For the progressive side, see Judith Stacey's *In the Name of the Family* (1996), Arlene Skolnick's *Embattled Paradise* (1991), or Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were* (1992).
working-class mom who is able, despite the absence of a father in the family, to create an emotionally healthy environment for her daughter.⁶⁹

Against this background of social and political ferment over the state of the family and particularly the state of fatherhood in the popular arena, feminist scholars, who had spent the better part of the 1970s and 1980s studying women, enlarge their scope in the 1990s to include the social construction of manhood and masculinity, non-traditional forms of sexuality and alternative family arrangements. These efforts result in the rise of a new field—gender studies—which has either supplanted women’s studies or coexists alongside it in college departments and on bookstore shelves. As the scholarly focus shifts, feminists begin to acknowledge that delving so exclusively into women’s lives, while a necessary counterbalance to the historical oppression of women and the suppression of their voices, has also worked to reinforce both the gender dyad and the status quo by keeping men’s histories and experiences above scrutiny.⁷⁰

Sociologist Michael Kimmel has made dispelling this silence about men’s lives a focus of his work. Noting that “American men have no history of themselves as men,” Kimmel argues in Manhood in America: a Cultural History (1996) that maleness in America, like whiteness, has generic status: what men think or do is normalized to such an extent that they blend into the background—always present but, in a curious way, also always absent since the role they play is so often not scrutinized (2). Kimmel calls for a closer examination of the state of being male, including an acknowledgement of the many differences among men—what he calls

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⁶⁹ See Vera B. Williams' A Chair for My Mother.

⁷⁰ Such a realization came earlier to Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt who write in 1985, “[t]o a materialist-feminist, writing about men may well seem essential both to an understanding of women and of women’s culture and to an understanding and transformation of our gender systems. A focus on women’s culture, moreover, might well seem to work against an exploration of the real class and race divisions among women” (xxvii).
“masculinities”—generated by their varied standpoints with respect to class, race, ethnicity, age and sexuality (5).

But while there has been a great deal written about manhood and masculinity since the 1990s, very little has been written specifically on fatherhood either in the field of literature or in other disciplines. Relatively few history books, for example, have placed the American father at their center. Surveying the scene in 1982, historian John Demos found “no focused treatments of the subject in print—no monographs, articles, or compilations of data, let alone synthetic overviews,” and came to the rather startling conclusion that “[t]he historical study of fatherhood is waiting to be born” (Past, Present, and Personal 43). While a small trickle of articles on American fatherhood does begin making its way into print in the years following Demos’ pronouncement, it is not until 1993 that the first full-length study of the topic emerges: Robert L. Griswold’s Fatherhood in America. Drawing attention, as Demos had, to “the paucity of historical analyses of American fatherhood,” Griswold emphasizes that his book is merely “an overview” and predicts that many subjects, including “the history of emotional relationships between fathers and children . . . will be left to other scholars” (ix). Griswold’s work has been followed by several notable histories, each of which focuses on the subjective or emotional life of fathers: Ralph LaRossa’s The Modernization of Fatherhood (1997) which examines the changes that American fatherhood underwent in the period between the two world wars, Stephen

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71 An interdisciplinary conference entitled “Black Masculinities” which was held at the Graduate Center of the City of New York in Jan 2005 is representative of the general lack of scholarly work on fatherhood being produced amongst those who are studying men and masculinity: only one paper addressed the topic. In November of 2013, there was not a single paper offered on the subject of fathers or fatherhood at the New York Metropolitan American Studies Association's conference on "American Masculinities" which was held at Pace University in New York City.


73 For a fairly complete listing of the historical works produced during the 1980s and 1990s on the subject of the history of American fatherhood, see Ralph LaRossa, The Modernization of Fatherhood, (209-10, n. 4).

Despite the prominent position that fathers play in the pages of American literature, literary critics, like historians, have tended to focus their scholarly attention elsewhere. Even when parenting is the topic, mothers in fiction continue to draw far more critical interest than fathers do. A search of the Modern Language Association’s (MLA) online database of all documents in English published between 1990 and early Feb. 2006, for example, produced 954 entries using the keyword “motherhood” and only 158 documents when the keyword was “fatherhood.” When the search was repeated in April of 2014, the entries for "motherhood" jumped to 1803, while only 267 documents were retrieved when the keyword "fatherhood" was used. 74 *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* (1995) begins its entry for “Motherhood” with the statement, “Motherhood is a very important, and contested, term in feminist criticism and theory,” but provides no entry at all for fatherhood (Childers 195). Mary Ellen Snodgrass’ *Barbara Kingsolver: A Literary Companion* (2004) follows a similar pattern, including an entry for both “motherhood” and “parenthood,” but omitting fatherhood despite the fact that fatherhood is a central theme in two of Kingsolver’s most acclaimed novels, *Animal Dreams* and *The Poisonwood Bible*. A search of the MLA database for articles on John Updike and some aspect of fathering reveals a scant handful of documents (5 out of 754) even

74 The MLA online database was accessed Feb. 6, 2006, using the options “words anywhere,” “in English,” “between 1990 and 2006,” and “all document types.” Indicative of a slight quickening of interest in the study of fatherhood is the fact that over half (83 out of 158) of the documents having to do with the subject of fatherhood had been published since the year 2000. When the search was repeated on April 20, 2014, the same search parameters were used except that the database was searched from 1990 to the present. The percentage of fatherhood to motherhood articles actually dropped slightly between 2006 and 2014: in 2006 16.6% of the MLA articles dealt with fatherhood; in 2014 that percentage dropped to 14.8%.
though Updike’s Rabbit series, the subject of my fifth chapter and the winner of two Pulitzer
Prizes, is arguably the longest and most detailed literary portrait of fatherhood in post-war U.S.
literature. ⁷⁵

Feminist literary critics who write about the Euro-American fictional family do not completely ignore the figure of the father in their analyses, but because the impetus of their work is often to illuminate other figures in the family, the father’s outline remains indistinct. Even when adult males are featured in a literary study of the family, it is often their role as husband or lover rather than as father which is under examination. ⁷⁶ David Leverenz, who has long been interested in the subject of manhood and masculinity in American literature, broke this pattern by producing Paternalism Incorporated: Fables of American Fatherhood, 1865-1940 (2003), a book about the role fatherhood plays in literary depictions of the corporate workplace where older male employers often act as surrogate fathers to younger workers who assume the roles of daddy’s boys and girls. Leverenz postulates that older men so readily assume a father role at work because they seek to compensate for the disappointing emotional lives they lead at home, where their role is abbreviated precisely in order to allow them to spend more time at work.

Leverenz’s book is one of the few full-length studies dealing with fatherhood in American literature that approaches the subject from the social, economic, and historical point of view rather than from the psychological. ⁷⁷ Leverenz explains that his interest in fatherhood and,

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⁷⁵ I accessed the MLA online database on April 20, 2014. Using the keyword “John Updike” and the options “in English,” “all years,” and “none selected” for document types, 754 documents were identified. Using the same options and adding the keyword “father*” to “John Updike” narrowed the number to just five documents.

⁷⁶ As their titles indicate, Marianne Hirsch’s book The Mother-Daughter Plot concentrates chiefly on mothers and daughters, while Paula Marantz Cohen’s The Daughter’s Dilemma has daughters, not fathers, at the center of inquiry, and Tony Tanner’s Adultery in the Novel focuses on the heterosexual couple. Dianne Sadoff’s Monsters of Affection is one of the few feminist books to place fictional fathers at the center of a critical investigation.
more particularly, in the workings of the capitalist corporation arose in response to a silence he has observed at numerous MLA and American Studies conferences: there “are many panels about border crossings, hybridities, regional and ethnic constructions of subjectivity, the intersections of literature and popular culture, and the transgressive interplay of desires. What’s missing is the metropolitan center for all these energies: not an urban place, but rather corporate capitalism” (15).

Fatherhood forms a similar silent center at these conferences. Like corporate capitalism, it is so much a part of the foreground of our lives and of the invisible power structure we deal with everyday as to elude us. On one level, the assumption seems to be that there is not as much of interest to say about “the center,” which is perceived as having monopolized the conversation forever anyway, as there is about “the periphery.” On a deeper level, it may feel too painful or too risky—professionally and otherwise—to scrutinize that which lies at the heart of the status quo.

Unleashing the father’s voice is more threatening to the status quo than unleashing the mother’s voice not because it is a more powerful voice—though it does contain different kinds of knowledge than the mother’s voice—but because of the way patriarchy itself positions mothers and fathers. The mother’s situation is viewed first and foremost through the lens of gender. The target of her rage and the focus of her attempts for change is generally the system of male domination. For fathers, however, the enemy to be organized against is not—initially at least—so clear. Men may grumble about women’s “unfair” control or advantage, but a movement against women when men continue to control most of society’s institutions is obviously off base. Susan

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77 Another more recent exception is Doreen Fowler's *Drawing the Line: the Father Reimagined in Faulkner, Wright, O’Connor and Morrison* (2013). Fowler sees the father as a threshold figure in literary works, helping children both connect to and develop a sense of separation from social identities other than their own.
Faludi takes up this dilemma in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), a book which explores U.S. men’s feelings of anger and powerlessness at the end of the twentieth century:

> [m]en have no clearly defined enemy who is oppressing them. How can men be oppressed when the culture has already identified them as the oppressors, and when they see themselves that way? . . . Nor do men have a clear frontier on which to challenge their intangible enemies. . . . If the American man crushes the machine, whose machine has he vanquished? (604-605)

Faludi blames “consumer culture” for men’s angst. Arguing that the second wave of feminism was born out of the outrage women in the 1960s felt as they became conscious of the way they were controlled and objectified by the commercial world, Faludi sees contemporary male unhappiness as being tied to the fact that men are now, for the first time, being targeted for a similar kind of commercial exploitation.\(^7\)

The reason bringing paternal subjectivity to voice carries so much more potential charge than bringing maternal subjectivity to voice is because one needs to go beyond patriarchy to understand the forces acting upon and shaping the father. What is contained in the father’s silence is not (as Faludi rightly argues) oppression by the other gender, but (and this Faludi shies away from) the oppression inherent in the economic system of capitalism. What is missing from Faludi’s analysis is the role that capitalism, with its hierarchies of class, plays in shaping each

\(^7\) For more on the way women’s discontent has been tied to their commercialization, see Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

Faludi expresses the hope that men, by virtue of their position in society, will find a different way to press their concerns than that used by the other U.S. protest movements of the last half century, which, she argues, have all relied upon a “male paradigm of confrontation, in which an enemy could be identified, contested, and defeated.” Noting that civil rights, gay rights, women’s rights and the environmental movement have all failed to achieve their goals, Faludi concludes that the male paradigm of confrontation needs to be rethought: “[o]ther paradigms are needed to untangle the invisible skein of stubborn threads that restrain women and other subordinated populations” (604-05). Precisely because men cannot identify a clear enemy as they organize to deal with their growing sense of victimization, Faludi hopes that they will be in the best position to create “a new paradigm for human progress,” one that knows how to “wage a battle against no enemy, to own a frontier of human liberty, to act in the service of a brotherhood that includes us all” (608). Faludi’s analysis only makes sense if class is taken out of the equation.
individual’s relationship to consumer culture. It is this story, the story of class oppression, that the father is positioned to tell, both because of his role as breadwinner and because his story is able to go beyond preoccupation with the gender dyad in a way that the mother’s, focused on the problem of male domination, cannot. A forceful narrative about capitalism and its deleterious effects on families and communities so threatens the status quo that there is tremendous pressure—even more pressure than that which is exerted upon mothers—to keep it from coming to voice.

Were they to speak, fathers would tell the antithesis of the tale the U.S. public is used to hearing about the economic structure of their lives. Against a story of choice, just rewards, social mobility, and eventual liberation, many fathers would tell about being unable to control either their own lives or that of their family’s, and of being unable to keep children, especially sons, from repeating the unsatisfying life the fathers, functioning as cogs in the wheel of a larger economic system, have led. Fathers would tell of being unable to change the overall setup of society even if, by dint of hard work and/or dumb luck, they do succeed in moving themselves and their families up the “economic ladder.” And their voices would make visible to us the psychological wounds male breadwinners carry as they contend in a world where they must "look out for number one," competing against their fellows in order to survive.

Adrienne Rich has written that it is “[e]asier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her” (Of Woman 235). Fiction writer Alexie Sherman makes a similar point at the end of his screen play Smoke Signals (1998) when his main character—a young man searching for an absent/present father—asks in a voice-over addressed directly to the film’s audience, “If we forgive our fathers, what is left?” What indeed? What
would flood in if we were able to dismantle the defenses built up against knowing our fathers? What would we learn? What would we see?

Marianne Hirsch argues in her work exploring the fictional portrayal of mothers and daughters that “any discussion of maternal subjectivity . . . has to take into account the pervasive cultural fears contained in the powerful and angry figures” of mothers whose daughters and whose own lives have been destroyed and derailed by patriarchal oppression (36). The cultural fears unleashed by the exploration of paternal subjectivity are inextricably tied to the economic structure of capitalism where all human beings are objectified and alienated and where profits routinely take precedence over people. Capitalism itself is what lies coiled close to the surface in the literary portrayal of fathers.

Thinking about a world in which fathers no longer play the dominating, controlling role associated with the patriarchal father, Marianne Hirsch has argued that “[b]efore the familial can be transcended or left behind, all positions within the family must be probed from all directions” (12): “the constraint in oedipal structures which circumscribe the thinking and plotting of this particular feminist generation can be loosened not by stepping outside the family, but by giving voice to those members of the family who have served as silent backdrop to the development of others” (161). While Hirsch is thinking specifically of the mother, the patriarchal father also has served as a silent backdrop in the family drama and its literature.

If there can be no satisfying resolution to the problem of family relationships until all positions are voiced, but the voicing of the paternal position carries with it not only the threat of an escape from patriarchy, as does the mother’s voice, but also the threat of laying bare the workings of capitalism, then its vocalization is both liberatory and, because it implies revolutionary, society-wide change, extremely unsettling. No wonder the voices of wounded,
weary, vulnerable, and/or angry fathers speaking personally and authoritatively about the workings of class in a society where class is the most taboo subject of all have been difficult to hear.

Robert Seguin has surveyed representations of work and the ideology of what he calls “middle-classlessness”—the notion that there are no classes in America or, alternatively, that we are all middle class—in U.S. literature written during the first half of the twentieth century (4). In novels that display the discomfort of men with work, a discomfort that becomes more pronounced as the century goes on until it culminates with the emergence of the Beat writers after World War II, Seguin finds a strong desire amongst protagonists to work at satisfying, non-alienating jobs. Because many men experience themselves, in their role as breadwinner, to be "working" for the family, however, the desire to escape from a situation of alienated labor becomes conflated with a feeling that it is the family and not the economic structure of the work world that is oppressing them. It is the family that feels "wrong," the family that men long to escape. Jimmy Durante's popular song "Start Off Each Day with a Song," written in 1936, gets at this mindset:

You know I'm walking down Broadway
And who taps me on the shoulder
My pal, Hit 'Em In The Head Schwartz
I said who you working for now
He said the same bunch
The wife and the kids
Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

For men, the family itself, as Durante’s joke suggests, is often substituted in for the actual boss who remains outside the realm of comment and examination.79 Thus, once again, an over

79 For more on men's frustrations with the conditions and obligations of breadwinning and the connection between these frustrations and their dissatisfaction with family life, see Barbara Ehrenreich's The Hearts of Men.
emphasis on the gender dyad makes it harder to see the other forces shaping family life, particularly, in this case, the powerful workings of class.

Seguin identifies one other reason that class dynamics are difficult to think about: in the “political unconscious” of the texts that he examines he discovers that “[w]hat is desired is ultimately the liberation from (alienated) labor as such, in ways that we perhaps cannot at this moment of what Marx called our prehistory fully apprehend or foresee” (9). Because it is not yet possible to envision what liberation from alienated labor would look or feel like, it remains a vague and unsatisfying ideal. The effect of not being able to imagine a more positive vision of the future is that it is hard both emotionally and intellectually for authors, characters, or the reading public to delve too deeply into the negative experiences of the present.

The fact that very little has been written by literary critics since the late 1980s on the intimate workings of the fictional family in literature is connected to the overall difficulty Americans have thinking about the economic system upon which their society is based. Though, as already discussed, interest in applying a psychoanalytic approach to literature waned in the early 1990s as the limitations of such an approach became apparent, another approach to the subject of the family in literature has not emerged to take its place. The dearth of literary criticism on the subject of the family over the last few decades coincides with a general veering away of literary criticism from political subjects and with the development of a kind of cultural theory that Terry Eagleton has argued avoids making clear connections between itself and the political and economic world. 80

80 The analysis of the fictional family—which had been a major subject for feminist literary critics in the 1970s and 1980s—no doubt loses steam in the 1990s for the same reason that the civil rights and the women’s movement have slowed down over the past two decades: sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who began arguing in the late 1980s in her book The Second Shift that the women’s movement had become a “stalled revolution,” recently observed that
Around the same time that literary critics begin to fall silent about the family, the U.S. economic system enters a period of such profound and disruptive change that political theorists have had to scramble to catch up. “At the core of these changes,” according to Johanna Brenner, “are not simply globalization but capital’s increasing flexibility, mobility, and concentrated power, as well as the intensity of capitalist competition and the employers’ drive to squeeze ever more out of the workforce. A highly competitive and turbulent economy now dominates life in the U.S.” (317). Brenner, writing in 2000, argues that the institutions that might have worked to block or modify the worst excesses of capitalist exploitation in the past are “utterly unable to respond to [the] new conditions” brought about by capitalism’s restructuring and notes that new institutions and alternative forms of resistance have yet to arise (317). Sociologist Joan Acker, struggling to come up with an “accurate” description of the way capitalism functions in the world at the turn of the century, offers up the following rather startling image:

Capitalism looks to me like a mutating monster . . . changing forms, moving from one place to another, spawning abstract, disembodied technological marvels while re-creating nineteenth-century sweatshops, organizing itself through ever more abstract, textually mediated relations, but also through the most old-fashioned direct relations of exploitation. . . . It has a certain, very general, logic—

“American culture incorporated what of feminism fit with capitalism and individualism, but it resisted the rest” (Commercialization 254). Political theorist Johanna Brenner concurs, adding, “the great mobilization of the second wave achieved historic gains without directly confronting capitalist class interests. This was true also of the civil rights movement. Today, both movements face a similar impasse” (307). For more on the impasse that the civil rights movement faces, see Patricia Hill Collins Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice.

81 In the past few years, the emergence of the World Social Forum, an annual international gathering of progressive intellectuals and activists under the slogan “another world is possible” seems to be a step in the direction of creating such an alternative as is the development of what Brenner could only snatch glimpses of in 2000—a broad-based, multi-issue movement, exemplified by the Occupy movement, which is beginning to find ways to confront capital’s political and economic power (Brenner 310-318). Key in beginning to formulate these alternatives to capitalism has been the emergence of a consciousness about the importance of understanding the workings of class and economics. The World Social Forum, for example, grew up as a direct response to the World Trade Organization (WTO)—an international planning group of corporate capitalists. Whereas in the 1990s and in the early years of the twenty-first century, the forces arraying themselves in opposition to global capitalism were known simply as the “anti-globalization movement,” the multi-issue international grassroots movement offering resistance to the kinds of policies and projects pushed by the WTO have in recent years begun to identified themselves as the “anticapitalist movement.”
exploitation and accumulation. . . . But predictions about where the monster will engulf and extrude, where and when it will change form, are not possible, anymore than we can predict the exact forms of innovations in the arts. As the mutations continue, classes change, as do the forms of gender and racial oppression. (63)

Brenner’s and Acker’s descriptions of contemporary capitalism emphasize how difficult its contours have become to understand and pin down. In this, they recall Brenkman’s and particularly Stacey’s descriptions of the contemporary family as “diverse, fluid, and unresolved” (Stacey, “Backward” 94). This similarity of descriptions about the changes the economy and the family are going through under late capitalism is yet another signpost pointing in the direction of the need to study the inter-relationship between the two.

While a few recent works of literary criticism have incorporated a consciousness of economics and class into their analyses, these works stand out as exceptions: the bulk of literary criticism continues to keep clear of the subject. In the introduction to American Literature’s special 2005 issue on intersectionality, for example, Margo Crawford urges literary critics to bring all social terms into full play, but class is represented far less often than gender and race in the collection of articles that follow. Such an omission is in line with Brenner’s observations that class—despite its inclusion in the mantra “class, race, gender” that supposedly guides social and cultural research—continues to be left to the side in feminist analyses. Ignoring class, she points out, greatly “inhibits our political imagination” (307).  

82 For two examples of literary studies that do take class and the economic structure of capitalism into account are Robert Seguin’s Around Quitting Time: Work and Middle-Class Fantasy in American Fiction (2001) and David Leverenz’s Paternalism Incorporated: Fables of American Fatherhood, 1865-1940 (2003).

83 Noting that “Class difference . . . is a much less central theme in contemporary representational culture than other public discourses,” Brenner observes that “Class is so thoroughly racialized that white poverty . . . virtually disappears” (303). Two areas—our knowledge of white working-class women and our knowledge of the specificity of working-class women of color—have been left so undeveloped as a result of this ignorance of class that the U.S. population mistakenly divides the country into three classes— “the (white) rich, the (white) middle class, and the (Black and brown) poor” (303). Neither the civil rights nor the feminist movement can make further progress, Brenner predicts, until an “anti-racist working-class feminist politics” develops (307).
The omission of class also limits our critical imagination; the continuing lack of attention that literary critics give to the workings of class and to the contours of capitalism goes a long way towards explaining why so little has been written on the subject of the fictional family in the last two decades. If an alternative method of analysis has not come into being since the collapse of the psychoanalytic approach to the fictional family, it is because the obvious alternative—an analysis of the economic world in which the family is so inextricably embedded and about which the economic world has so much to “say”—has been ignored or resisted. Because an alternative method of analysis is lacking, an understanding of the function of the father, the member of the family most heavily tied, at least in our perceptions, to the economic world, has likewise gone undeveloped.

Aversion to thinking about class has a long history in the United States. Eli Zaretsky notes that the ideology of American exceptionalism—the notion that the social divisions that have plagued other countries do not exist in the United States—has “functioned throughout the nation’s history to deny and absorb class conflict” (“Exceptionalism” 138). Repression of the knowledge of class has resulted in what Benjamin DeMott calls the “American myth of classlessness.”

Elevating the political and especially the realm of economic or “material practices” to a prominent position in the analysis of intimate life and its depiction in literature raises a number of deep-seated fears. There is the concern that such an approach will not only be boring, dry and unemotional but, worse, will lead to the objectification of human beings by reducing them to a set of formulas. This foreboding is built into the ideology of separate spheres that, as we have seen, tends to view the public world as a “desolation of feeling” (Ladies Magazine, qtd in Rotundo 23).
Some of the fear that clings to the notion of approaching literature through a political rather than a psychological avenue can be traced to the “widespread suspicion of political literacy” which Nancy Armstrong finds in eighteenth and nineteenth-century domestic novels where a “mass forgetfulness” of the role that social forces—and most especially class interests—play in the construction of the intimate world of the family is both promulgated and reinforced (21). In the twentieth century and particularly during the cold war years, this “suspicion of political literacy” is given a jolt of new life in the U.S. when anti-communist prejudice penetrates cultural as well as political life. The prohibition against mixing culture and certain kinds of politics was reinforced again during the 1990s when, under the banner of “family values” and the leadership of such right-wing ideologues as Newt Gingrich, attempts to incorporate progressive political analysis into academic work were castigated as giving in to the tyrannical agenda of the “politically correct.”

Further complicating the inquiry is an issue that had concerned cultural theorists from the postwar generation through the 1970s: the problem of how to study culture’s relationship to the social and the economic aspects of life when culture itself is often times at least partly involved in shoring up the status quo. Under such circumstances, it becomes difficult to tell when culture and its critics—who are also a part of the apparatus of cultural production—are involved in obfuscating culture’s role in the formation of class (or classlessness) consciousness and when they are not.

Another factor adding to the reluctance to apply a class analysis to the contours of family life is the fact that doing so will inevitably draw attention to the way that relying so exclusively upon the psychological has distorted our conception of personal life; some of the most

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84 For a discussion of the early cultural theorists and their thinking on the relationship between culture, capitalism, and class consciousness, see Terry Eagleton After Theory, particularly Chapter Two: “The Rise and Fall of Theory.”
comfortable and comforting notions of how life works—that the family is a haven in a heartless world, for example—have to be revised when economic and political theory is allowed a say in what has heretofore been the almost exclusive purview of the psychological.

Finally, there is the question of what sort of expertise and commitment, in terms of time and energy, is needed to bring together the seemingly disparate fields of literature, family relations, and political economy. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt touch on this when, in explaining why feminist critics tend to privilege cultural over material analyses, they write, “it is a double work shift that is implied in trying to construct both . . . an analysis of literature and of history and society” (xix).

But if attention to the inflection that class and capitalism place on family life is still largely lacking in the field of literary criticism, it has not been missing from the pages of recent U.S. fiction. Beginning in the late 1980s as analyses of the fictional family quiet down and feminist critics like Patricia Yeager and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace begin to call for more attention to the father, a number of novels spring up that paint a much fuller picture of the links between the economic world and intimate family life than has previously been the case. It is almost as if the authors of these works have decided to use the pages of fiction to work out a relationship the critics themselves seem to be at a loss to trace. Many of these novels, of which the ones I study in this dissertation are a subset, concentrate on the figure of the father, placing him at the center of inquiry and seeking to understand what happens to him and to his family as he straddles the public/private divide. The emergence of this type of fictional father is tied to the ideological shifts and material changes described in this chapter as well as to the contemporaneous calls by scholars and activists alike to find a way to bring the personal and the political together in order to create a more stereoscopic view of family life. By insisting on linking the father and his role in
the family to the socio-economic structure of society, these novels have found a way to speak back to the fears and hesitancies and silences that have long relegated both literary and real fathers to the periphery.

These novels also respond to the fear apparent everywhere, but especially in conservative rhetoric, that the modern family is falling or being ripped apart. Tony Tanner, exploring the contradictory impulses of the nineteenth century novel—on the one hand, displaying a conservative drive to support the status quo and on the other having an interest in disrupting it—argues that in general the novel’s “real, if secret, interest has been aroused by the weak points in the family, the possible fissures, the breaches, the breakdowns” (371). Tanner identifies adultery as the weak point that nineteenth-century novels circle excitedly around. Contemporary novels seem to have found a new weak point: the family’s isolation and its feigned ignorance of the world of which, in reality, it is and has always been a part. Because of his ambiguous position vis-à-vis these two realms, the figure of the father is the logical site from which to explore this “weakness.”

But if these recent novels depicting fatherhood pick and pry rebelliously at the notion of the family as an isolated and static realm, they are themselves nevertheless full of ambiguous twists and turns, some of which, just as with the nineteenth-century novel, support the status quo. Perhaps this is because they are constructed in a moment of history that is itself an in-between time, neither completely under the sway of the old way of thinking about family nor completely free of it. They are threshold texts: on one side is the ideology of closure that has shaped so many of our notions about family and the psychoanalytic perspective which concentrates on the personal and the individual; on the other side is a more expansive view of both the family and of

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85 For a discussion of concerns about the demise of the modern U.S. family, see Judith Stacey's Introduction to In the Name of the Family. For a sampling of the conservative rhetoric about the “demise” of the family, see David Blankenhorn's Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem.
the construction of subjectivity which takes into account the political, the economic, and the collective.

The texts that I examine in this dissertation are all published—with the exception of the first three novels in John Updike’s Rabbit series—during the period of this loosening or transition. It is a symptom of the very thing I am studying in these novels from the early to mid-1990s that I feel compelled to bring the public and the private into contact not through the mediations of psychology but through the mediations of economic and political theory: many of the novels seem determined to investigate the very same question—that is, how the political and economic arrangements of society have guided and influenced the development of the father and, through him, the family.

There is a correlation between, on the one hand, the discomforts that fathers themselves feel and that we feel upon viewing or interacting with them, and, on the other hand, the discomforts of capitalism. In text after text from the time of the Industrial Revolution forward the problematic nature of capitalism, which rapidly becomes taboo to discuss out loud, is sublimated into the problematic figure of the father. Without understanding why or how, he becomes a figure of unease: restless, silent, a place marker for the larger realm of discomfort and discontent that lies beyond the bounds of the family in the socio-economic world.

In contrast to the silence about the father that I've traced in this chapter, the novels from the 1990s that I study reflect a loosening of the mask that has kept the father mute, mysterious, and, in many cases, nearly incomprehensible both to other family members and to readers. The reason for this change in figuring the father has to do, as it did in back in the nineteenth century when the advent of the Industrial Revolution stimulated the fictional figure of the absent/present breadwinner father, with changes in the economic landscape. Despite attempts by rightwing
ideologues to the contrary, in a postindustrial economy where more than one wage is needed to raise a family and where global corporate capitalism has made cogs of us all, figuring the home as a haven or a refuge no longer rings true. The border between the domestic and the public world is gradually being breached and that breaching is making its way into our literature where it is changing the way the story of the family and particularly the story of the father is told.

Nancy Armstrong finds fault with much of the feminist criticism produced in the 1970s and 1980s arguing that “in concerning itself with writing by and representations of women, [such] literary criticism has not destabilized successfully the reigning metaphysics of sexuality” (25). In other words, focusing chiefly, if not exclusively, on women—whether as authors, characters or readers—has, perversely, served to uphold the nineteenth-century gendered division of society since staying within a structure where “sexual relationships appear as the model for all power relationships. . . . makes it possible to see the female as representative of all subjection and to use her subjectivity as if it were a form of resistance. By inscribing social conflict within a domestic configuration, however, one loses sight of all the various and contrary political affiliations for which any given individual provides the site” (24).

In writing a dissertation that seeks to understand the contours of fatherhood and therefore necessarily concentrates disproportionately on the male half of the gender dyad, I have had to be cognizant of the very problem Armstrong outlines above. It is not enough to explore the ways in which men have taken up, both in life and in the pages of fiction, the role of victimizer opposite women’s and children’s victimhood. Nor will it do to only go so far as to explore the ways that men themselves have been victimized by the gendered system of identity, though insight into that process is extremely important. To do only these things would be to reinforce the “reigning metaphysics of sexuality” by allowing men’s primary characterization to be the gendered role
they play vis-à-vis women and the domestic sphere rather than bring in for examination the other forces and affiliations that work in concert with gender to shape male subjectivity. In my study of literary fatherhood, I have tried to step outside the gender dyad and bring to the surface other aspects of men’s identity—or, when this proves too difficult given the shadowy depiction of men’s inner lives, to at least offer a better understanding of the way these aspects have been suppressed. To do so, I examine not only the ways in which constructions of maleness have cost or benefited men, but also in what ways continued acceptance of the gendered form of male identity that arose in the U.S. with the Industrial Revolution contributes to the organization of our society today, shaping not only our notion of sexuality but, more surreptitiously, our notions of economics, community, and class.

Psychological theories have provided important insights in the field of literary criticism, but I don’t tend to rely upon them as I probe the workings of the modern fictional family. Rather, I have chosen to view the development of subjectivity in the family, and specifically in the father, through the social, the political and, most importantly of all, the economic. Sadoff and Cohen and Hirsch argue that the psychological theory that each has chosen to use in their own literary criticism so deeply permeates and reflects the society and the fiction they are studying that such theory provides a map of the essential routes into each text.

I make a similar claim in drawing upon political and economic theory to navigate the twists and turns of the fictional father, a figure whose chief definition in the actual historical family since the mid-nineteenth century has been as its breadwinner. It is my contention that since the material world and its practices are so deeply involved with the development and expression of the actual father’s subjectivity and role in the family, it is, at this time in history, theories about the material world that can best lay out to view the partially obscured portraits of
him that are found in fictional texts. This is so because it is the traces of the “public” world, with all its pressures and pleasures that have been assiduously erased from both the domestic sphere and from the portrait of the father. To allow the aspects of the father that have been silenced to surface and take shape, it is necessary to use as a lens the socio-economic world where his energy and power are so deeply engaged and to which his identity, even as a child growing up, is so strongly angled and shaped.

I do not dismiss the psychological approach entirely. Rather, I strive to recognize and redress the imbalance that for so many years has excluded the public and the political from the realm of the family. Terry Eagleton points out, “[a] psychoanalytical reading of the novel . . . need not be an alternative to a social interpretation of it. We are speaking rather of two sides or aspects of a single human situation. . . . [W]e can see how . . . human relationships . . . are understandable both in terms of unconscious processes and in terms of certain social forces and relations” (Literary Theory 176). In my work I concentrate on the “side” of human relationships that has up to now been given short shrift and is therefore less fleshed out in our minds.

My decision to study the fictional father in both the private and the public spheres is based primarily upon the conviction that it is not some extra-historical psychoanalytical system of gender that has given the father his valence as an absent presence in text after text, but rather that it is the ideology of the separation of the public and the private which situates the father-breadwinner astraddle these two worlds, suspended over the gap between them, in a “no man’s land” which places him always just out of reach.

The novels that I study in this dissertation seem to have come to a similar conclusion. Each one probes the difficulty of accessing and understanding the father's story and each takes the tack that his shadowy participation in the family is a function of his experiences in the world
beyond the family and most especially of his experiences as the family's breadwinner. But before turning to an in-depth analysis of how each of these novels presents the figure of the absent/present father in such a way that he becomes, in addition to a startlingly well-fleshed-out portrait of the classically difficult-to-know father, a key that allows readers to reconsider and deconstruct the familiar figure of the absent/present father which has been a touchstone of the American novel since the mid-nineteenth century, it is necessary to know more about how the narrative of the absent/present father has been told up to the point when the novels I work on are written. That story, as it has been presented both by American novels and by literary critics, is the subject of my next chapter.
CHAPTER TWO

FATHER FIGURING:

NARRATIONS OF THE ABSENT/PRESENT FATHER IN LITERATURE AND LITERARY CRITICISM

The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation.
—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels The Manifesto of the Communist Party

[Father Bhaer is] not ashamed to express by gesture or by word the fatherly emotions an American would have compressed into a slap on the shoulder and a brief 'All right.'
—Louisa May Alcott Jo's Boys

Where does the real life of most American men lie? In some woman's drawing-room or in their offices? The answer's obvious, isn't it? The emotional centre of gravity's . . . business. In America the real crime passionnel is a "big steal"
—there's more excitement in wrecking railways than homes.
—Edith Wharton The Custom of the Country

The time-clock drags me off at dawn, at night it lets me go.
I hardly know my flesh and blood; his eyes I hardly know . . .

I climb the staircase wearily:
a figure wrapped in a shade.
Each night my haggard wife describes how well the youngster played;
How sweetly he’s begun to talk,
how cleverly he said,
“When will my daddy come and leave
a penny near my bed?”

—Morris Rosenfeld  "My Little Son" (Trans. Aaron Kramer)

She guessed that something was developing behind the silence,
behind the hard, blue eyes, the almost unnatural interest in the children.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald  *Tender is the Night*

Running away—let’s do it,
Free from the ties that bind . . .
Why sit around, resigned?
Trouble is, son,
The farther you run,
The more you feel undefined
For what you have left undone
And more, what you’ve left behind.
We disappoint
We leave a mess,
We die but we don’t . . .

—Mysterious Man revealing himself
as the Baker’s father in  *Into the Woods*

Beck would not have known [his children]. And they, perhaps, would not have known Beck. They never asked about him. Didn’t that show how little importance a father has? The invisible man. The absent presence.

—Anne Tyler  *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*
Within the fields of gender and men's studies which emerge in the 1980s, a small but growing subfield since the 1990s has been the study of fatherhood. Important works, particularly in the fields of history and sociology, have been produced.\(^1\) In contrast, the field of literary studies has devoted relatively little attention to the study of fathers and fatherhood.\(^2\) Several literary critics, while not focusing on fatherhood per se, have, however, set the stage for an exploration of fictional fathers in American literature, and particularly the absent nature of those fathers, by pondering a corollary aspect: the highly problematic depiction of sexual love between men and women in the pages of American literature. R.W.B. Lewis and Leslie Fiedler, writing in the 1950s and 1960s, and Joseph Allen Boone, writing in the 1980s, have explained in quite different ways the American male protagonist's apparently urgent need to separate himself off from women and the "female" sphere of hearth and home. More recently a few critics have begun to address the question of the representation of fathers in American literature directly. In Part I of this chapter I consider what both older and more recent literary critics including Marxist literary critics have had to say about the portrayal of fathers and domestic life in American literature. In Part II, I sample how the absent/present father has been figured in some key works of fiction from the nineteenth century on, paying particular attention to the way the father's story


changes as socio-economic conditions change. In Part III, I situate Smiley, Díaz and Updike's works within the context of the stories about the absent/present father that have come before as told by both literary critics and novelists. What emerges is how these novels, written towards the end of the twentieth century, are in conversation with older literary and critical figurations of the father but also contribute something new to the story of this pervasive literary figure.

I. THE ABSENT/PRESENT FATHER AS LITERARY CRITICS HAVE FIGURED HIM

In 1960, Leslie Fiedler focused critical attention on one of American literature's most remarked upon tropes: the male who seeks, by any means necessary, to avoid what he perceives as the deadening orb of family and domestic life. Here is Fiedler in his classic study of the phenomenon, *Love and Death in the American Novel*:

[t]he figure of Rip Van Winkle presides over the birth of the American imagination; and it is fitting that our first successful homegrown legend should memorialize, however playfully, the flight of the dreamer from the drab duties of home and town. . . . Ever since, the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat--anywhere to avoid "civilization," which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility. (25-6)

Fiedler's assertion that the typical U.S. male protagonist is "a man on the run" has had wide currency amongst American literary scholars, though some recent critics have questioned whether there hasn't been greater variety in the depiction of fathers and family men in American literature than Fiedler would allow: some of the most popular novels in the nineteenth century, for example, depict men as deeply involved in and appreciative of domestic life.³ The absence of

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³ For a critic who questions whether the rendering of family men isn't more diverse, see Helena Wahlström. Examples of extremely popular nineteenth-century novels where fathers or father figures are depicted as committed to family include Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, Maria Susanna Cummins' *The Lamplighter*, and Harriet
these male characters from Fiedler's analysis has to do, among other things, with the politics of canon formation: in the early to mid-twentieth century when the canon from which Fiedler draws his conclusions was being formed, American literary critics tended to dismiss these domestically-oriented novels, written mostly by and for women, as marginal.⁴

Fiedler's decision to exclude from serious consideration those nineteenth-century American novels that do depict men as being committed to the life of home and family also has to do, no doubt, with the critical perception that in these novels the relationships between men and women generally comes across as flat or stylized or both. Henry James, writing in his 1899 essay "The Future of the Novel," finds this a pervasive problem in the portrayal of male-female relationships in late nineteenth-century English and American novels, noting the "immense omission in our fiction" of anything but "the most guarded treatment of the great relation between men and women" (39).⁵ Fiedler, writing some sixty years after James, makes a corollary observation when he writes that the classic American writers "avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman" and "shy away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature women" (24).

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⁴ The canon that Fiedler bases his arguments upon contains, in the main, authors who were white and male. Inspired by both feminism and a new interest in social history, literary scholars during the 1980s began to reconsider the canon. Examples of critical works from the 1980s that begin to challenge and revise the traditional canon by focusing on marginalized writers and genres include Jane Tompkins' Sensational Designs (1985) and David Reynolds's Beneath the American Renaissance (1989). In an afterward to the 1992 edition of Love and Death, Fiedler argues, somewhat defensively, that his study also contributed to an opening up of the canon, pointing out, for example, that he "smuggle[d]" Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin into his book (511).

⁵ While James highlights the poor depiction of male/female relations, he also argues that the Anglo-American novel has become timid and censorious in other areas as well: "there are too many sources of interest neglected--whole categories of manners, whole corp distributor classes and provinces, museums of character and condition, unvisited," all of which leads, in James' opinion, to a "facile flatness" in these novels (40-42).
James criticizes both British and American novels for the "facile flatness" with which they depict male-female relations. In contrast, Fiedler sees the European novel as having successfully placed heterosexual love at its center and so argues that the classic American novel is unique in its inability to treat male-female love relationships. Fiedler’s explanation for this difference between European and American novels lies in his analysis of the amount of class consciousness—or its conspicuous lack—in the two traditions. Like the American novel, the European novel arose alongside of and in the service of the rising bourgeoisie but it also had as historical backdrop centuries of feudalism, including the literary traditions associated with courtly love. The European novel's emphasis on love in all its permutations—seduction, courtship, marriage and adultery—can be seen, in its early years, to rehearse and rehash the triumph of the bourgeoisie over its aristocratic predecessor. 6 In America, however, there was no feudal aristocracy to overthrow.

Even more importantly, as discussed in Chapter One, is the fact that American society has been, since its inception, permeated by the ideology that it is a classless society. With true class consciousness repressed, Fiedler argues, "the only class war" becomes the war between the sexes (90). The effect of this narrowing of the social focus is that in the novels where the subject of family and domestic life takes center stage, women and men are depicted as being in constant struggle against each other. Because the turf on which they battle is the female sphere of domesticity, women are always the winners: equipped with "finer feelings," they are shown to be superior to men whose contribution to the love or family relationship is increasingly devalued: "instances of male humiliation are endlessly multiplied" and "though the male is allowed still to

6 Fiedler offers Samuel Richardson's novel Clarissa (1748) as example: the seducer Lovelace is, among other things, an aristocrat while Clarissa, the object of his lust and his abuse until, after several hundred pages, she turns defeat into victory, articulates the values of the rising middle classes including the notion, so important in sentimental literature, that the heart is a more trustworthy barometer of reality and human relations than the head.
spout 'ideas,' those ideas are revealed as irrelevant to life and good sense, the babble of a bookish child" (Fiedler 90). In the end, Fiedler concludes, men and women, writers and readers alike, seem to arrive fairly early in the evolution of the American novel "at a mutual pact": males accept the tame role of "Bad Boy" while females allow themselves to be cast as either a "sexless savior" or an "eternal Mama" (90). The overall effect is "to castrate the father: to make him seem a spoiled child rather than a sexual aggressor" (90).

In response to the constricted world of the domestic novel, says Fiedler, a tradition of "dangerous and disturbing" novels written primarily in the gothic form and featuring male protagonists "on the run" springs up (11). Fiedler sees a political reason, also relating to the question of class, prompting American writers towards the gothic: it gives them a way to counteract the optimism of rising bourgeois expectations by exposing "a world of fear and loneliness, a haunted world" in which "the hidden blackness of the human soul and human society" predominate (26). Further, Fiedler argues, the fact that American literature was "from the start a colonial one, the first such in the modern world" means that it took shape amidst a sea of violence and racial conflict (509). Against such a background "the tale of terror proved especially attractive to our writers, making death rather than love the central theme of our most authentic and enduring books" (Fiedler 509). By getting outside the standard plot and storytelling conventions of the sentimental novel, Fiedler argues, writers were able to draw attention, in a veiled way, to what U.S. society was constantly attempting to repress: knowledge of the

7 Nathaniel Hawthorne expresses a distaste for the popular sentimental novel of his day, complaining to his publisher in 1855 about the "damned mob of scribbling women" who had not only taken the American literary scene by storm but appeared to leave little audience for other kinds of novels and subjects: "I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed" (qtd. in Frederick 1). Hawthorne was particularly indignant about the success of Maria Susanna Cummins' The Lamplighter (1854) which was vastly outselling The Scarlet Letter (1850).
country's "rape of nature. . .exploitation of dark-skinned people" (31), and "the guilt of the revolutionist who feels himself a parricide" (27).

Fiedler is categorical in claiming that the choices the earliest American novelists made have had a profound and lasting effect on all of American literature: from Hawthorne, Melville, Twain and Poe right on up to Saul Bellow and the "highbrow terror" of Paul Bowles, the "failure of the American fictionist to deal with adult heterosexual love. . . . [is] a pattern imposed both by the writers of our past and the very conditions of life in the United States from which no American novelist can escape, no matter what philosophy he consciously adopts or what theme he thinks he pursues" (12-3).

Writing towards the end of the 1980s, Joseph Allen Boone, in his important book *Tradition Counter Tradition*, takes another look at the way marriage and romance are figured in the novels of Britain and America. Unlike Fiedler, who argues for exceptionalism in the evolution of the form and content of the American novel, Boone speaks of a long and unified "Anglo-American" novelistic tradition in which the "ideal of romantic wedlock" is depicted as both realistically achievable and absolutely necessary "for the fully experienced life" (6). This tradition in which marriage is depicted as a happy end to life (and where it often supplies a happy ending to the novel) differs from the tradition of the marriage novel on the Continent where, as Tony Tanner has shown, marriage novels tend to focus on adultery.8

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8 Tony Tanner argues that the novel places marriage at its center because marriage has a central ideological function for the rising middle classes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. "For bourgeois society marriage is the all-subsuming, all organizing, all-containing contract" he writes, adding "It is the structure that maintains the Structure." It is for this reason that "the bourgeois novelist has no choice but to engage the subject of marriage. . . . He [or she] may concentrate on what makes for marriage and leads up to it, or on what threatens marriage and portends its disintegration, but [the] subject will still be marriage" (15).
Boone divides his study into novels that, while they voice some discontent with the status quo of marriage, are generally supportive of the ideal of romantic wedlock, and a group of novels that more rigorously challenge the idea that marriage is the gateway to a life of "happily ever after." The first group of novels is Boone's "tradition," the second group is his "counter tradition." Boone's counter traditional novels attempt to address through innovations in form and content the contradiction between the commonly accepted ideal of love and friendship within marriage and the actual inequality between men and women as patriarchy remains everywhere in force. Boone argues that the novels in the counter-traditional group break "through the strictures enforced by the orthodox system of novel making" and, in doing so, reveal "the contradictions concealed" within the novelistic marriage tradition of ideal wedlock (2).

It is noteworthy that Boone includes both English and American fictional examples for every category in his study except the category of counter-traditional novels that trace the trajectory of a single male protagonist outside the marriage plot. For that category, he explores only American male authors—specifically Herman Melville, Mark Twain and Jack London—and calls the works they produce "American Quest Romances." Although Boone's general argument is that American and English literature share a common marriage plot tradition, the

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9 The ideal that husband and wife could look towards each other for romantic love developed in the wake of feudalism where marriage and love were considered quite separately. A further level of intimacy between spouses occurred after the Restoration, according to historian Lawrence Stone, who uses the term "companionate marriage" to describe the emphasis on friendship in marriage which emerges in England and in the colonies after the 1660s. For more on this, see Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, especially Chapter Seven, "The Companionate Marriage."

10 Boone identifies two types of counter traditional novels: novels like Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* and Virginia Wolfe's *To the Lighthouse* that go beyond the happy ending, "into the uncertain textual realm of marital stalemate and impasse" and a set of novels that "invent fictional trajectories for the single protagonist, male or female, whose successful existence outside the convention [of marriage] calls into question the viability of marital roles and arrangements" (19). Examples of single female protagonists "surrounded by communities of similarly unmarried women" include Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (21).
existence of this special case of American novels supports the notion that there is, in fact, a unique American literary phenomenon of male protagonists who ostentatiously avoid women and the domestic sphere. The historical impetus for this tradition is, as Boone notes, "the extremity of sex-role division in the States, a fact apparent to English visitors in the 1830s who, like Harriet Martineau, were taken aback by the 'persuasion' current in the country 'that there are virtues which are especially masculine, and others which are peculiarly feminine" (Boone 232).

While Fiedler characterizes the runaway male protagonists as, in general, suffering from a kind of arrested development which makes it impossible for them to form adult identities and so explains their inability to form adult (heterosexual) relationships, Boone takes the opposite position, arguing that in certain of the American Quest Romances what the male protagonists actually succeed in doing by avoiding domestic life is developing into fully-formed human beings. While Boone agrees that literary figures like Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle and James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo who uphold and indeed exaggerate the sex-role stereotypes of their society do seem to suffer from an "avoidance of adult identity," Boone argues that characters like Herman Melville's Ishmael and Billy Budd and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn are on a more liberatory journey (228). The solitary male protagonist in these latter works, according to Boone, embarks on an inner journey "towards a redefinition, a 'remaking,' of self that defies, at least partially, social convention and sexual categorization" (228-29). In other words, Ishmael and Billy Budd and Huck are not escaping women and the domestic world per se. Rather, they are extricating themselves from the rigid sex-roles that have forced both men and women to suppress or leave large parts of themselves unexplored. Boone shows how these male protagonists reclaim, over the course of the novel, the feminine parts of

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11 See Boone, especially page 228, for more on Fiedler's psychoanalytic take on the arrested adolescence of the runaway male protagonist.
themselves that have been repressed: instead of conquest or goal-oriented behavior they come to explore themselves and their surroundings in a more open or process-oriented way; instead of a rigid self-definition these characters develop flexibility and a fluidity of identity, and instead of a hierarchal structure which locks individuals into scripted roles they move towards equality and a mutual recognition of independent identities. As Ishmael and Huck begin to express qualities defined by society as "feminine," qualities like mildness, peacefulness, and a heartfelt compassion for their fellows, their story becomes a "powerful critique of the male ethos ruling American society" (Boone 250). Unlike the characters of traditional quest narratives, these protagonists do not return home triumphantly at the end of their journey because society remains as scarred by sex-role divisions as it was when they left. It is because they have succeeded in becoming more fully human, not because they are emotionally truncated, that they remain outsiders at novel's end, unable to survive in the choking atmosphere of society's separate male and female spheres.

But if certain nineteenth-century novels turn a critical eye on society's constructions of masculinity, this window onto sex-role exploration begins to close, according to Boone, as the twentieth century approaches and the ethos of American culture tilts away from the sentimental and domestic values that had taken root at mid-century and towards "a more overtly masculinist ethos that [venerates] power at the expense of almost all the values identified with woman's 'sphere'" (259). Macho real-life heroes like Teddy Roosevelt and his fictional counterpart, the western novel's silent, hypermasculine cowboy-savior, become popular during this time and the era overall ushers into being "a definition of culture based on physical aggression, phallic

\[\text{12} \text{ For more on this transition and also on the domestic ideology that dominated much of the nineteenth century, see Ann Douglas' The Feminization of American Culture.}\]
virility, and authority that has since become axiomatic of the self-image of the 'normal' twentieth-century American male” (Boone 259).

The trope of the male protagonist who eschews love, marriage, and family responsibilities continues to appear with frequency in major twentieth-century American literary works, but, according to Boone, the space where men live without women becomes, in novels like Ernest Hemmingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), "the enclave of misogynistic endeavor" (21). Instead of attempting to locate the feminine within themselves, as the nineteenth-century heroes of American Quest Romances do, these twentieth-century protagonists express distaste for women and everything defined as feminine: "many modern American male writers," Boone concludes, "have made women the scapegoat for their (the men's) dissatisfaction with the institution of marriage" (273).

Another literary critic whose work has helped frame the discussion about the meaning of American literature's solitary male protagonist is R.W.B. Lewis. His book *The American Adam* (1955) explores notions of innocence and experience in nineteenth-century literature with an eye towards what these protagonists have to say about the American political experiment as a whole. Looking closely at literature from the early to mid-nineteenth century, Lewis describes the typical fictional hero of this period as "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources" (5). Like Boone and Fiedler, Lewis finds examples
of this isolated figure everywhere in American Literature, from Charles Brockden Brown's Arthur Mervyn right up to Ralph Ellison's unnamed hero in the *Invisible Man*.\(^{13}\)

In contrast to Fiedler's vision that the American novel is "pre-eminently a novel of terror" (26), Lewis celebrates the solitary protagonist (who is usually male) as an "American Adam" who, like Adam before the fall, begins as an innocent. Unfettered by the experience and traditions of the past, this character stands on the threshold of the New World dazzled by the possibilities. As he makes his way he is exposed to the harshness of life. Instead of becoming cynical or paralyzed, the Adamic protagonist escapes falling into either "the arrested development of innocence [or] the premature old age of an absorption with sin" by developing a third way of viewing reality, one characterized by irony (Lewis 197). It is this ironic vision that Lewis celebrates in the solitary American protagonists he studies, observing that such a state of mind not only informs America's best literature but is also vitally important to America's overall political health.

For Lewis, then, the meaning of the solitary male protagonist doesn't at all have to do with his desire to escape domestic life; rather, this character is actively engaged with working out the meaning and reality of the American Dream. His particular story of self-creation, including both its triumphs and limitations, suggests for Lewis the socio-political trajectory and identity struggles of the nation as a whole.

With Lewis' Adamic protagonist we may seem to have traveled far from the subject of fatherhood, but what is noteworthy about his analysis is the way that he interprets orphanhood as a positive state from which, unencumbered by the baggage of the past—often represented in

\(^{13}\) Lewis' catalogue of Adamic protagonists also includes Hawthorne's Donatello, Melville's Redburn, Pierre and Billy Budd, Henry James' Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer, Twain's Huck Finn, F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, William Faulkner's Issac McCaslin, J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield, and Saul Bellow's Augie March.
literature by the figure of the protagonist's father—new approaches to life and society can be launched. As we turn to a closer analysis of American literature in Part II of this chapter, we shall see that the trope of the orphan and, in particular, of the young person who, for one reason or another, finds him/herself unencumbered by a father, often goes hand in hand with the story of a protagonist who has been freed to make great progress in spiritual, intellectual or material development.

A frequent topic in the analysis of American society in general and of American literature in particular is the degree to which it can be said to form a distinct tradition. Lewis and Fiedler base their scholarship on the notion of an exceptional American tradition, while Boone highlights a specifically American genre of quest novel. Recently, Josep M. Armengol-Carrera has joined the conversation about what, if anything, is unique in American literature. "One answer to that question," he writes, "is the limited use American writers seem to have made of fatherhood as a theme in their fictional works" (211). Until quite recently, Armengol-Carrera argues, fathers in American literature have been depicted as either absent from family life or, when present, as despotic and authoritarian. The literary depiction of fathers is quite different in nineteenth-century English fiction, he adds, where there are numerous portraits of caring fathers; another related difference is that nineteenth-century European novels "spend a good deal of time locating the young protagonist in his social and familial background" (215).¹⁴ This tendency of European novels to depict protagonists as deeply involved with their families stands in sharp contrast to the dislocated protagonist of American novels who begins life, as Lewis puts it, "happily bereft of ancestry" (5).

¹⁴ Armengol-Carrera points to Anthony Tollope's *Dr. Thorne* (1858) and George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861) as examples of English novels where fathers or father-surrogates raise children on their own.
Searching, as do Fiedler, Boone, and Lewis, for some social or historical reason for the anomalous treatment of fathers and fatherhood in American literature, Armengol-Carrera locates the origins of this literary pattern in the events of the American Revolution (215). The rejection of England and its king by the Sons of Liberty set the stage, he believes, for the American literary tradition of depicting fathers as both remote and tyrannical. After the "parricide" of King George III (an act which, as we have seen, is also on Fiedler's mind as he ponders the phenomenon of the runaway male protagonist), there was not only a feeling of guilt but a gradual recognition that equality or brotherhood wasn't enough to bind the now fatherless sons together: a new authority figure was needed to keep the sons from turning on each other. Concludes Armengol-Carrera:

Since [President] Washington, Americans have needed political fathers to keep the fantasy of social and national stability, even if such presidential father-figures have often proved to be distant, aggressive, and/or punitive. . . . Fatherhood in American culture and politics has often been seen as a punitive, albeit socially necessary, authority. Little wonder that fathers in American fiction, when/if present, tend to be represented as a distant or punitive authority as well. (218)

Since an escape from women and the domestic sphere almost always also means an escape from fatherhood and its responsibilities, the work of critics like Fiedler, Lewis, and Boone are important to any study of fatherhood in American literature. At the same time, fatherhood is clearly peripheral to these three critics' major focus which is the meaning of the solitary male protagonist in American fiction. Thus it is a refreshing change to read Armengol-Carrera's work which places American fatherhood squarely at the center of a literary study.

Armengol-Carrera is aware of his anomalous position, noting that "[d]espite the remarkable critical attention to motherhood in literature—and despite the late twentieth-century focus on patriarchy—there is surprisingly no comparable in-depth analysis of fatherhood" ("Where Are Fathers" 224). Helena Walström, writing in 2010, agrees that "to date, fatherhood has not been a prioritized area in [American] literary studies" (15).

The literary critics we have examined so far have each pointed, some explicitly others implicitly, to the effects capitalist economics has had on shaping the American male protagonist and, in particular, his absence either emotionally or physically from the home. Lewis sees in the move of protagonists out of the home and away from family, an exploration and celebration of the American ideals of freedom, social mobility, and individual achievement. Such ideas are integral components of the American Dream which is itself based on an individual's successful navigation of the capitalist "free" market. Fiedler, highlighting the refusal of American society to acknowledge the existence of economic classes, sees the epidemic of male protagonists on the run as an attempt by authors to step outside the stultifying status quo which family life seems to represent and bring to the surface unsettling truths about American economic inequality and oppression. Boone, noting the extremity of sex-role division in American society, a division based, as we have seen, upon the notion that men should be the family's main or even only

16 The main exception to the critical silence on the depiction of fathers in American literature, as Walström points out, is in the area of psychoanalytic criticism. As I argue in Chapter One, one of the weaknesses of such criticism is its apparent inability to locate familial patterns in the larger historical or social world. For this reason, psychoanalytic criticism often plays the role of reinforcing the false but status quo-supportive notion that the domestic world is separate from the rest of society.

Two important compilations of essays that explore the father in American and other literatures are Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace's *Refiguring the Father* (1989) and Eva Paulino Bueno's et al. *Naming the Father* (2000). In each work, despite the editors' stated objective of assembling a group of articles that will help to demystify the father by rooting him in the actual world and by exploring his social or historical context as well as how he functions as an ideological construct, the bulk of the essays reveal a preoccupation with the questions and concerns of psychoanalytic theory. As the editors of *Naming the Father* note, "[n]o theorist is cited by our contributors more than Lacan" (3).
breadwinners, shows how some nineteenth-century American male protagonists leave the
domestic sphere in order to develop the more "feminine" or compassionate parts of themselves.
By the twentieth century, Boone shows how male characters, still under the ideology of the sex-
role division but also, it seems to me, swayed by the growing ethos of aggression as American
capitalism develops into imperialism, become super-macho and begin to evince a misogynistic
attitude towards both women and domesticity.\(^\text{17}\) Finally, Armengol-Carrera locates his
explanation for the superabundance of remote and/or tyrannical fathers throughout the course of
American fiction in the need a democratic society has to develop authoritative father figures who
can keep brother from killing brother. Though Armengol-Carrera assigns a psychological
reason—the revolutionist's guilt for overthrowing the father/king—to this enduring American
problem of violent male relations, I believe that a fear of brother killing brother is far more likely
the result of the cutthroat competition that is the hallmark of capitalist economics.\(^\text{18}\)

In my own survey of American literature one phenomenon which leaps out is the way
that the father serves in so many works from the mid-nineteenth century on as a marker for the
world beyond the home and, more specifically, for the world of work and work relations beyond
the home. This is especially apparent in nineteenth and early twentieth-century novels where the
chief attribute of fatherhood is widely thought to be the father's ability to support the family
economically.

\(^{17}\) For more on the relationship between American imperialism and its effects on the fictional figuring of
masculinity, see Amy Kaplan's "Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular
Historical Novel of the 1890s."

\(^{18}\) It is the problem of power inevitably accruing unequally under capitalism that led capitalism's first apologist, the
Scottish philosopher and political economist Adam Smith, to insist that capitalism could only be a liberating force in
society if there were regulations put in place to keep the playing field somewhat level. (McNally, Another 84).
What follows from this observation is that the father is the figure in American literature who tracks economics into the text, specifically—because it so thoroughly informs American life and thought—capitalist economics. It is his relationship with capitalism that makes the father so mysterious and difficult to understand: the way he hovers on the margins of the text reflects the ambivalent valence that capitalism itself, which has both positive and negative effects on people and communities, holds for American authors and readers. In texts where the author's focus is trained on family and domestic life (as most novels, particularly in the nineteenth century, are), the father serves, by the remoteness of his presence, as a silent reminder of the socio-economic world which gives every family its shape. He also acts as a buffer since his semi-absence from the home and also from the text, whether that absence is emotional or physical or both, serves to repress a deeper understanding of the troubling economic world in which the home is situated. Further complicating and energizing the dynamic, his absence sometimes also draws attention to that repression. In short, the father is freighted with a subversive knowledge about the economics of domesticity that is difficult for either the text or its readers to completely take in or to completely ignore. His presence is a marker for the unconscious knowledge of the economic world in which every family floats.

Another observation I can make with confidence is that fathers and the theme of fatherhood are very much present in American literature. This runs counter to Armengol-Carrera's assertion that American authors have made "limited use" of fathers in their works. It is certainly understandable for Armengol-Carrera to take such a position, given the absent nature of fathers in American literature, but once absence is identified as a main attribute of fatherhood, it is easy to see that glaringly absent or only partially present fathers can be found everywhere in American literature. What makes these father figures different from their counterparts in
European or other literatures and so creates the illusion that they are not being made "use" of by their authors, is the different sort of use to which they are put in American texts. Fathers in American literature are seldom, with the exception of works appearing from the late 1980s on, fully developed characters intricately involved in the life of the family; instead, they present as shadowy, remote, incomprehensible, bumbling, insensitive, and/or tyrannical figures who are cordoned off in one way or another from the rest of the family.

This is, of course, a broad assertion to make about any literature, and, given the great diversity within American literature, exceptions certainly exist where the father is depicted as nurturing and engaged. Helena Wahlström, for one, has raised concerns about the veracity of the claim that the father in American literature is generally depicted as either remote or authoritarian: "the American canon has often constructed family and domesticity as antagonistic to the idea of male American freedom and individuality, a dichotomization promoted both by authors of fiction and by literary critics," she writes, noting further that "the mainstream of literary studies still often unproblematically places women in 'the domestic sphere' and men outside of this 'sphere'" and that "the dominant tradition in American literary criticism [links] masculinity and domophobia" (27-30). Wahlström speculates that a careful re-reading of both canonical and popular American texts from older historical periods would yield a more diverse array of male protagonists than literary critics have thus far discovered. ¹⁹

¹⁹ Wahlström, whose area of expertise is the contemporary period where she studies the depiction of “new” or alternative fathers who exemplify domestic masculinity in American literature and film, admits she is simply speculating when she raises the question about how diverse representations of fathers and fatherhood in earlier literary periods have been. To support her argument, she does point, however, to an interesting study by Laura McCall of male and female American authors publishing between 1820-1860 which finds that male authors were as active as female authors in creating portraits of men harmoniously engaged in domestic life. McCall's work does raise questions about whether the theme of male domophobia in American literature is really as bedrock a feature of American literature as Fiedler and other twentieth-century American literary critics assert.
Wahlström is certainly right that there has been a tendency both in the construction of the canon and in much of America's most celebrated fiction to produce and promote a stereotypical depiction of fathers and fatherhood as remote and/or authoritarian. Though I agree with her that American writers and critics are, essentially, 'up to something' when they so often link masculinity and domophobia, I don't draw the conclusion she does that there is therefore an ignored body of literature out there that depicts the father as a more engaged or nurturing figure. Instead, my reading of American literature supports the perception of Armengol-Carrera and others that fathers in American literature are often depicted as absent or at odds with the rest of the family.

Two tendencies, both relating to American history, further complicate our understanding of how fathers appear in American literature. The first is the false assumption that a straight line can be drawn between depictions of fathers in fiction or other types of literature and the lived experience of actual fathers at the time in which each literary work is set. Historian Shawn Johansen has shown how easy it is to confuse historical reality with literature about fatherhood in his book *Family Men* (2001) where he finds that the portraits of fatherhood appearing in advice books and magazine articles during the nineteenth-century show—indeed, seem to encourage—a remote, hands-off fathering style while the historical record Johansen unearths indicates that many nineteenth-century American fathers were actively engaged in their children's lives and had a good deal of authority over how the home was run.  

20 While more has been done in the field of history to illuminate the subject of fatherhood than in the field of literary studies, even the historical study of American fathers is still in a rather preliminary state. Johansen's *Family Men* underlines the nascent state of these historical studies and serves, as well, as a cautionary tale against extrapolating too quickly from fictional portrayals of family life to actual family life or vice versa. Studying the private letters and diaries of men in the period from 1800-1860, Johansen discovers that fathers were much more involved in family life than the nineteenth-century conduct books and advice literature being published at the time portrayed them to be. He concludes that while popular forms of literature in the early nineteenth century hammer out over and over
The second tendency is the political and ideological uses to which "family" in general has been put in American history. From as early as the first decades after the founding of Plymouth Colony, when the family was thought of as a "little commonwealth" mirroring and helping to build all the other institutions in society, right up to the present moment when the family is experienced mostly as a retreat separate from the surrounding society, there has been a steady discourse of worry about the decline or disintegration of family life. This discourse of family decline, especially from the late nineteenth century on, has almost invariably linked worries about the decline of the family to worries about the decline of the larger community and/or nation. Thus President Theodore Roosevelt warns at the beginning of the twentieth century that the nation's future rests upon "the right kind of home life," and President Ronald Reagan, in 1984, asserts that "[s]trong families are the foundation of society" (qtd. in Coontz 94). In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the time period during which most of the literature studied in this dissertation was written, political rhetoric highlighting the putative problem of family decline and the deleterious impact of that decline on the nation reached a fevered pitch.

A paradox emerges when, against this long history of political discourse which highlights the importance to the nation of a stable home life, American literature, which has also from its inception been an important vehicle for the creation and expression of national identity, seems to again the prescriptive notion of separate spheres for men and women and thus "emphasize a limited and undermined role" for fathers in the family (8), letters and diaries show that amongst the population he studied—middle-class, white, Northern men—"fathers retained most of their duties and much of their authority" in the family during this time (13). Johansen points out that because most histories of the colonial and nineteenth-century American family to date are based on secondary sources like conduct books and stories published in magazines, they tend to perpetuate the often stereotypical view of fathers and fatherhood promoted by the writers of these secondary sources. Johansen notes that Robert Griswold's important work Fatherhood in America, for example, "relies almost entirely on secondary sources for his view of nineteenth-century fathers" while Stephen Frank's Life with Father relies heavily, though not exclusively, on the ideas presented in nineteenth-century advice literature and conduct books (8).

21 For more on this discourse of family decline, see Stephanie Coontz's The Way We Never Were and Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg's Domestic Revolutions (xx). See John Demos' A Little Commonwealth for a description of the way the family in Plymouth was seen as a miniature of larger societal structures like church and government.
move in almost the opposite direction. By giving us, in some of our most iconic literature, protagonists who seem to be able to achieve the quintessentially American values of freedom and individuality only by leaving their families behind, American literature appears in these works to express a deep antagonism to the stability of the family.  

This discrepancy between political rhetoric about the family and the literary portrayal of family and domestic life has helped to make the family a difficult, even elusive, subject to study. Indeed, this elusiveness mirrors the elusiveness of the father as a subject of study and no doubt derives from a similar impulse: the tendency to repress knowledge of the influence of the socio-economic and specifically of capitalist economics on what is thought of as the purely "personal" realm of family life. This blind spot which obscures the dialectical relationship between economics and family life can be found across society in both scholarly and popular venues.

Once the role of economics is factored into an analysis of family life a different perspective opens up; what before seemed like a paradox begins to make sense. The problem of an unstable home life, for example,—which, as we have seen, is the subject of extensive debate in both political and literary circles—takes on a different cast when one considers, as Barbara Ehrenreich, does in *The Hearts of Men* (1983), the material basis of marriage: "the fact that, in a purely economic sense, women need men more than the other way round, gives marriage an inherent instability that predates . . . the revival of feminism . . . or other well-worn explanations for what has come to be known as the 'breakdown of the family'" (3). It seems likely,

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22 I am indebted to Helen Wahlström for pointing out this paradox (27).

23 Barbara Ehrenreich notes in *The Hearts of Men*, for example, that in the literature written by social scientists about the family in the 1970s "marriage exists in some realm outside of ordinary economic ties, and families operate more or less like voluntary associations or social clubs, which the members have opted to join" (3-4). In the popular realm Ehrenreich also documents a dearth of thinking about the effects of economics on marriage: "[w]e romanticize [marriage]. . . . [o]r we convince ourselves that there is really a fair and equal exchange at work so that the wages men offer to women are more than compensated for by the services women offer to men" (3).
extrapolating from Ehrenreich's sociological observation, that what male protagonists flee when they decide, like Huck, to light out for the proverbial territory is not women, children, or the confines of domesticity per se, but the burdensome responsibility of being the family's sole breadwinner. Such responsibility lies particularly heavily on the shoulders of American breadwinners who, under the influence of the ideology of the American Dream, with its inflated expectations of opportunity and performance along with its denial of class and its impact, face the daunting task of eking out their "success" story in the tough landscape of American capitalism. "[C]onsidering the absence of legal coercion," Ehrenreich concludes, "the surprising thing is that men have for so long, and, on the whole, so reliably, adhered to what we might call the 'breadwinner ethic'" (11).

The father in American literature often appears to be out of sync with the rest of the family, partly because he spends so much of his time away and partly because even when he is home he has trouble switching gears; it is difficult for him to simply drop his work persona at the threshold. The competitive and individualistic character of the capitalist marketplace makes it difficult to enter into the family because the ethos the father has been immersed in at work clashes with the more compassionate and communal rules of behavior that, theoretically at least, govern home life.

In the 1950s, advice writers O. Spurgeon English and Constance J. Foster, trying to help American fathers returning from work bridge the gap, suggested that fathers see themselves as "exciting courier[s]" bringing back to their children news and information from the wide world beyond the home (qtd. in Weiss 354). What these advice writers gloss over, in their attempt to be sunny and upbeat, is the fact that the work world is only an "exciting" experience for a small group of men, chiefly those in the middle and upper classes, and even for them it is only
"exciting" a fraction of the time. With its inequities and widespread disregard for human needs, the capitalist work world is, for most workers and especially for those lower down on the hierarchal ladder, a troubling place. The news a father brings home from such a world, were fathers able to be honest, would include reports of boredom, alienation, fear of being fired, the anxiety and insecurity of having to compete against or ingratiate yourself to others, the hyper-male atmosphere which forces more vulnerable ways of thinking and being underground, and being a participant in numerous exclusionary paradigms including those of sexism, classism, and racism.

The general response other members of the family have to the father and his troubled and troubling presence is either to ignore or rail against him. A similar response may well be operating when literary critics turn away, as they have generally done, from a close examination of the uncomfortable territory the father inhabits in texts about domestic life. Fiction authors seem to do this too when they downplay or altogether exclude the father from the fictional story of family life, as happens in many nineteenth and early twentieth-century novels where the father appears either as a benign but rather distant denizen of the domestic sphere or where the protagonist is an orphan. In twentieth-century novels, as the father's overall contribution to family life becomes more of a focus and the tendency to rail against fathers becomes more pronounced, the number of protagonists who strike a blow for liberty by pushing the father completely out of their lives multiplies.

Still, though they do not do so in the way that the advice writers English and Foster envision, many fictional fathers, including the types just mentioned above, do, it turns out, act as "couriers" bearing news of the larger world and, in particular, news of the economic world, across the threshold and into the home. Exploring how hard it is for humans to hear "the truth"
straight on, Emily Dickinson recommends a more circumspect approach: "Tell all the Truth but
tell it slant--/ Success in Circuit lies/ . . . The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be
blind--" (506-07). Many fictional fathers are constructed so that the "truth" they have to tell
about their lives comes out "slant."

Turning now to look at the work of Marxist literary critics to see how they analyze the
figure of the father in American novels, it emerges that, in the main, like their more well-known
non-Marxist counterparts, the majority of Marxist critics only tangentially touch upon the
relationship between capitalism and the fictional depiction of family life. This lacuna in the
scholarship of Marxist literary critics probably reflects the same overwhelming preoccupation in
both American life and letters with the individual and his/her self-fashioning as opposed to the
configuration of group life whether it be the family or the community that we have already
encountered in the works of Fiedler and R.W.B. Lewis. Marxist critic Walter Benn Michaels, for
example, in his series of essays written in the 1980's entitled *The Gold Standard and the Logic of
Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*, concentrates almost exclusively
either on the dialectical effects capitalism has on individuals or on philosophical questions such
as how the fictional text itself both produces and is a product of market capitalism.

Of the small number of Marxist literary critics who do take a close look at the depiction
of family life under capitalism, the majority tend to conform to the general critical pattern we
have already observed of tending to not look closely at the figuration of fathers and fatherhood.
Nevertheless, the fact that these critics do look closely at the impact capitalism has on family life
has resulted in some important insights into both fatherhood and the overall arena in which the
fictional father operates. Using a Marxist prism to analyze the interaction of socio-economic
forces and family life, these critics provide a much-needed perspective.
While it is not his primary focus, for example, Marxist literary critic Richard Godden has produced important observations about the role the father plays in American texts, particularly in F. Scott Fitzgerald's and Norman Mailer's works. In *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel from James to Mailer* Godden explores the way novels created in three distinct economic periods—the 1880's, the 1920's and the 1960's—both represent and react to three stages in the U.S. growth economy. Godden argues that during the periods of tension and transition from one stage of capitalism to the next, novelists are able to bring to the surface of their works a narrative that is usually repressed: the narrative of the way capitalism shapes individuals and families. I recount Godden's analysis in some detail below because it bears on the analysis I bring to the novels I study all of which appear towards the end of twentieth century when capitalism is undergoing yet another stage of transition.

Zeroing in on the question of exchange value and consumerism, Godden observes that "[c]apitalist logic changes as the owning class struggles to overcome the tendency of the rate of profit to fall" (6). At issue is an inherent contradiction of capitalism: on the one hand, profits depend upon keeping the workers' wages as low as possible, on the other hand, profits depend upon being able to sell more and more goods to these very same wage-deprived workers. This untenable state of affairs is largely responsible for capitalism's periodic bouts of economic crisis. As capitalism evolves, the kinds of measures the owning classes take to ward off crises and/or to keep the rate of profit from falling also change.

In the 1880's the accumulation of capital was still the dominant preoccupation of the owning classes, a preoccupation that Godden explores in the novels of Henry James who depicts a world where the emphasis on the stability of objects and traditions within the domestic sphere serve as metaphors for the stability of the accumulated wealth of the owning class but where
consumer capitalism with its corollary of mass production is beginning to emerge as a rival tension. By the 1920s the impetus to grow economically has forced a shift in capitalist logic, ushering in what has become known in economic circles as "partial Fordism" where capitalists raise wages and grant other concessions such as more leisure time in order to encourage greater consumption by workers. Godden, relying on the economists Ernst Mandel and Alfred Chandler, identifies "two of capitalism's deeper narratives" as guiding the shifting approach of the owning classes to the problem of consumption under capitalism: "the plot to accumulate and expand resource, with a particular eye to finance capital (1880 to the First World War); and the plot to ensure the reproduction of the expanded resource (preoccupying what Mandel calls 'late capitalism,' but already an issue for market leaders in the 1920s)" (10).24 The narrative arc of Godden's book is to trace the move from capitalist accumulation to reproduction by first juxtaposing James to Fitzgerald and then juxtaposing Fitzgerald, whose work stands at the beginning of the Fordist period when a first large expansion of the consumer market takes place, to Mailer, whose novels from the late 1960s stand at the end of Fordism, a period often referred to as "full Fordism" which begins in the 1950s with a second large expansion of the consumer market. Godden ends his analysis with Mailer's novel *Armies of the Night* (1968). Fordism in the U.S. no longer obtains after about 1970, due to the export of production abroad and the rise of a post-industrial economy at home when more wealth begins to be generated by the service industry than by manufacturing.

One of Godden's overarching theses is that, as the twentieth century unfolds, consumption becomes separated or hidden from production so that knowledge of the work of production and of those who do that work is repressed with the result that the products of production seem to stand on their own, sporting a value whose origin cannot be parsed or

24 For more, see Ernst Mandel's *Late Capitalism* and Alfred Chandler, Jr.'s *Strategy and Structure*. 
examined closely. As workers' sense of identity as workers is lost and they are directed instead towards being consumers, the culture of consumption that emerges makes available "a changing anthology of selves (and of politically disputatious sub-texts) . . . to consumers and writers alike" (Godden 10). At the same time that new identities for workers are promoted, Godden points out, "[c]onsumer capitalism [seeks] to limit the images and identities through which consumers might represent themselves" in order to steer workers away from discovering or acting upon the class tensions which have arisen precisely because capitalism is in difficulty (4). "Amnesia," Godden concludes, "has always been one of the staples of a successful commodity culture: however, as the sales pitch broadens, first in the twenties and again in the fifties and sixties, forgetting becomes imperative"(4).

The logic of capitalism, as it ceaselessly seeks out ways to avoid the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, creates a culture, Godden argues, that supports whatever its current socio-economic needs are. In novels, he calls the depiction of such needs "capitalist realism." Ernest Hemingway's writing is an example of this in that his style, a "double slippage of the collective into the private and of the private into the physical," (63) is "a style of writing unknowingly saturated in the logic of consumerism" of the post World War I period (10). In the years following the war, that same logic moved society towards privatizing the home and heightening individuality even amongst family members because "in order to maximize profit, 

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25 For more on the reflection and response of American literature to the damping down of class consciousness in twentieth-century American life, see Robert Seguin's *Around Quitting Time: Work and Middle-Class Fantasy in American Fiction.*

26 Godden doesn't take up the question of how class conscious or proletarian writers like Jack London, Upton Sinclair or John Dos Passos fit in to or challenge the creation of such a culture.

27 Godden credits Roland Marchand for this term. Marchand argues in *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* that "capitalist realism" was invented by advertising agencies in the 1920s.
capital must privatize need; there is more money to be made from the gratifications of the *isolato* than from the shared satisfactions of a group" (42). Hemingway's writing style does a number of things, Godden persuasively argues, to reflect and bolster the needs of consumer capitalism in the early part of the twentieth century. As examples, Godden points to Hemingway's tendency to present objects in isolation from one another, to strip away their use value and their history so that all that is left is their exchange value, to become obsessed with the physical response to things to the near exclusion of all else, and to repress the complex social web of relationships amongst people, including the social labor, which goes into creating objects.28

Godden sees the novels of Fitzgerald and Mailer as having a more self-conscious edge: they simultaneously succumb to the capitalist effort to create amnesia and attempt to understand and bring what has been submerged back to consciousness. In doing so, Fitzgerald and Mailer "counter the market's broad metaphoricity through a sustained exploration of the 'missing parts' latent in consumerism's favoured tropes—a habit born of a fascinated mistrust for the "reality" to which the respective historical moments of their class have apprenticed them" (9). In taking this stand, Godden explicitly rejects Michaels' contention that authors are too embedded in their culture to proffer a critical vantage point or resistance.29

28 For more on Hemingway and "capitalist realism," see Chapter Two of Godden's *Fictions of Capital* which is entitled "You've got to see it, feel it, smell it, hear it, buy it: Hemingway's commercial forms." Godden believes that "[t]o work within the capitalist system is to wound oneself, and to forget, not the wound, but how the wound was made" (58). According to Godden, Hemingway "recognizes the pervasiveness of 'objectivity' and 'indifference' in his culture, but he misrecognizes the source of that ubiquity. . . the war hangover [or the war wound] is an excuse, releasing him from an exploration of the 'disquiet' that ghosts his own sense system. [Hemingway's main characters] compulsively counter anxiety by revaluing objects 'objectively'. They seek to escape their own indifference through a grace with things that is akin to art: by obeying the object they become the form of its life—a still life. To overstate the case: in order to remain satisfactorily human they become objects." (66)

29 Referring specifically to Michaels' work, Godden writes "I . . . want to stress (in opposition to several recent readings of commodity aesthetics) that the commodity and the commodified self are events that should be read within the class history that produces them" (4).
In the late nineteenth/early twentieth century the American family goes from being centered on production, as it had been for most of its history, to being centered on consumption. Godden, exploring how the rise of consumer capitalism and the concomitant changes in the sphere of family finds expression in the pages of fiction, chooses to study the novel of manners, explaining that "[t]he foundation of manners is economic; and as economic structures change, so manners change" (12). Since the works I consider in this dissertation are all in the realist tradition and are all also, to greater or lesser degrees, novels of manners, Godden's observations on how economic structures appear in the works of Fitzgerald and Mailer are germane to my own study of how the economic changes associated with late capitalism have shaped a group of novels towards the end of the twentieth century.

Bourgeois women of leisure, Godden points out, are often depicted in late nineteenth and early twentieth century novels as disembodied. As if their role is to be "the antithesis of the [market-involved] male," they are passive, sensitive and unselfish:

The woman, at the centre of her drawing-room, becomes the medium through which the man forgets labour and transforms consumption into sentimental privacy and into art. Consequently, the novel of manners is preoccupied with the transfer of such cultural shaman; that is to say, with marriage as a dicey exchange of accumulations in their double form as economic fact and cultural artifact (or veil). . . . From Isabel Archer to Daisy Buchanan, the wealthy female in her feminized space [the home] . . . protects and distributes the accumulations of her class. (Godden 16-17)

The quintessential Jamesian interior—the drawing room—with its rare and rarified objects can't support a great deal of consumption nor can it support the sort of mass production of consumer goods that capitalism is beginning to need by the end of the nineteenth century to counteract the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. In The Bostonians, Godden analyzes James' "narrative decisions as expressions of an historically based class anxiety," anxieties shaped by such changes in the socio-economic landscape as individual entrepreneurs losing out to large
corporations, the working class needing to be appeased and made to buy into the system, and businessmen becoming the new ruling class (37). These changes have a direct effect on manners: "What capital increasingly needs after 1900 is a highly mobile, highly reproducible and highly controllable system of manners. . . . Fashion must supplant manners: where taste once stood, style must stand" (20). While the manners on display in a Jamesian drawing room create a substantial, integrative self, a self that is in possession of itself and in control of others, the new system of manners "opens the self for the market. . . . [As such it] is always disintegrative; it aims to give us several selves, thereby providing capital with a diversification of markets" (20-21). James, through a "tissue of displacements" plots his novel to ward off the threats of labor and the fractionated self implicit in the notion of fashion and its corollary, publicity. He does this in an attempt to guarantee the stability of the old bourgeois self, represented by the stability of the drawing-room, even as that stability is beginning to be undercut by the encroaching realm of fashion (37-38).

Godden doesn't discuss fathers or fatherhood in either James' or Hemingway's works except to note, in the latter's case, that Hemingway's male characters mostly avoid or fear fatherhood; even when Nick Adams talks to his son in "Fathers and Sons," Godden points out, "the boy might as well be adopted for all that we are told about his conception and upbringing" (64). Such a comment on Godden's part implies that for Hemingway's fathers, children mirror the fate of things in that their origins and history have been repressed.

While the novels of James and Hemingway, in different ways, make use of displacement to repress and distance unsettling truths about the economic world and to avoid as well a deeper look at fatherhood, Godden argues that the novels of Fitzgerald and Mailer hinge upon the ability on the part of each author to bring some of what has been repressed by the capitalist ethos back
to the surface. Because the father's role in the fictional family is not the focus of Godden's scholarship, he himself doesn't point this out, but there seems, as well, to be a correlation between the interest Fitzgerald and Mailer have in exploring what capitalism has repressed and their use of the figure of the father to represent and, in a certain way, make visible to the reader the larger socio-economic forces at play.

Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, as Godden points out, is "beset by ill-disguised fathers and under-aged girls" (111). The main protagonist, Dick Diver, a psychiatrist, marries Nicole, his patient and the victim of her father's incest; Dick later has an affair with Rosemary, a young up-and-coming actress whose first starring role is in a film called *Daddy's Girl*. While Godden's analysis is far too complex to rehearse here, his essential argument is that the novel traces the moment when "a class becomes conscious of the need to assume alternative forms of behavior, sexuality, spending and finance" (118). The economic change underlying the need of the owning class to change its behaviors is, according to Godden, the transition from the stage of capitalist accumulation to the stage of capitalist reproduction. Nicole's Victorian father exhibits symptoms of "compulsive accumulation" (120): in committing incest, for example, he uses "that which he is required to exchange" (113). Rosemary, on the other hand, is, as Godden describes her, "the adopted daughter of the new fathers, anonymous, corporate figures who work to establish different modes of authority" in the service of heightening both consumer desire and frustration (123-24). If Nicole is a daughter of the Jamesian drawing room, Rosemary is a daughter of the sexual market place which finds its ultimate expression in Hollywood. As a movie star, her job is to market desire itself by being "available to all but possessed by none" (122). She has no history and "no self to be conscious of" (121), or, viewed another way, "[s]he has too many fathers, too many selves and absolutely no trauma about it" (120).
One of Godden's insights is that Fitzgerald "[approaches] the economic through the sexual" (118). Pointing out that so much of the economic transition Fitzgerald is tracing "focuses on the re-distribution of the human body (particularly the body of the female)," Godden concludes that "[a]ny culture that commodifies the erotic, by eliding money and the body, produces the option of resistance through a pursuit of that elision" (118).

Looking at the important role psychoanalysis plays in *Tender is the Night* and in the historical period the novel describes, Godden analyzes Freud's theories as helping the bourgeoisie relocate their accumulations as capitalism changes. Psychiatry in the 1920s, he argues, plays a role similar to the role the domestic sphere plays in the 1870s and 80s: both help to create an "alternative to the workings of the market" (106). The subconscious, in this scheme, becomes "a strategy that allows individuals to return to themselves, insofar as they may be said to possess a hidden place of permanent acquisition and accumulation" (106). Fragmentation is already a hallmark of the capitalist experience in the nineteenth century as the line between public and private, work and leisure, intellectual and manual, and between male and female becomes more and more exaggerated. As the fragmentation of the self under consumer capitalism accelerates, the "subconscious is needed to explain how the multiply subdivided person held together" (106). Nicole is "cured" by Dick who helps her integrate her inner self enough, largely through blocking or repressing the trauma of incest, for her to make the transition into a world dominated by reproduction. Dick, on the other hand, drops out of society; by novel's end he has left Nicole and moved to a small town in upstate New York where he "disengages himself from the haut bourgeoisie, old and new" (133).

According to Godden, in Freud's version of the subconscious "the 'reality' of the father remains central," but in the real world, incorporation was busy erasing "the names of founding
business-fathers from company letter-headings" (107). Godden sees the popularity of Freud and his preoccupation with Oedipus as symptomatic of the anxiety being felt by Freud's business and professional clientele about the diminishing authority of the father and the changing structure of the family. In addition, the market, with its growing emphasis on the individual consumer and on youth instead of on family or community life as a whole, was editing out not just fathers but the traditional roles of 'mother' 'sister' and 'brother' as well. Against these changes, Godden sees Freud's theories as an attempt to "recover the patriarch" (Godden 107).

Godden observes that the societal repression of certain types of knowledge seems to particularly affect the way fathers are thought about or figured. The "history of what a class finds unthinkable" Godden points out, "is one measure of how that class maintains its integrity despite economic transition" (105). The Victorian Bourgeoisie, for example, "cannot forget the accumulating father, but must forget his worries [about] . . . how to preserve what has been saved" (105). Thus while a part of the father is experienced as present, another part is ignored or made to seem absent. A credit economy, such as the one that grows up after World War I produces, as Godden analyzes it, a different kind of amnesia than that produced by the Victorian bourgeoisie: as it learns to spend, the postwar American middle class needs to "forget the social and physical forms that might impede isolate satisfaction": the forms that need forgetting include the authority of the father (105). In Tender is the Night, there is a collision of the two worlds: the world of accumulation represented by the drawing room and the world of reproduction, represented by the sexual market. As Godden points out, a result of that collision is the idea that "'the father' is uncertain ground to build on, since the novel establishes that the image of the father is a divided image and that the accumulations made in his name—be they psychic, economic or mannered—are capable of two histories" (128). An example is Nicole's father,
whose act of incest is "Janus-headed": it represents accumulation but also, because it creates a confusion of roles or selves (father becomes lover and daughter becomes mistress) it also creates "disintegral selves," a state that anticipates the stage of consumer capitalism just coming into being (120). The questions of how deeper economic currents are both acknowledged and repressed within the figure of the father and how the father, as a result of being the family member depicted in literature as most attuned to the changing logic of capitalism, is also often depicted as being pulled in two directions is deeply germane to my own study of more recent literature in which the father is presented as both absent and present.

Godden returns to the theme of incest again in his analysis of Norman Mailer's 1967 novel Why are We in Vietnam? where he argues that Mailer, who called Marx's Das Kapital the "first of the major psychologies" (qtd. in Godden 196), also "treats incest as an economic metaphor" (195). This time it is the son D. J. who is incestuous, seeking to kill his father who is a corporate executive and bed his mother as well as other members or surrogate members of his family. But D.J. is not in rebellion against his corporate father's belief structure or class: "firmly oriented towards private profit," he is, rather, embracing his father's competitive logic by attempting to take it one step further (205). D.J.'s incestuous urges are prompted by his discovery that the incest taboo impedes the flow of electricity and, further, that electricity is equal to the flow of capital. Hence, in order to acquire more electricity/capital, he must break the incest taboo. The socio-economic problem the novel delves into is the continuing issue of capitalist overproduction in the post World War II period, a time characterized by capital seeking ever new kinds of commodities and markets including, eventually, when civilian markets and government spending on social welfare cannot solve the dilemma, the production of armaments and war. As capitalists seek to innovate no matter what the moral implications of their "products"
in order to reap future profits, there is a tremendous expansion of credit debt and with it expansion of the finance industry or what Marx calls "fictitious capital"—the capital that invests, through stocks and bonds, "in future appropriation rather than in actual production" (185).  

This frenzied proliferation of products and the increasingly detached relationship between capital and actual production signaled by the growth of the finance industry is represented, Godden argues, in D.J.'s incest scheme itself. When the father in Fitzgerald's novel, set in the 1920s, was the instigator of incest it created a multiplication of roles, but when the child in Mailer's novel becomes the instigator roles are further proliferated: the son in penetrating his mother becomes son and lover and father, even as he makes his parents over into mother, mistress and adulteress, father, rival and cuckold. Role proliferation implies a disintegrant selfhood, in which self-diffusion mirrors accumulation's continuing post-war problematic of self-transgression (whereby capital must seek unrealized relations and forms). (195)

Mailer intends D.J.'s father, Godden argues, to be read as the figure of corporate capitalism itself. At novel's end, after D.J.'s electric incest scheme fails, he hears a voice that, Godden proposes, "can only be that of the corporate father" telling his son to "Go out and kill" (199). Thus, Godden concludes, the novel answers the question of its title: "the US corporate state is safe for as long as it ingenious children [D.J. in this case] are dedicated to reworking the fixes that sustain its over-accumulation" by creating a war in Southeast Asia that will continue the expansion of the arms economy and so keep the rate of profit up, at least for the time being (199).

Godden continues to ponder the question of fathers and corporate capitalism in Mailer's next novel *Armies of the Night* (1968) where the father in Book I is the character 'Mailer' who

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30 Marx describes fictitious capital as a process where everything is "doubled and trebled and transformed into a mere phantom of the imagination [because] . . . all connection with the actual expansion process of capital is . . . completely lost, and the conception of capital as something with automatic self-expansion properties is thereby strengthened" (*Capital* Vol. 3,464-72; qtd. in Godden 185-186).
expresses himself in a variety of voices, reflecting the proliferation of selves characteristic of late capitalism, but often adopts the role of the Victorian father. That father, according to Godden, is "frequently heard lamenting, instructing, worrying and generally seeking the last word" (230). One of the central worries 'Mailer' the father expresses is "Who will now educate the bourgeois child, and to what?" (qtd in Godden, 230). 'Mailer' tends to argue for a return to family values while the novel itself shows that 'Mailer,' often referred to as the father of six, is "patriarch to a de-oedipalizing family" and that, in Fordist America, such a father is being replaced by "the corporate father [who] sits where the nuclear/oedipal father sat" (Godden 233). Godden also points out that "the corporation, having replaced the father, can afford to be seminal without assuming a male identity," a fact which hastens the demise of the patriarchal father since "[w]ithout a threatening patriarch against whom to define his properly patriarchal tone the incumbent may lose heart" (Godden 234). Incest is no longer an issue in this novel, having been replaced by concerns about adultery. Thus in Book II of the novel, America—to which 'Mailer' has compared his wife—is pregnant but it is not possible to ascertain exactly who or what is the father or even if the pregnancy is hysterical (matching the proliferation of fictitious capital) or real. All clues point to the impregnator being a corporate father with the implication that the future belongs to Fordism because, as Godden sees it, Mailer "has found no sign in himself [and therefore in the liberal professional middle class he represents] of sustainable opposition" to corporate capitalism (249).

Critic Ralph Clare in his article "Family Incorporated: William Gaddis's JR and the Embodiment of Capitalism" picks up the narrative thread of novelists who depict the relationship between capitalist economics and family life where Godden leaves off by examining William Gaddis' novel JR (1975) which is set in post-Fordist America. JR has the distinction, according
to Clare, of being "the first novel to emphasize the crucial connection between the family and an emerging late-capitalist world system" (104). In order for businesses to keep profits up, capital needs, by the 1970s, to become more "fluid" than the old Keynesian model of capitalism will allow. Thus, beginning in the 1970s, Keynesian economic policies, in place in the U.S. since the Depression and relying heavily on government regulation of business practices and liberal amounts of government spending, increasingly gives way to policies of deregulation and austerity. As a result, capital starts flowing in new directions and corporations increasingly begin to divorce themselves from the U.S. and assume an independent or transnational identity. The economist David Harvey refers to this newest stage of capitalism as the period of "flexible accumulation" (Clare 111).\footnote{See David Harvey's \textit{The Condition of Postmodernity} for a description of this period and the effects of this new stage of capitalism on cultural and social structures in the US.} Gaddis' novel, situated "at the dawn of the neoliberal age" (102) is not only "an early fictional representation of the apparent power of corporations eclipsing that of nation-states," (115) but it also makes an exploration of the effects of these economic changes on family life. Though Clare doesn't make the connection himself, the special "crossing of the discourses between . . . [the] usually separate spheres [of business and the family]" which he observes in \textit{JR} recalls Godden's observation that novels written in times when a new economic stage is emerging are more able to express unconscious knowledge about capitalism and its effects on individuals and society than novels written during more economically stable times.

The eponymous protagonist of Gaddis' novel, JR, is a fatherless 11-year old boy who starts what eventually becomes an extremely profitable corporation from a payphone booth at his elementary school. The name he gives his corporation—"Family of Companies"—points up what Clare sees as the overriding theme of the novel: that corporations are stepping into the place formerly occupied in American life by the nuclear family. The fact that the families depicted in
the novel are all "broken or breaking up" (102) prompts Clare's observation that "Gaddis's interplay between family and capital is strategic, intended to call attention to the inverse relationship developing between the two spheres—the expansion of capital and the relative 'fractionation' of the family" (118).

Absentee fathers abound in JR. One character describes her businessman father in this way: "he couldn't take a moment to speak to me to, even to ask how I am there's always a meeting an important meeting he hides in meetings" (qtd in Clare 104). Clare sees the novel as focusing not so much on the role of the father in family life, however, as on how individual members and the family as a whole are relating to or being shaped by the transition to late capitalism. Gaddis' novel shows how the family is

ultimately subject to the rules of the market itself. The 'private' world of the family and human emotion is always already subordinate to the public world of capital. Gaddis, by focusing on families that are involved in building companies and corporations (and not merely working for them) gains a more nuanced view of capitalism's merging of these spheres and its disavowal of doing so. (Clare 107).

Clare doesn't take up the question of whether Gaddis' insights about the way capitalism shapes these entrepreneurial families are applicable cross class to other kinds of families.

As the transition to late capitalism takes place and "capitalism's myth of the separate spheres of business and family breaks down," Clare argues, "the rhetoric of family merges with capital's master narrative, and the 'play to win' capitalist ethic gives birth to a new kind of family and new kinds of social relations" (118). In this new family, marriages are arranged in order to foster business connections and children express their love for parents in monetary terms: "As human beings are reified . . . it becomes impossible to distinguish genuine human emotion from calculated business strategy" (107). In such an environment, the father's absentee behavior is just one of many instances of increasing alienation amongst family members.
But if actual fathers in *JR*, under the destabilizing force of late capitalism, seem to have lost their special status and authority within the family, the patriarchal father does not disappear: instead, he emerges in a new form—as the head of a corporation. Picking up on the zeitgeist, JR hires, at the beginning of his business venture, a public relations expert to help him project an image of himself as "a strong and virile patriarch in charge of his family's [i.e., his corporation's] increase and maintenance" (Clare 109). In doing so, JR reverses the process by which earlier captains of industry became superstars: "the recognition and retro-mythologizing/whitewashing" of men like Carnegie or Ford came after they had succeeded at their business ventures (108). In late capitalist America, however, "where the sign often trumps what is signified," and where the audience is not only "obsessed with images" but also "hungry for . . . reassuring and inspirational stories of personal triumph," it is the image that comes first (109).

In the period between the 1920s and the 1960s when the Fordist consensus between capital and labor was being tried and decent wages and benefits for workers became the norm, there was, Clare argues, "still a kind of reciprocity and paternalism in the relationship between business, on the one hand, and labor and the public on the other" (111). By the 1970s, however, the economic basis for corporate paternalism had become a thing of the past, replaced by an "age of corporate cannibalism" where corporations engaged in hostile takeovers and, at the same time, callously broke their faith with American communities by pulling up stakes and moving to places where they could pay labor less (Clare 113). Against this background, JR's decision to make his corporation appear like a family with himself as its paternalistic head is an attempt, Clare argues, to project "a nostalgic and comforting image as an ideological cover for the drastic changes" in society, including the increasingly rapacious behavior of corporations in the post-Fordist era (112).
This is perhaps the right moment to note that Clare appears to be indulging in a bit of nostalgic airbrushing of the past himself in his failure to mention, in describing the Fordist period, that alongside the atmosphere of paternalism and consensus which developed between labor and capital there were also bouts of fierce class warfare especially in the 1930s when the new CIO unions took on various industrial corporations and when San Francisco, for example, experienced a general strike. Godden, in his discussion of Fordism, also does not take up or seek to explain the existence of class-conscious resistance in either the political or cultural realm during this period. I can't account for these gaps in their analyses except to say that perhaps, as literary critics attempting to incorporate other disciplines into their work, they have a tendency to simplify some of the insights borrowed from other fields of knowledge either because of a lack of grounding in these other fields or because interdisciplinary study itself puts so many balls in the air that it is hard not to drop a few here and there.

Clare quotes Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describing capitalism as a "two fold movement of decoding or deterritorializing flows on the one hand, and their violent and artificial reterritorialization on the other" (Clare 120). For Clare, Gaddis' novel is an example of this twofold flow: "the 'decoding' of older family narratives and their 'recoding' in a global capitalist enterprise unleashes vast amounts of energy and capital, yet much of this energy is immediately rechanneled into the 'imagined family' of JR's corporation" which looks backward to an earlier type of 'imagined family'—the patriarchal nuclear family (120). Noting that in times of socio-economic upheaval, people often turn to established forms of authority for a sense of stability and comfort, Clare concludes that during late capitalism the imagined corporate 'family' becomes more appealing than the "increasingly unstable nuclear family (traditionally capitalism's basic unit of production)" and thus, as Gaddis illustrates in JR, corporations seize on the possibility of
presenting themselves, in their attempt to market more products, as "the default families of the future" (117).  

Todd McGowan in his article "Liberation and Domination: Their Eyes Were Watching God and the Evolution of Capitalism." has argued that the three breadwinner husbands Zora Neale Hurston has her main character Janie marry in Their Eyes Were Watching God represent, in chronological order, the three main stages of capitalism: Janie's first husband "Logan, with his emphasis on the Protestant work ethic, exhibits the consciousness apropos of competitive capitalism"; her second husband Joe, with his emphasis on organization, efficiency and control, "exhibits the consciousness apropos of the subsequent epoch—monopoly capitalism" (113). Teacake, Janie's third "husband"—they don't actually marry—represents "an investment. . . in the ideology of late, or global, capitalism," an ideology which is "dispersed and fragmented, demanding not work or organization, but enjoyment" (119). McGowan is careful to emphasize that he is not saying each husband represents a different capitalist stage but rather that each man's "subjectivity is structured by the ideological form corresponding" to that economic stage (114).  

While McGowan sees Hurston employing the figure of the male breadwinner to highlight the effect of capitalism on male subjectivity, his is not a study of the dynamics of fatherhood since none of the men in the novel are fathers. Influenced by Lacan as well as Marx, McGowan does, however, explore the question of the symbolic Father in relation to Janie's second husband Joe whose power he sees as corresponding "precisely to that of the symbolic Father in Lacanian psychoanalysis" because his power is "thoroughly phallic" in that he has

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32 For his thinking on the turn towards authoritative institutions during times of economic change, Clare relies upon David Harvey who writes in The Condition of Postmodernity that at "times of fragmentation and economic insecurity . . . the desire for stable values leads to a heightened emphasis upon the authority of basic institutions—the family, religion, the state. . . Corporations, governments, political and intellectual leaders, all value a stable (though dynamic) image as part of their aura of authority and power. The mediatization of politics has now become all pervasive. This becomes, in effect, the fleeting, superficial, and illusory means whereby an individualistic society of transients sets forth its nostalgia for common values" (qtd in Clare 111-112).
power only insofar as everyone invests him with it. . . . The phallus, in other words, is literally powerless, an empty—and impotent—signified which has authority only through the obedience of others. Phallic authority, however, rests upon the nonacknowledgement of this—the belief that the Father has some Thing, some phallus, which constitutes his authority and thus demands obedience. If the illusion of the phallus is destroyed, then the Father completely loses his authority, since this authority existed only through the illusion (115-16).

As soon as Janie publically announces that Joe is impotent, his patriarchal status in the community evaporates. McGowan sees this as the moment when Janie "deconstructs the hierarchy of domination endemic to the epoch of monopoly capitalism" since "Joe's domination, like that of monopoly capitalism, exerts control through organizing disparate elements into a coherent whole" around the seemingly "substantial" and therefore "stabilizing force of the phallic center" (116-17).

Of all the Marxist literary critics I have surveyed thus far, Eileen Cleere takes up most directly the ways in which one particular family member—in her study, the uncle—represents or speaks to the relationship between intimate family life and the capitalist economic system. In *Avuncularism: Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Nineteenth-Century English Culture* Cleere finds that while fathers are generally downplayed or absent in nineteenth-century British novels, there is a proliferation of uncles who play a crucial role in the narrative. The absence of fathers in these texts is due, according to Cleere, to the tendency during the early years of industrial capitalism to associate the father and his role within the family with the feudal past: in this scenario, the father evokes both the paternalistic image of a family held together by bonds of emotion and moral obligation and the patriarchal image of an oppressive hierarchy with the all-powerful father at its apex.

Cleere sees fathers in nineteenth-century British novels operating as "the benchmark of hermetical family models" (15). Fictional uncles, on the other hand, "unhampered by

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33 The title of Cleere's introductory chapter is "Life Without Father."
paternalistic imperatives of either affective or unilateral oppression," stand in these same texts "for a variety of social directives that came to life under industrial capitalism" (32). As such, they bring fresh ideas, information, and, most especially, new economic possibilities into the family sphere; it is often the uncle's access to extra-family money and resources that allows a family member or the family as a whole to resolve the issue that has been keeping both characters and plot stuck. The important role that the uncle plays in these texts has been overlooked, Cleere argues, because contemporary critics, historians, and feminists have tended to impose their own expectations backwards onto the literature of the nineteenth century. Chief amongst these expectations is the belief that all families during the industrializing period were nuclear and all fathers were patriarchal (11). What psychoanalytic and feminist criticism have denied or negated, Cleere points out, by viewing Victorian family life almost exclusively through the lens of the patriarchal nuclear family is the "spectrum of cultural discourses that resist father-centered vocabulary and standard psychoanalytic form" (2).

One such cultural discourse that has been denied, according to Cleere, is the ideological role that the uncle, a figure who, positioned at the crossroads between the "hermetic" nuclear family and the larger socio-economic world, provides "a particularly elastic term for understanding the intersection of the commercial world with the affective family" (32). Cleere argues that nineteenth-century British authors feature uncles in their works for two reasons. First, the existence of uncles reflects the historical fact that the extended family not only still existed in the post-feudal period but was, in fact, flourishing as capitalist changes stimulated new family configurations including the need to call upon the resources of family members external to the parent/child nucleus. Second, authors use the figure of the uncle in novels in order to intervene
in and even influence the socio-economic debates of the day, debates prompted by the changing socio-economic conditions brought about by industrial capitalism.

In Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, for example, Cleere reads Fanny's marrying of her cousin under the approving eye of her uncle/soon to be father-in-law as an endorsement of Britain's need at the time to limit trade with other nations: resources (in this case marriageable women) are traded within the family rather than outside of it. In other novels, uncles, often involved in commerce or in middle class professions such as law or colonial administration, become the source of earned as opposed to inherited wealth that nephews and nieces are able to use to break away from their families and/or develop themselves as autonomous individuals.

The figure of the uncle is also used by many novelists to highlight negative aspects of capitalism, specifically the sense that commerce is "a force of individualism and self-interest that . . . sacrifices familial identity," and brings a tone of alienation into all human life by seeking to convert everything, including the most intimate relationships, into a money transaction (205). This concern is conveyed throughout nineteenth-century British literature by a "persistent correlation between uncles and the commercial sphere of usury" (24). In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, for example, Cleere argues that avuncularism is used to emphasize "the inefficacy of social paternalism by exposing the usurious beginnings (and endings) of humanitarianism, idealism, and even sentiment" (26).

If uncles are illustrative of the forces of dehumanization in many nineteenth-century novels, later in the century, commerce, again represented by the avuncular, begins to take on a more nuanced feel as it is also shown as capable of working in the service of affective familial relationships and against capitalist greed. Several of Anthony Trollope's novels, for example, contain uncles involved in the drive to lower the postal rate, a project which was undertaken in
real life to help working families, broken up by migratory employment, stay in touch. Eventually the capitalist is "distinguished from the criminal" in novels and fictional uncles begin "to stand in for a democratic concept of economic autonomy" (28-29). By the end of the century the uncle appears in a number of works as "a 'fair capitalist' who enables the working classes to empower themselves as a family as the wealthy have done for centuries" by helping communities set up community banks, for example (31). This image circulates in America too where "in many American political allegories of the late nineteenth century, Uncle Sam appears as a good capitalist who engages and eventually defeats [a] bad capitalist" (208).

Cleere, in a quick look at contemporary American pop culture, argues that avuncular metaphors continue "to shape the intersection of capitalism and familialism" (211) in the United States pointing to The Sopranos where "fathers are scarce" and the 'family' "is held together by [an] avuncular chain" of uncles and nephews (211) and the film Pretty Woman (1990) where the leading male character, a Reagan-era capitalist, poses as the "uncle" of the prostitute he will eventually marry. "These modern [American] capitalist fictions of familialism," Cleere points out, continue to reveal through their use of the figure of the uncle the "inherent instabilities in patriarchal ideology [by] allowing us to catch glimpses of historical and cultural meanings that have been elided by psychoanalytically driven models of kinship" (213). Cleere concludes that feminist critics are still, even in their analysis of contemporary American literature and culture, over invested in "patriarchal fictions" that emphasize the primacy of the nuclear family and the law of the father; she calls for the development of a feminist theory that, in its analysis of the fictional family, will be "more responsive to the realities of gender, class, and culture, then and now" (213).
To sum up, all of the Marxist literary critics that I've examined tend to see the fictional father or, in the case of Zora Neale Hurston's novel, the breadwinner husband, as a metaphor for one or another stage of capitalist development, though the economic stage represented by each fictional father varies depending upon the historical era in which the work is set. In some novels, critics also see the father as providing resistance to one or another economic stage—either one that is passing away or one that is just coming into being. Cleere makes the point most forcefully, but all of the critics see the figure of the literary father as a vehicle authors use to reflect, comment upon or intervene in the socio-economic status quo.

The association of fathers with capitalist economics is taken for granted in these critics' works, however, with the result that there is almost no discussion about the origin or larger meaning of this phenomenon. The lack of analysis stems in part from the fact that, though each critic has interesting and important things to say about the fictional father, the father is not the main focus of any of their works. It no doubt also reflects the fact that, with the exception of William Gaddis' novel JR, all of the novels that these critics study are written and set before the end of the Fordist economic period in the U.S. What comes after, during the socio-economic changes of the "post-Fordist period" is a sharp decline of Oedipality as "the socially-backed authority of the Father [is transformed] into an increasingly diminished and abstract principle" (Pfeil 268).34 Once the nature and conception of fatherhood begins to become disassociated from socio-economic power, as it does after 1970, it may become easier to see and question the normalization of the association of fatherhood with specific economic stages of capitalism.

All of the Marxist critics I've examined find a relationship between male subjectivity and the stage of capitalism under which men live. A question that they don't take up, but which is

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34 For more on the de-oedipalization of the family during this period, see Fred Pfeil's "Makin' Flippy-Floppy," Jessica Benjamin's "The Oedipal Riddle," and Dana Heller's *Family Plots: The De-Oedipalization of Popular Culture.*
nonetheless important to think about, is what it means that male characters are often portrayed as so tightly aligned with one or another stage of capitalism that they seem frozen in place, unable to change either themselves or their thinking. Female characters, in contrast, are often shown as having a far more flexible sense of themselves as well as a more facile ability to move through society. In Hurston's novel, for example, Janie's subjectivity develops and changes as she experiences and then liberates herself from each of the three stages of capitalism her husbands represent while each of her husbands remains rooted in the subjectivity dictated by the phase of capitalism they represent. Godden and Clare each describe a lack of flexibility on the part of the male characters they study as well. In particular, these characters don't seem able to change their psychological makeup as the economic conditions which have helped to create that makeup change. Dick in *Tender is the Night*, for example, as has already been mentioned, is unable to make the transition from the lifestyle and mindset associated with the stage of accumulation to that of reproduction while his wife Nicole is. JR, in Gaddis' novel, also seems to be stuck even as, at novel's end, his Family of Companies fails. Cleere sees the father in the nineteenth-century British novels she studies as similarly rooted in place: representing an older economic system which is being superseded by new capitalist developments, the father serves as a static foil against which another male character—the uncle—is able to unveil "a new model of patriarchy under capitalism" (23).

One way to read the portrayal of male subjectivity in the works these critics examine is that the authors of these novels are using their breadwinner husbands and fathers both as metaphors for the larger economic system and as foils for other characters in the novel who are struggling to make sense of capitalism and its effects. As such, one might conclude that the focus of these authors is not on creating a rich inner life for the male characters employed to represent
the socio-economic status quo. This observation circles back to the question I posed earlier about what happens to literary depictions of fatherhood in the post-1970 years when U.S. men begin to lose their purchase on patriarchal power and, simultaneously but not coincidentally, the percentage of women entering the paid workforce begins to expand dramatically. In novels from the late 1980s and 1990s I find that questions about whether male and female responses to the socio-economic structures governing their lives are different and, if so, what creates such a gendered dichotomy in the realm of subjectivity, are much closer to the surface than in American novels from earlier periods.

But while there are some important differences between contemporary novels and those that came before, there are also examples throughout American literature of authors creating rich inner lives for their male characters. Therefore, it seems to me the main reason that the Marxist critics I've surveyed do not delve deeply into questions of how male subjectivity is portrayed in the novels they study has mostly to do with the tendency on the part of these critics to focus on the socio-economic and leave psychological observations to the side. No doubt this tendency arises from an attempt to counteract the overwhelming tendency in American literary criticism to do just the opposite: to focus on psychology and leave questions about how capitalism has played a role in shaping domestic life and individual subjectivity to the side. In placing the socio-economic at the center of their inquiry, Marxist critics are breaking the taboo in American society on thinking critically about capitalism which has been in effect across the board in all fields, including in the field of literary criticism, since the late 1940s.\footnote{The economist Richard Wolff observes that "For the last half-century, the capitalist economic system in the United States, and indeed in many other parts of the world, has gotten a free pass in terms of criticism and debate. . . . Business and political leaders, the mainstream mass media, and the bulk of the academic community have substituted celebration and cheerleading for serious criticism and debate of capitalism. . . . and demanded no less of others." (Democracy 23-24)}

35 Considering the force of
this taboo, it is probably not a coincidence that of all the Marxist literary critics I surveyed, the one who has the most developed and insightful point of view on the dialectical relationship between family life and the socio-economic structure of society—Richard Godden—is British.

In concert with the Marxist critics, I also see the fathers in my works reflecting or representing economic stages within capitalism. At the same time, even as I borrow from and build on the insights of these critics, I feel it is important to bring a psychological look at the makeup and subjectivity of the father into the analysis as well. This approach—the bringing together of the socio-economic and the psychological—fits the dialectical nature of the study I am attempting where what is important is not how one sphere shapes the other, but how the two spheres—the public and the private—work together in a complex way to create, through their interaction, an integrated whole.

All the Marxist critics I have examined make note of the way that capitalism is generally depicted in novels as a complex overlapping of several economic stages. Hurston's novel, for example, where each of Janie's three husbands represents a different economic stage, is explained, according to McGowan, by the fact that older stages of capitalism have a "residual power" and "continue to work alongside dominant ones" (n.13 125). As we have seen, Godden sees Nicole's father in Tender is the Night as a "Janus head," representing two economic stages at the same time. In Mailer's work Godden shows the father as being representative of corporate capitalism in the garb of either a corporate CEO in Why are We in Vietnam? or an oversized authoritarian persona located somewhere within the state apparatus and/or the military-industrial complex in Armies of the Night. At the same time, Godden notes the existence of a second non-

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36 It is also possible, though McGowan himself doesn't suggest this, that the novel's depiction of the simultaneity of three distinct phases of capitalism reflects a particularity of the Black historical experience in the U.S. where, due to the retarding influences of slavery and racism, economic stages have become telescoped into a much shorter period of time.
corporate father in *Armies of the Night*—the character he calls 'Mailer' who is presented as another bifurcated figure: both contemporary man and Victorian patriarch. In Clare's study of Gaddis' novel there is also a doubling of the economic father, but here, as the logic of late capitalism continues to unfold in the post-Fordist period, there are a number of diminutive 'real' fathers poised against a fictional corporate father who has been pumped up, through the offices of the public relations machine, to gargantuan proportions. This corporate father is also a Janus-head cynically fabricated to direct attention away from the rapacious corporate behavior of the present by conjuring up a kinder, gentler, paternalistic past.

Eileen Cleere's work traces how nineteenth-century British novels used adult male characters to represent the simultaneity of residual and dominant stages of capitalism, but finds that these novelists split the representation between two different family members so that the father represents the residual economic stage and the uncle, as an extended family member, represents the stage of capitalism just coming into being. The difference between these British novels and the American ones where fathers routinely articulate even within the same figure more than one economic stage may reflect distinctions between the nineteenth and twentieth century, but I suspect this difference is chiefly a reflection of the distinctive way that the public/private sphere evolved in the U.S. In a country where the gendered divisions emerging with the industrial revolution were more pronounced than in any other industrializing country and where, for corresponding reasons, the iconic family unit was envisioned as containing just

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37 On the character 'Mailer' dressing up in Victorian garb, Godden quotes Marx who seems to also be thinking about the existence of "residual" socio-economic stages in society: "just when [men] appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language" (Marx "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte"; qtd in Godden 229).
parents and children, it makes sense that the figure of the father in American literature would become the locus of representation for all the stages of capitalism being depicted.

Richard Lichtman in *The Production of Desire: The Integration of Psychoanalysis into Marxist Theory*, as quoted and paraphrased by Godden, argues that over the course of the twentieth century as production is more and more separated from consumption, people learn to suppress their knowledge of a host of factors, but especially their knowledge of social relations: likening it to Freud's unconscious, he sees capital working "behind one's back" and "in one's depths" in ways, as Godden puts it, "which seem quite beyond representation" (qtd in Godden 204). Accordingly, all the social complexity that has been repressed is deposited into our "structural unconscious" which becomes "the repository of irreconcilable conflicts between capitalist reality and bourgeois appearance. . . . [because the] over reaching contradiction in capitalism between apparent independence and actual dependence . . . [is] too excruciating to be continually recognized and consciously confronted" (qtd in Godden 204). This painful knowledge about the true scope of life under capitalism only rises to the surface of consciousness, Lichtman argues, when the compensatory satisfaction people gain through consumption is derailed by periods of economic crisis or transition.

One of the most important insights emerging from my survey of Marxist literary critics who examine the intersection of family life and the socio-economic is that the depiction of fathers becomes especially interesting or available to authors and critics during periods when capitalism is undergoing major changes. During such periods the character of the father acquires a sort of unstable or shifting valence that draws attention to itself. These Marxist critics have looked at previous moments of capitalist transition and, without focusing explicitly on the father, have found his role in articulating contradictions or in bringing the unconscious or repressed
features of capitalism to the surface to be of interest. My work builds upon their observations by exploring what story the fathers in novels from the late 1980s and the 1990s have to tell us about the most recent period of capitalist change and its effects on both individual subjectivity and family life.

In the next section, I give an overview of way that the absent/present father has been rendered in American literature from the 1850s on, considering how the pattern of telling the story of the liminal father changes from one historical period to another and suggesting correlations between what happens in literature and what happens in the world beyond the text.

II. AMERICAN LITERATURE'S FIGURING OF THE ABSENT/PRESENT FATHER

Literary depictions of the father as an absent presence in the family become pervasive across the industrializing world in the nineteenth century. I begin my overview of American portraits of the absent/present father in the mid-nineteenth century when the ideology of separate spheres for men and women reaches full bloom and when the writers we think of as belonging to the American Renaissance were beginning to shake loose from the literary shadow of Europe and develop a tradition based on American themes and sensibilities.

In the discussion of literary texts which follows, I strive to do two things. The first is to notice the influence of socio-economic conditions on the depiction of the father and to tell the story of his elusive presence in literary works over the past century and a half as a history with an eye towards tracing chronologically when, how and why certain father figurations arise, persist or go out of vogue. The second is to sort the absent/present fathers presented in American Literature into types or categories. Some of these father types are in dialogue with specific
historical conditions and therefore are found mostly in literature produced during the period when those conditions exist. Other absent/present father types, no doubt because their existence is tied to more bedrock features of the socio-economic landscape, are found throughout the span of U.S. literature.  

Because the novel takes the family as one of its most important themes, it follows that an extremely large gallery of fictional fathers has been produced in a country as literarily prolific as the United States. The list of works and fathers that I consider in this section is not exhaustive; they have been chosen because they exemplify important trends in the narrative I wish to trace, a narrative which links the literary figure of the absent/present father to socio-economic factors.

My treatment of African-American texts in the following discussion and in the dissertation as a whole is somewhat limited and deserves explanation. While I have included some key African-American texts, especially from the twentieth century, in the survey of absent/present fathers that follows, it would take a more thorough grasp of African-American literature and history than I currently have to adequately analyze the complexities of the absent/present father in African-American literature. Such an analysis is important and needs to be done, but that work is beyond the scope of this particular study.

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38 I don’t mean to suggest that the figure of the absent/present father is an invention of U.S. literature nor that it has arisen only in the last few centuries in world literature. Homer’s *Odyssey* provides us with an early portrait of an absent father who fulfills his social and political obligations at the expense of a relationship with his child. By the time he returns, his son Telemachus, who, rather like Ahab’s son, has been fed a diet of stories about his father in lieu of having him actually present in his life, is a grown man with his childhood behind him. Some two thousand years later, Shakespeare creates another powerful portrait of a liminal father in the figure of King Lear, who, though physically present, is so emotionally disconnected from his daughters that he can neither understand nor be understood by them.

39 The experience of forced immigration and slavery and the continuing experience of racial discrimination and economic exploitation have inflected the African-American community and its cultural production in ways that are distinct. In the realm of historical differences, for example, Angela Davis, in *Women, Race & Class*, argues that one effect of slavery has been that African-American households have a higher level of gender equality than typically exists in U.S. households, while Jon-Christian Suggs has suggested that African matrilineal structures may play a role in African-American family structure. Historian Jacqueline Jones’ *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, which focuses on Black women, work and the family from slavery to the 1980s, provides a richly detailed account of the
In the pages that follow, I first give an overview which details the figuring of the absent/present father in U.S. literature from the 1850s onward and then offer a more in-depth discussion of some representative literary texts from these same years.

The dominant narrative in U.S. fiction between the Civil War and World War II is the narrative of rising. This is a change from earlier U.S. fiction where what David Leverenz has identified as "lateral" narratives that focus on an individual's self-development, accomplished either by "going into oneself or out to a wilder [frontier] environment" tend to predominate (Paternalism 28). The proliferation of narratives of rising after the Civil War reflects the growing assumption in society at large that sons and daughters will eventually surpass their parents' social and economic status. Themes of autonomy and upward mobility take center stage in many novels, crowding out expressions of obedience to parents and loyalty to one's birth family. In preindustrial times the father, who controlled resources through bestowing or withholding inheritance and who schooled his sons for the work world, was seen as crucial to the next generation's material success. In an era of rapidly changing economic opportunities such as occurs in the second half of the nineteenth century with the emergence of corporate capitalism, however, the father comes to seem increasingly inconsequential or, worse, a hindrance to the next generation: he holds his children, especially his sons, back by being too traditional or tyrannical, too tied to old or outmoded ways, and too inflexible to take advantage of new

Black family and comments throughout on the differences between Black and white families in the U.S. in different historical periods as well as the similarities they share.

40 See David Leverenz' Paternalism Incorporated, especially the Introduction and Chapter One, for more on the narrative of rising in U.S. fiction. Leverentz dates this narrative as starting in earnest after the Civil War, but, as I show in the following pages, there are novels written during the 1850s where the plotline of rising is also present and important. For examples of texts that concentrate on identity formation or an expansion of the self rather than a rising from one class to another, Leverenz points to Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Cooper's Leatherstocking series, Melville's Moby Dick, Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, the travel narratives by such writers as Caroline Kirkland, Richard Henry Dana, Margaret Fuller and Francis Parkman, Whitman's poem "Song of Myself," and Thoreau's Walden, among others.
opportunities. Reflecting the change industrialization has brought to the economic landscape, narratives in which fathers are dismissed or pushed aside become common during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. The father in such works is typically figured as a buffoon or as a sort of bull in the china shop of family life: unlike his wife, he doesn't quite "get" what his children are going through and so isn't able to help them navigate the difficulties of growing up or finding a place in the world. Quite often during the nineteenth century the pushing aside of the father is presented as a structural function of the plot: the protagonist's father is either already dead or missing as the novel opens or becomes so quite early in the narrative. In many texts a surrogate father—typically an older, successful businessman—comes forward to lend a (usually brief) helping hand to a young person in need of a little mentoring or some financial help after that young person has either rejected or otherwise lost his/her biological father.\footnote{Dick, for example, in Horatio Alger's \textit{Ragged Dick} (1868) is an orphan befriended by a wealthy businessman. Huck's father Pap in \textit{The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn} (1884) is an example of a tyrannical father who attempts to hold his son back. Among other things, Pap doesn't want Huck to get an education.}

As the first half of the 20th century unfolds the figure of the father begins to take on more of an emotional voice inside literary texts where, for the first time, the problem of the father's bifurcated existence, the split between the work world and home life, begins to sound "out loud." This is a change from late nineteenth century portrayals of fatherhood where men seemed content to occupy a position on the periphery of the family, their identity determined more by their work life and their interaction with the public world than by interactions with family. In contrast, fathers now express a greater desire for family life and it becomes clear that their sense of identity is at least partially wrapped up in their ability to form intimate bonds at home. The difficulties fathers face in their attempts to have a more intimate home life are considerable; a
key contradiction in the father's quest to develop a more intimate relationship with his wife and children, is the fact that his primary responsibility to the family continues to be his breadwinning abilities. Strung between work and home, men are still absent presences in novels of the first half of the twentieth century, but in these novels men are more conflicted than in previous eras and the difficulty they have being present in the home is problematized.42

A class difference in the depiction of fathers can be discerned in these works. Middle class fathers continue to be depicted as out of step with the family much as they were in nineteenth century novels, but the father's restless interior life, including where he goes in both mind and body when he is absent from the family and his deep longing for family intimacy, becomes more fleshed out as is his feeling of being ill at ease both at work and at home. For working class fathers, the grueling material conditions of work continue, as they did in earlier literature, to block men from being present in their children's lives: fathers are removed from the family by injury and death, by imprisonment, by the exigencies of poverty and the general insecurity of finding and keeping a job, as well as by the extremely long hours they work which leaves little time or energy to engage with family at home. Against a growing societal consensus that fathers are important to their children's emotional as well as material well-being, the working class father's inability to play more of a role in the lives of his children takes on, in these texts, a wrenching tone.43

The greater articulation during the first half of the twentieth century of the inner life of fathers and, in particular, of their sense of both wanting to engage more deeply with their

42 For examples of fictional fathers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who seem content to be disengaged at home see Squire Gaylord in William Dean Howells' *A Modern Instance* (1882) or the businessmen in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913). In Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1922), Babbitt is an example of a breadwinning father who wants to be closer to his family, but has trouble doing so.

43 Jurgis in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) is a working-class father who is unable, because of poverty and harsh working conditions, to be present in his family's life; another such father is Geremio in Petro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939) who dies in a construction accident leaving his wife and young children to fend for themselves.
children and of their dismay at being unable to engage with them occurs in response to many factors. The discovery of the psychoanalytic voice and of the idea that conflict can arise from internal tensions and contradictions is certainly one impetus for the change of the depiction of fathers in literature. The early decades of the twentieth century and particularly the interwar decades of the 20s and 30s also witnesses a change in the cultural expectations of fatherhood. The idea that marriages should be more democratic or companionate leads to talk of a "new father," one who is more involved in the emotional and psychological life of his children. Childrearing experts, who spring up in great numbers during this period, and countless popular magazine articles encourage fathers to become "pals" to their children and to serve as positive male role models. Finally, there is the changing face of work. Historians Margaret Marsh and Ralph LaRossa each argue that the growth of larger companies mean that male workers have more job security than was possible in the nineteenth century when individual professionals and entrepreneurs had to contend with extremely erratic financial conditions. This heightened sense of economic security, according to LaRossa, allows men "the freedom to focus more attention on their families" (35). Sociologist Eli Zaretsky sees a different reason for the turn towards the family in the early twentieth century. He argues that the desire for a more intimate personal life emerges in response to the increasing corporatization of the workplace where a loss of autonomy and a growing feeling of alienation cause many men to search for meaning outside their work lives.

44 For more on the "new father" see Ralph LaRossa's The Modernization of Fatherhood and Robert Griswold's Fatherhood in America.

45 For more on how the changing nature of work affected family life in the early nineteenth century, see LaRossa's The Modernization of Fatherhood, Margaret Marsh's "Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1915," and Eli Zaretsky's Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life.
In the post World War II period, the problem of the absent/present father assumes a more central and serious position in U.S. literature than ever before, especially from the 1970s on. No longer is the father relegated to the sidelines as he was in the nineteenth century. Nor is he stepped around with a mixture of worry and resignation as in the early twentieth century. Instead, the absent/present father comes, in the postwar period, under increasingly focused scrutiny as authors interrogate his meaning, using both humor and harsher, angrier methods to break through his silent exterior and get at his inner workings.

A diversity of absent/present father types emerges in the fiction of this period, reflecting social and economic changes in the society at large where, as historian Robert Griswold notes, fatherhood in the last decades of the twentieth century has become politicized, "its terms . . . contested, its significance fragmented, its meaning unstable" (9). In some novels, men's desire to flee or their actual flight from the confines of fatherhood and family is explored with concern and sympathy; in others, men who reject the demands of breadwinning are celebrated as creative free spirits. Anger towards the absent/present father is palpable in many works. In some novels the absent/present father becomes the brunt of satirical jokes. In other novels, especially those by feminist authors, the emotionally remote father, who maintains his grip on the prerogatives of power that maleness and his status as chief breadwinner confer upon him, is depicted as a vicious tyrant who must be disavowed and overthrown. Some novels, especially those written by authors of color and those depicting working-class fathers, expose the deep hurt that the absent/present father inflicts upon the family while, at the same time, finding a measure of compassion for the alienated and alienating father. Some works chart a new course for the absent/present father by
having him, over the course of the novel, shed his liminal status and become more present in the family.  

These changes in the literary portrayal of the absent/present father coincide with a sea change in the economic world, one which undermines what had been, up until then, the identifying feature of fatherhood: the role of family breadwinner. Starting in the pre-World War II years, but accelerating in the second half of the twentieth century, men's monopoly on breadwinning collapses as more and more women become wage earners. The ability of men to function as the family's sole breadwinner is dealt its severest blow in the years after 1970 when, with the globalization of capital and the transition in the United States to a postindustrial economy, real wages stagnate and most families find they simply cannot survive on just one worker's wages. Partly in response to these objective conditions and partly in response to the rise of the second wave of feminism, the gendered boundary between work and home shifts and begins to blur during the last decades of the twentieth century. No longer able to claim the identity of sole breadwinner, the contribution fathers can or should be making to their families

46 For a set of novels that view the father's feelings of being trapped with sympathy, see John Updike's Rabbit novels (1960-2000). For a novel that seems to celebrate the male escape from family obligations, see Jack Kerouac's On the Road (1957). Donald Barthelme's The Dead Father (1975) offers an irreverent treatment of the patriarchal father who, simultaneously dead and alive is being hauled by his children to his burial ground. Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible (1998) and Gloria Naylor's Linden Hills (1985) are two feminist novels that depict the father as an irredeemable despot. Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982) and Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street (1984) treat working-class absent/present fathers of color with compassion.

47 Historian Robert Griswold has written that "nothing has changed and continues to change fatherhood more than the collapse of men's monopoly on breadwinning" (4). By the mid-1980s nearly 70 percent of women with children aged six to seventeen were working for wages (Griswold 222). For more on women, work and the transformation of breadwinning from the 1970s on, see Griswold's Fatherhood in America, especially Chapter Ten.

48 See page 222-23 in Griswold's Fatherhood in America for more on the stagnation of real wages and its effect on family life. The economist Richard D. Wolff has written extensively on the socio-economic effects of the stagnation of real wages which began in the mid-1970s and continues into the present. For more on the repercussions of this important economic change, see Wolff's "Capitalist Crisis and the Return to Marx," and "Capitalism Hits the Fan: An Interview with Economist Rick Wolff."
becomes hotly debated and, for the very first time, the question of men sharing equally in the housework and childcare moves to the front burner.

The blurring of gender lines and of family responsibilities that occurs as a result of the collapse of men's monopoly on breadwinning coincides with the end of the absent/present father as a dominant literary trope in American literature. The works I study closely in this dissertation are part of a class of novels arising towards the end of the twentieth century that take the tough interrogation of the absent/present father, already apparent in postwar literature, to a deeper level by turning the spotlight on the socio-economic context in which he lives. The discovery that these works make and seek to broadcast is that the absent/present father is a social construction: he is an absent presence not because such behavior is biologically determined by virtue of his maleness nor because his individual personality prompts him to tend in such a direction but because the economic and social structures in which he is embedded have shaped him so.

Arising at the same time as and continuing after the novels I study is a group of novels that Ellen G. Friedman has called "postpatriarchal novels." These novels move towards curing the problem of the absent/present father by either drawing him into the circle of the home and making him truly present, or by casting him out and making him truly absent when sons and daughters refuse to become ensnared either in mourning his passing or in exhaustive (and exhausting) quests to “find” him. Movement of the fictional father in either of these directions is a radical break with the majority of depictions in nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. literature where, with the exception of the late twentieth century works that I have drawn examples from for this dissertation, the texts do little to challenge or fundamentally alter the figure of the father as an absent presence.

49 See Ellen G. Friedman's “Postpatriarchal Endings in Recent US Fiction.”
Turning now to a more in-depth consideration of a few representative novels which feature the absent/present father, I begin with an examination of a prominent absent/present father type that is prevalent in all periods of American literature: the father who, unable to provide financially for his family, abandons it. Since, from the start of industrialization until just a few decades ago, the central role assigned to the father was to be a good provider, it makes sense that this type of father can be found in every literary period. Typically he is poor or working class, though there are middle-class examples of the type as well. I categorize this father as an absent presence rather than merely as an absence, both because the struggle he goes through to abandon the family is often an important theme in the novel, and because, once he has actually left the family, his absence assumes an electric presence in the family as family members project their own ideas and fantasies of the father onto the empty space he leaves behind. Sometimes, also, such a father leaves and returns to the family many times as his economic status rises and falls, a pattern of coming and going that reinforces the sensation that he is always both present and absent.

After exploring the depiction of this important father type in novels from the 1850s on, I circle back to the nineteenth century to look more closely at the depiction of the absent/present father as he appears during that period. I begin with a consideration of fathers in the latter half of the nineteenth century who, unlike the first batch of fathers I examined, are good providers and remain physically present in the home. These men are, in many ways, mirror opposites of the failed providers who physically flee their families. Mostly men of the middle or upper classes, the good providers of the nineteenth century are physically present but mentally absent. Often this absence takes the form of a preoccupation with work or with some other facet of life outside the realm of home and family. In many novels there exists an attitude of approbation towards
fathers who maintain their distance from family life. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, concern about fathers who are "too" deeply involved with their children begins to appear in some novels where such closeness appears to signal an unhealthy lack of attention on the part of the father to breadwinning duties.

I begin in 1850 when, a year before Melville's *Moby Dick* appears, Nathaniel Hawthorne publishes *The Scarlet Letter*. The young minister Arthur Dimmesdale is not physically separate from his daughter Pearl the way Ahab is from his son, but, because she is proof of his adulterous relationship with Hester Prynne, he refuses to acknowledge her existence. Instead, he spends the years of her young life preoccupied by his own spiritual journey and his work status in the community. It is only as he lays dying that Dimmesdale publicly claims Pearl as his daughter. When the seven-year-old kisses his lips for the first time, Hawthorne writes that "[a] spell was broken": like a character in a fairy tale, the kiss sets in motion the daughter's transformation from a wild, impish creature to a normal child able to partake of "human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it" (238). Dimmesdale's ability to connect with his daughter only at the moment of his death might remind us of Willy Loman's fantasy in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* that his death will bring him closer to his sons. What is different, however, is the apparent lack of irony with which Hawthorne proffers Dimmesdale's moment with Pearl as a deeply transformative event; Hester's steady work as a single parent both before and after Dimmesdale's dramatic deathbed confession seems less consequential in the child's development than her father's kiss which somehow releases Pearl into the larger social world.⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ Hawthorne himself appears to have been an engaged father: his journals are full of interactions with and observations about his children. See, for example, *Twenty Days with Julian and Little Bunny by Papa*, a chronicle of Hawthorne's time as a single parent to his five-year-old son when his wife Sophia was away for several weeks.
Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, also published in 1850 and destined to become one of the best-selling novels of the nineteenth century both in the United States and in England, contains another stark portrait of an absent/present father. Warner's novel, which critic Jane Tompkins has called "the Ur-text of the nineteenth century United States" for its fine-tuned embodiment of Victorian-era values, is the *Bildungsroman* of Ellen Montgomery ("Afterword" 585). A young girl when first we meet her, Ellen lives with a mother whose health is failing and a father who is away on business "most of the time" (23). Even when he is home, Captain Montgomery is scarcely present: in a novel of nearly 600 pages, the sole interaction between him and Ellen is on the morning when he, with great insensitivity, separates Ellen from her mother, sending Ellen to live with relatives in the countryside while he takes his wife to Europe on "some government or military business" (11). It is hoped that a change in climate will restore Mrs. Montgomery's health; instead she dies. On his way home across the Atlantic, Ellen's father also perishes. Ellen's love for her mother and her eventual acceptance of her mother's loss is a central theme in the novel. In contrast, here is how Ellen receives the news of her father's death:

Ellen rather felt that she was an orphan than that she had lost her father. She had never learned to love him, he had never given her much cause. Comparatively a small portion of her life had been passed in his society, and she looked back to it as the least agreeable of all; and it had not been possible for her to expect with pleasure his return to America. . . . The knowledge of his death had less pain for her than . . . relief. (381)

Captain Montgomery not only fails to form any sort of intimate bond with Ellen; he is also a failure in the world of business. In the very first chapter we learn that he has lost a lawsuit and that that loss has wiped the family out financially. He leaves for Europe with his wife because he is "too poor now to stay [at home] any longer" (11). Though the novel draws a

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51 For more on the popularity of *The Wide, Wide World* and its social and literary context, see Jane Tompkins' "Afterword" to the Feminist Press edition of the novel.
discreet curtain around his business ventures so that we don't learn of the specifics, his treatment of Ellen gives a clue as to the cause of his business troubles: his callous disregard for Ellen's feelings as he separates her from her mother and fobs her off on his unwilling and emotionally cold sister, along with his failure to provide for her material needs during her time of exile, reveals a self-centered mind, one that is un-tempered by the Christian values of love and compassion.\(^{52}\) In keeping with the Victorian sensibility which linked material outcome and spiritual development, Captain Montgomery's personal and spiritual failings keep him from being present physically and emotionally in his daughter's life and also keep his business ventures from being a success. In a chicken-and-egg sort of way, his failure to be a good provider also makes him a failure as a father.\(^{53}\)

The theme of fathers physically leaving their families because they are unable to financially provide for them runs throughout American literature. While *The Wide, Wide World* draws a link between Captain Montgomery's fiscal woes and his lack of personal and spiritual development, other novels, particularly in the twentieth century, focus more on the problematic nature of the material world itself and particularly on the effects that the grinding pressure to perform well in a world of cutthroat competition has on fathers and fatherhood. Sociologist Kathleen Gerson points out that during the period of industrialization men's status as the family's head became less assured: patriarchal dominance under the breadwinner system “could no longer

\[^{52}\] It is these Christian values that the novel bolsters through its detailed chronicle of Ellen's spiritual progress.

\[^{53}\] Susan Warner's own life is in part the template for *The Wide Wide World*: her mother died when she was quite young; a few years later her father lost most of his money in the Panic of 1837 and the rest when a series of lawsuits went against him. These losses plunged the family into poverty from which it never recovered. The family, consisting of the father, the father's sister and Susan and her younger sister, moved to a farmhouse in the country. It was there, after some ten years of poverty, that Susan and her sister Anna turned to writing novels and later religious tracts in an attempt to make ends meet. The resentment Susan Warner seems to have felt at her father's financial failure and her continuing dependence on him for money peeks out in a diary entry: "I wish one thing—that father would give each of us an allowance" (qtd. in Tompkins, "Afterword" 601).
be easily asserted as a male birthright; men now had to earn it through economic success in the marketplace” (19-20). The vicissitudes of the market with its upswings and downturns and capitalism's need for a certain amount of unemployment in order to keep wages low and workers compliant made breadwinning a source of tremendous anxiety for men.

The pressure to provide took its toll on many an individual man who simply ran off from job and family, giving rise to what historian John Demos has called “the notorious ‘tramp’ phenomenon” of the nineteenth and early twentieth century:

Demoralized and destitute wanderers, their numbers mounting into the hundreds of thousands, tramps can be fairly characterized as men who had run away from their wives. (They had, of course, run away from much else besides.) Their presence was mute testimony to the strains that tugged at the very core of American family life. Many observers noted that the tramps had created a virtual society of their own, based on a principle of single-sex companionship.

(“American Family” 438)

For sociologist Jessie Bernard, the historical phenomenon of men dropping out of marriage and family life to live in all-male countercultural groups, either because they "could not live up to the norms of the good-provider role or did not want to" (154) goes a long way towards explaining Leslie Fiedler's observation that the most prominent male protagonists in American literature are men "on the run" from domesticity and family life.

Agnes Smedley's novel Daughter of Earth (1929), a fictionalized account of her own poverty-stricken beginnings in the mining and farming towns of the West and mid-West around the turn into the twentieth century, draws a devastating portrait of the effects the insecurity of the capitalist job market has on her protagonist's father and, by extension, on the entire family. When

54 For a more thorough discussion of the perquisites and costs of the good provider role on men, see Jessie Bernard's “The Good-Provider Role: Its Rise and Fall" and Kathleen Gerson's No Man's Land: Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work, particularly Chapter Two.

55 Jessie Bernard notes that “the annals of social work agencies are filled with cases of runaway husbands” (156, n4).
the novel opens, Smedley's narrator Marie Rogers is a small girl living on a Missouri farm. Life with her father, a competent farmer and an involved member of the community, though not without its traumas, is basically good; Marie loves the way her father tells a story and watches in admiration as he calls a square dance at a harvest party. There is an abundance of fresh food to eat while living on the farm and plenty of community suppers and molasses pull parties and sleigh rides to participate in. Everything changes, however, after Marie's father grows restless with the monotony of farm life and, lured by the thought of making "a lot of money," decides to leave the farm and become a wage laborer: "from that moment our roots were torn from the soil and we began a life of wandering, searching for success and happiness and riches that always lay just beyond—where we were not" (34-5).

The elusiveness of the American Dream which remains always just out of reach becomes fused with Marie's experience of her father in the years to follow as he also becomes elusive, repeatedly walking away from the family, usually because some money-making scheme of his has failed, sometimes because he finds the grinding poverty the family has descended into too much to bear. When he returns from his times away, times during which his children and wife suffer even worse poverty because he has not been there, he slips back into his role as patriarch, making decisions and lording it, sometimes through violence, over the other members of the family. Increasingly demoralized by his inability to "make it" in the American work sphere, he begins to absent himself from his family even when he is present, spending his time and whatever meager wages he has in saloons.

Marie's emotional scars from such an upbringing run deep. In the end she chooses to do what many a male hero does in American novels: she steers clear of marriage and parenthood. Unlike many of those male protagonists, however, Marie's decision to turn her back on family
life is tinged with feelings of regret rather than feelings of liberation; she genuinely longs for love and children but the degradation and subjugation she has witnessed in her mother's and other married women's lives seems such an inevitable part of the family setup that she determinedly rejects becoming a wife and mother. Instead, finding inspiration in her father's more independent lifestyle and his romantic flare for life and for storytelling, she becomes a journalist and joins a mostly male group of political and cultural activists in New York City.

In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the inability of men to fulfill their role as good providers during the Depression causes a power shift away from patriarchy in the Joad family, where Ma Joad assumes an amount of leadership by the end of the novel that was unthinkable in its opening pages. Even though the inability to make money erodes their power as head of household, the majority of the male characters in *Grapes of Wrath* continue to display a remarkable amount of loyalty to family. Nevertheless, as material conditions worsen, each of the younger men in the Joad family takes his leave. One son, Noah, walks off just before they reach California. He is quickly followed by the Joad's son-in-law Connie who has dreams of upward mobility and has calculated that his chances of making it are better if he divorces himself from his poverty-stricken in-laws. Connie leaves behind his pregnant wife Rose-of-Sharon whose birthing of their stillborn baby some months later forms the climactic end of the novel. Tom Joad, realizing that the only way to help his people is to become an organizer in the fight for economic justice, leaves the family when it becomes clear that being a political activist places the family in danger of blacklisting and retaliation.

Thus the main character of *Grapes of Wrath* becomes, at novel's end, yet another man on the run, living out in the open with a group of other men, confronting dangerous and exciting circumstances together. It is, in fact, precisely because Tom is neither a father nor a husband, that
he is able to choose to become a political activist; he is not tied down with the responsibility to provide for a wife and children. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a union of male migrant laborers who often rode the trains, hobo-style, from job to job and were active fighting for better wages and working conditions both before and during the years in which Steinbeck sets *Grapes of Wrath*, were outspoken in their contempt for the good provider role society had assigned to men; they saw it as the primary way working men were kept quiescent in the face of oppression. Historian Philip S. Foner explains:

In some IWW circles, wives were regarded as the 'ball and chain.' In the West, IWW literature proclaimed that the migratory worker, usually a young, unmarried male, was 'the finest specimen of American manhood . . . the leaven of the revolutionary labor movement . . . .' [The nomadic migratory worker of the West] was most emphatically 'not afraid of losing his job.' No wife and family cumbered him. The worker of the East, oppressed by the fear of want for wife and babies, dared not venture much." (qtd. in Bernard 155)

The IWW's critique of the male breadwinner role has merit, according to Jesse Bernard, who notes that "employers preferred married men, disciplined into the good-provider role, who had given hostages to fortune and were therefore more tractable" (156).

Meridel LeSueur's novel *The Girl*, written in 1939 but revised and published in 1978, is peppered with men who are unable to function as fathers and husbands because of the grinding effects of poverty. Fashioned out of real life stories that LeSueur collected from working class women during the 1930s, the novel is narrated by a young girl who migrates from the countryside to St. Paul during the Depression to find work. The girl lands a job working as a waitress in a restaurant/speakeasy where she falls in love with Butch, a young man who dreams of someday owning his own gas station. Like most of the characters in the novel, Butch is barely able to cobble together enough money for a next meal; in an attempt to get the startup money for his own business, he gets involved in a bank robbery. A shootout ensues, Butch is killed and the
narrator, pregnant and also jobless, is taken in by other women without men. By novel's end she is living in an abandoned warehouse that has been taken over by homeless and destitute women. It is here that she gives birth to, as the women who surround her cry out excitedly when they see the gender of the baby, "a girl, a woman, a mother . . . a new woman" (148).

Most of the female characters we meet in *The Girl* have lost their men, either through violence, as is the case of Butch, or through the emotional withdrawal and demoralization that comes when a man can't find work or feels he can't provide for his family. As Clara, who has become a prostitute to make ends meet, explains "a man doesn't feel good when he can't work, he doesn't feel respectable....That's the way with Tommy, he felt bad after he had to pawn his tools. He pawned more than his tools all right" (118). In a similar vein, when the narrator first tells Butch she is pregnant, he becomes angry and insists she have an abortion telling her "[y]ou have to feed them . . . for years and years. They'll get sick and all that kind of stuff. . . . I don't care what happens to grown people . . . they can take it but kids is different, what happens to kids is a hundred percent different" (77). The narrator resists Butch's anger and the pressure he is placing on her to have an abortion saying to herself, "It's not a fault being hungry and it's not a fault that men hate the hunger in women now that they can't be filling them, it's not a fault aching for a child, food, love" (78). Analyzing the problem as a societal problem, as the narrator does here, rather than as the fault of one gender or the other is reiterated towards the end of the novel by Amelia, an older woman and an activist: when a group of women cry out about how men use women for sex and then walk away when they become pregnant, leaving them abandoned or, worse, "poisoned" with the after-effects of abortions and sexual diseases, Amelia says, "It isn't the man. A man is a mighty fine thing, there is nothing better than a man. It's the way we have to live that makes us sink to the bottom and rot" (112). Adding to the difficulty men have staying
involved with women and children is the relief system itself. Relief workers police the women to make sure no men live with them; if a man is found, the woman associated with him risks losing her benefits even if he is barely able to support himself.

Like Meridel LeSueur's novel, Tillie Olsen's short story "I Stand Here Ironing" (1953-54), in which a mother reflects back over her nearly grown daughter Emily's life, highlights the emotional effect poverty and unemployment can have on a father's staying power: Emily's father abandoned the family when Emily was just eight months old because he "'could no longer endure' (he wrote in his good-bye note) 'sharing want with us' " (2). Perhaps, like Butch, Emily's father couldn't bear seeing a child in want.

In Grace Paley's short story "An Interest in Life" (1950s), the narrator Virginia is abandoned by her husband when he finds out she is pregnant with their fourth child. "The city won't let you starve," he says as he leaves (85) adding, "I got to get out of here . . . . I'm going nuts" (96). Virginia believes her husband is restless and unhappy because he hasn't done better "lifewise or moneywise":

Happiness isn't so bad for a woman. She gets fatter, she gets older, she could lie down, nuzzling a regiment of men and little kids, she could just die of the pleasure. But men are different, they have to own money, or they have to be famous, or everybody on the block has to look up to them from the cellar stairs. (94)

Virginia doesn't tell her children that their father has left, justifying her vague answers to them about his whereabouts by saying, "a child should have a father" (84). Besides, Virginia believes that her husband's absence is only temporary: he will come back when he realizes that "the babies are in school and everything easier" (100). There is a sense here, just as in Agnes Smedley's novel, that the father's absence is only temporary, that later on he will become present again. Just as the market fluctuates, moving through recessions and recoveries, booms and busts,
so too does the father's presence as he moves into the family when he is doing better in the work
sphere and out of the family when he is feeling badly about himself and his ability to be a good
provider.

In Sherman Alexie's collection of linked stories set in and around the Spokane Indian
Reservation, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), Victor's father, unable to
provide for his family, eventually abandons his wife and son. At an early age Victor witnesses
the grief his father feels over his inability to bring money into the family:

On Christmas Eve when [Victor] was five, Victor's father wept because he didn't
have any money for gifts. . . . Just the week before, Victor had stood in the
shadows of his father's doorway and watched as the man opened his wallet and
shook his head. Empty. Victor watched his father put the empty wallet back in his
pocket for a moment, then pull it out and open it again. Still empty. Victor
watched his father repeat this ceremony again and again, as if the repetition itself
could guarantee change. But it was always empty. (4-5)

By the time Victor is seven, his father has emotionally withdrawn. Thomas Builds-the-
Fire tells Victor, "Your father's heart is weak. He is afraid of his own family. . . . Late at night he
sits in the dark. Watches the television until there's nothing but that white noise. Sometimes he
feels like he wants to buy a motorcycle and ride away. He wants to run and hide. He doesn't want
to be found" (61). Eventually, Victor's father does buy a motorcycle and run away. After Victor
grows up he reflects that "white men have been [abandoning their families] forever . . . Indian
men have just learned how. That's how assimilation can work" (34).

Critic Allyson Ande

Critic Allyson Anderson, studying the portrayal of fathers in Native American fiction, has
come to something of the same conclusion. The pervasive depiction of Native American fathers
in fiction as absent or, if present, as emotionally unavailable is directly linked, she argues, to the
history of colonial subjugation which, after "centuries of social/political emasculation" (179) has
turned the Native American man from a warrior into an "invisible, ineffectual eunuch" (181).\(^{56}\) Anderson blames the strictures colonization has placed on the economic lives of Native American men including "the devaluing of their traditional modes of production (such as hunting and fishing); the mass deskillling of their labour (achieved by streaming them toward unskilled jobs and away from trades or academics); and, discrimination in the marketplace" for the absence of Native fathers in literary depictions of the families (181). With little ability to provide for their families, she argues, Native American men feel stripped of their manhood.

Concerning itself with a similar set of themes, Junot Diaz's *Drown* (1996), which is the subject of my fourth chapter, explores the effects of both U.S. colonization and capitalism on men and family life in the Dominican Republic and its diaspora. In *Drown*, the narrator's father Ramón de las Casas emigrates to the U.S. in search of work in the wake of the U.S. military invasion of the Dominican Republic. Ramón succeeds in making enough money to bring his wife and children to join him a few years later, but, unable to escape the effects of discrimination and economic exploitation, he continues to be a distant and abusive father in the United States, just as he was in the Dominican Republic. Eventually, like Victor's father in Sherman Alexie's work and like so many other working-class men in fiction, Ramón leaves his family altogether.

So far I've considered texts in which men, unable to succeed financially, withdraw from their families. There are numerous texts, however, where fathers—generally from the middle-class—do successfully provide for their wives and children. In the nineteenth century, these men, as a rule, do not tend to physically abandon their families as many of the poorer fathers we

\(^{56}\) Anderson points to N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* as examples of novels in which Native American fathers are absent because they have been picked off by violence, illness or suicide. The fathers who are present in these and other novels, tend to be "emotionally unavailable because [they are] abusive, addicted or just plain ineffectual" (Anderson 179). Examples offered by Anderson of novels in which fathers must keep their distance from their children because they are the result of an illicit love affair or because a white stepfather has supplanted the biological Native father include Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, and Thomas King's *Medicine River*. [182]
have just examined do. Nevertheless these successful breadwinners are often depicted in the pages of U.S. literature as absent presences, emotionally disconnected from the rest of the family, often because they are preoccupied with work and with the world outside the home. Nineteenth century novels abound with such fathers and it is to them I now turn.

One novel that contains such a father is Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). The plot hangs on the inattentiveness of Percy Driscoll, a slave owner and land speculator, who does not notice when his seven-month-old son, whose mother died shortly after the child's birth, is exchanged for the son of his female slave Roxana. Both children were born on the same day and both look equally white since Roxana is only one sixteenth Black and her son's father appears to have been white as well. When Roxana, who is both children's caretaker, switches the children in order to save her son from ever being 'sold down the river,' she worries that Percy will notice. Preoccupied by business, however, he gives her no trouble: "for one of his speculations was in jeopardy, and his mind was so occupied that he hardly saw the children when he looked at them" (17). A few days later Percy leaves town and is away for seven weeks wrestling with the problematic land deal which "had gotten complicated with a lawsuit" (18). His long absence on business cements Percy's inability to recognize that his son has been replaced by another child.

While the switch of the infants, coming early in the novel, allows Twain to set in motion a plot that circles around the tensions between the small town's rigid notions of status and race and the celebrated American ideals of ingenuity, self-determination and individual identity, the switch of

57 The father of Roxana's son is another absent/present father: according to Roxy the father is Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, a highly respected white man of the town. Colonel Essex never acknowledges his son or plays a role in his life. Christopher E. Koy notes that Twain's original intention was to make Percy Driscoll's brother, Judge York Driscoll, the father of Roxana's baby, a plot twist which would have made the two boys cousins and had Roxana's son murdering his biological (absent/present) father. The plan to make Judge Driscoll the boy's father was nixed by Twain's wife. An upstanding white citizen being the father of Roxana's son, whether it be Judge Driscoll or Colonel Essex, points to an important type of absent/present father—the white man who takes sexual advantage of a female slave and then is allowed to refuse, even though he lives in the same community, to acknowledge or care for a child born from that union.
the children also serves to highlight the absentee nature of fatherhood and, in particular, connects being immersed in the competitive world of money-making with the father's inability to see (literally in this case) his own child.

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* Twain pokes satirical fun at what is apparently a characteristic trait of nineteenth-century middle-class fathers: their extreme preoccupation with business and the corresponding lack of attention to domestic details. Twain’s novels often cast a jaundiced eye on patriarchal figures, but in many fictional works, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the father who is in one way or another abstracted from family life because of his absorption in work or, more broadly, the world "beyond" the home, seems to be accepted with equanimity. Indeed, in many novels, such a father is viewed with warmth and even approbation.

Mr. March in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is one such father. Though physically absent—Mr. March spends all but the last few pages of Part One (1868) away from home serving as a chaplain in the Civil War—he is present in spirit: a letter from him which the girls receive in the first chapter urges them to "be loving children . . . do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully, that when I come back . . . I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women" (8). Through this letter Mr. March provides the book with its title and sets in motion the plot which is the working out of the girls' pledge to spend the year while their father is away confronting and overcoming their faults.

While Mr. March provides the overarching framework and course of action to be followed, the

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58 Emily Dickinson, writing to T.W. Higginson in 1862, picks up the same theme when she reports, “Father, too busy with his Briefs—to notice what we do. . . . They [Mother and Father] are religious—except me—and address an Eclipse, every morning—whom they call their “Father”” (qtd. in Leverenz, 22). In this letter, Dickinson elides her father busy at his work with God; both seem equally remote and abstract. Dickinson's father's absent presence is aligned with the holy Father's who is “an Eclipse”—there but not there. Her father's absent presence seems to elicit a resigned shrug from Dickinson.
day to day details of the "Pilgrim's Progress" which the girls undertake is supervised by their mother, who is closely involved in every step of the journey. When Mr. March returns at the end of Part One, he quickly assumes the role of the girls' judge. To everyone's delight, he pronounces himself pleased with their progress, noting that Meg has put aside her vanity in favor of developing the "womanly skill that keeps home happy," that Jo has jettisoned her tomboyish ways, and that Amy "has learned to think of other people more, and of herself less" (223-24).

In Part Two of the novel, which was written at the urgings of Alcott's publisher in 1869 after Part One proved so wildly popular, Mr. March is physically present, but is markedly absent from the day to day workings of the household, spending most of his time tucked away in his study "busy with his books" and his work as a minister (236). Indeed, as James Wallace has noted, Mr. March seems "[m]ore present in his absence" in Part One than he is "in the flesh" in Part Two (259). Mr. March's absence is given a determinedly positive spin at the beginning of Part Two by the omniscient narrator:

To outsiders, the five energetic women seemed to rule the house, and so they did in many things; but the quiet man sitting among his books was still the head of the family, the household conscience, anchor and comforter; for to him the busy, anxious women always turned in troublous times, finding him, in the truest sense of those sacred words, husband and father.

The girls gave their hearts into their mother's keeping—their souls into their father's; and to both parents . . . they gave a love that grew with their growth, and bound them tenderly together. (237)

Despite the respectful, even reverent treatment of Mr. March evident in this passage, the family Alcott constructs in Little Women is matriarchal: Alcott's male characters are sparsely drawn and generally relegated to the periphery where they serve as admiring onlookers of the

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59 Significantly, the work Mr. March does in his study is not described.
female world which occupies center stage. It is, in fact, the remoteness of Mr. March which allows the March girls to flourish, for, as Nina Auerbach points out, much of "the richness of the March household" is the result of "the absence from it of controlling men" (qtd. in Susina 162-63). Ann Douglas observes that the enduring "excitement of Little Women for feminine readers" has been the development this lack of male involvement affords the March girls: "the sisters are complete, if imperfect, before men seek their hands" ("Introduction" 59).

Critics disagree, however, about whether Little Women and its sequels are ultimately subversive or supportive of patriarchy. While Auerbach highlights the power girls and women have in Little Women, Judith Fetterley argues persuasively that the novel details an internal civil war in which the little women, after expressing the hopes and desires of a more liberated life, learn to gracefully renounce or repress those dreams and, through their marriages, submit to the patriarchal order. James Wallace theorizes that the absent father in Alcott's work represents the diffuse nature of patriarchy, which is lodged not in a particular individual but spread out silently over society as a whole, making it impossible for individual female characters—even ones as creative and strong-willed as Jo March—to escape its repressive orbit.

While there is no doubt that Little Women and its sequels explore the effects of patriarchy on girls and women, there is another quite important and related theme in the books: the effect economics has on family structure and, in particular, on fathers and fatherhood. The nostalgic turn Alcott's books make towards a communal, almost pre-industrial/ pre-capitalist state of

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60 Jan Susina argues that Alcott's male characters in Little Women "are often marginalized, infantilized, or viewed as the other" (169).

61 Alcott herself expressed considerable annoyance when, after the publication of Part One, she received numerous letters from girls asking "who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life" (qtd. in Showalter, "Introduction" xix).

62 See Nina Auerbach's "Waiting Together: Alcott on Matriarchy" and Judith Fetterley's "Little Women: Alcott's Civil War."
family togetherness is part of a tradition of nostalgic yearning which crops up at intervals in American life and literature. Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, which is the subject of my third chapter, delves into just such a set of feelings when she explores the nostalgic lens through which community and family members view life on a mid-Western late twentieth-century family farm where home life and work life are fused and where, because so much about the socio-economic world that the family stands upon has been ignored or repressed, the ideology that everything is working out for the common good dominates. Because the desire to escape coming to terms with the negative effects of capitalist economics is an important theme in any study of breadwinning fathers and family life and because Alcott's *Little Women* and its sequels have had a large impact on contemporary feminist writers, many of whom say that they poured over these books as children, it is useful to take a closer look at what Alcott's famous 'children's' novels have had to say about U.S. family life and particularly about fatherhood under industrial capitalism.

Just as women's independence is both celebrated and undermined in Alcott's novels, so fathers who are truly present in their families are both celebrated and, at the same time, depicted as being at odds with the dominant social and economic structure including the demands placed upon men to be breadwinners. Of the four fathers Alcott depicts in *Little Women* and its sequels—Mr. March and the men who become Meg, Jo, and Amy's husbands—the three who are nurturing, involved fathers, for example, are quite removed from the contemporary capitalist workplace.

While the family as an economically self-supporting unit gives way in post-Civil War America to work outside the home often in large-scale institutional settings, Mr. March escapes

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63 See Janice Alberghene's *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination* for contemporary feminist writers who attribute a great influence to Alcott's novels about the March family.
this paradigm. He works from home: his study is his office and his "employer" is a congregation rather than a for-profit business or corporation. His clergyman's income is modest but, as Ann Douglas points out, his poverty "protects his family from the psychological consequences of living in a profit-oriented society. If he acquires nothing, he learns and passes on none of the ugly lessons of acquisition" ("Introduction" 57). The March household is, overall, a celebration of anti-capitalistic values where, as Douglas has argued, "[s]ocialist democracy" prevails: the family operates as a collective sharing generously with each other and with their neighbors while decisions are made through consensus and with an eye towards the needs of both individual members and the group ("Introduction" 57). It is Mr. March's lack of attachment to the economic status quo which allows the March household to escape somewhat from the dominant capitalist ethos just as his general retreat into his study gives the March girls the space to develop themselves as strong and creative women.64

Jo and her husband "Professor" Fritz Bhaer take the experiment in socialist democracy quite a few steps further when, in Little Men (1871), they establish a boys' boarding school at Plumfield, the large country estate that Jo inherits from her wealthy Aunt March. Like Mr. March, neither Fritz nor Jo are interested in making money and they are never depicted as having much of it. Plumfield's egalitarian community seems to float in an isolated bubble outside the capitalist world of work and money: tuition is low for the students whose families can pay, but the school also takes in orphaned street children and the main support for the school comes from wealthy patrons. In a throwback to an earlier economic era, work and family are completely

64 To complicate the matter a bit further, however, it should be noted that just as Alcott's fictional world can be seen to support patriarchy even as the characters seem to move against such a system, the values of the busy, disciplined, self-sacrificing and frugal March home are also attributes of the Protestant work ethic and therefore are supportive of a capitalist approach to work even as Alcott's characters seek to escape or disavow such an economic system.
blended: Fritz is the school's teacher, while Jo takes care of most of the other tasks needed to run the school, but the two help each other out as needed and both serve as mother and father to the school's young residents which include their own children as well as a number of nieces and nephews.

Amy's husband Laurence is also positioned as being outside the capitalist work world. He hails from a wealthy aristocratic family and though he is said to work in the "family business," money is of no concern to him: he uses his wealth not only to live a life of ease but to support worthy and uplifting causes, which, of course, includes the support of Plumfield.

Both Laurence and Fritz are depicted as engaged fathers; both are also out of step when it comes to American masculine behavior. Laurence was partially educated in France and has both a foreign and an androgynous air about him. Fritz, who is German, simply breaks the mould for American fatherhood: extremely devoted to and beloved by children of all ages, he is, as Jo puts it, far more "simple and natural" than American men (Little Women 339). In the context of American gender roles, he seems effeminate to the point of being buffoonish: early on, we see him down on all fours, being ridden about by the tiny daughter of a laundress one minute and darning his socks in his dressing gown the next. Over the course of several novels, it becomes clear that he is a loving father, both warmhearted and wise. In Jo's Boys (1886) when he hugs his sons, he is, the narrator tells us, "not ashamed to express by gesture or by word the fatherly emotions an American would have compressed into a slap on the shoulder and a brief 'All right'" (qtd. in Showalter, "Introduction" xxvii).

Meg's husband, John Brooke, is a study in contrasts. Depicted as completely American in his upbringing and ancestry, he has no inherited wealth to fall back on. He makes his way in the

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65 These attributes are even more pronounced in the 1868 edition; Alcott apparently toned them down in the 1880 edition in order to make Laurence align more closely to American readers' expectations of a romantic hero. For more on these changes, see Showalter's "Introduction," especially xxi-xxii.
business world "conscientious almost to a fault . . . and above reproach in all things" (334). He never becomes rich or famous, but he works so hard as a bookkeeper "for the rich men whom he . . . [serves] faithfully for years" that when he dies ten years into his marriage to Meg, there is speculation that this hard work "shortened his good life" (Little Men 332-36). The talk amongst the mourners after John's death dwells chiefly upon John's quiet, steady work habits and the fact that he was such a good provider for his family. After he dies his 10-year-old son, inspired to emulate his father, begins to do odd chores to make money because "My father told me to take care of Mother and the little girls" (337).

But though John is eulogized as a "good man," he seems to have been hollowed out by his years of shaping himself to be a small cog in a large corporation. With his careful, rule-abiding nature, he is the blandest of the three March sons-in-law. Indeed, one has the feeling that Alcott kills him off precisely because he has conformed so closely to the role of good provider that most of his own personality has already been snuffed out. The few glimpses we get of him in the domestic sphere show us that Meg and John's house reflects the values and problems of the capitalist work world in a way that the other households in the novel do not. First of all, Meg and John struggle more than the other two sisters to find happiness in their marriage and it is clear that the nuclear family arrangement which places John away at work all day has much to do with their discontent: there is difficulty finding common ground after long days of separation. Meg feels isolated in the home where, until the children are born, her work seems meaningless. Even after the children come, she continues to suffer from being shut up all day alone with the

66 Judith Fetterley has a similar take on Beth, the March sister who dies just as she reaches young adulthood. Beth is the character that most internalizes the values of Victorian womanhood. But, according to Fetterley, though she is "the perfect little woman," she is the "least vital and the least interesting" of the sisters. Fetterley concludes that "Beth registers [by her death] the cost of . . . suppressing so completely the expression of one's needs; of controlling so massively all selfishness, self-assertiveness, and anger" (37).
babies. In addition, John has a sort of anger lurking beneath the surface which is quite different from anything we have seen in the other three of Alcott's fathers: early in the marriage, Meg's mother warns Meg "He has a temper, not like ours—one flash, and then all over—but the white, still anger that is seldom stirred, but once kindled, is hard to quench. Be careful, very careful, not to wake this anger against yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect" (*Little Women* 279). John's approach to the world is both judgmental and rigid: one sinks or swims; issues are black and white. Compassion and unconditional love, the stuff upon which the more communal families in the novel are built, are clearly not foremost in John's larder of emotional responses. In keeping with this tendency towards sternness and order, John's fathering is characterized chiefly by his skill at disciplining his children, though Alcott is careful to show that he is never harsh or abusive to them. After a long period of ceding the domestic sphere to Meg who has come to feel "nervous, and cross, and out of sorts" because of her isolation, John decides to take a more active role in the family. The narrator explains, "It was not all Paradise by any means, but every one [sic] was better for the division of labor system: the children thrrove under the paternal rule, for accurate, steadfast John brought order and obedience into Babydom, while Meg recovered her spirits, and composed her nerves (*Little Women* 398-99).

Alcott never seems to have found a resolution for the disappointing behavior of American fathers under capitalism: her important autobiographical novel *Work* (1871) details the experiences of a young working-class woman named Christie who struggles to make ends meet working as a maid, an actress, and a seamstress before marrying her gardener-boss David who conveniently dies in the Civil War shortly after she becomes pregnant. Though David's memory is enshrined in her house—she imagines him hovering as a guiding spirit over her and her daughter's life—the novel ends with Christie happily living in a three-generation community of
female relatives where wages, chores and political aspirations for a better future for women are all shared. As James Wallace notes, the final image of the novel "definitely excludes all the father surrogates of the novel and projects a vision of a community of women based . . . [not] on capitalist competition but on . . . the principle of liberty" (273).

In terms of the fictional representation of fatherhood, Alcott's work stands on a cusp. In the creation of figures like Mr. March and Fritz Bhaer it looks nostalgically backwards to a time when fathers were a central, stable and positive feature of family life; simultaneously it looks ahead in figures like John and, again, Mr. March, to the increasingly absent nature of fatherhood as corporate capitalism develops and women not only become the family's "chief parent" but also begin to find ways to liberate themselves from the strictures of patriarchy.67

Even though two of the four fathers depicted in Little Women—John and Mr. March—have strong overtones of the absent/present father, Alcott still portrays them as playing an important day-to-day role in the lives of their children. In many other nineteenth and early twentieth-century narratives, however, the tendency to push the father to the margins of the text or jettison him altogether is pronounced. In Susan Warner's The Wide, Wide World (1850) or Maria Susanna Cummins' The Lamplighter (1854), for example, the death or disappearance of the father occurs early in the lives of these novels' respective heroines Ellen Montgomery and Gerty Flint. Since Ellen and Gerty's mothers are already dead, the loss of their fathers renders both protagonists orphans. The father's removal in these two popular texts, much like Mr. March's removal first to the Civil War and then, in the second volume of Little Women, to his study, turns out to be largely beneficial: it frees each protagonist to make her own way in the

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67 Alcott's depiction of Fritz Bhaer who is an extremely present father is a rarity in American literature. The irony, of course, is that he is not American; Alcott makes it quite clear that it is precisely his not being American which allows him to be so lovingly engaged with children. Ann Douglas points out that "the March family is both America's last completely self-reliant enterprise and a viable form of necessary retreat and consolidation" (61).
world and, perhaps most importantly, provides each girl with the opportunity to acquire a new and, in many ways, superior set of guardians and mentors, once the biological father's claim to oversee his daughter's upbringing has been eliminated. The cast of surrogate mothers and fathers that Ellen and Gerty eventually acquire allows each girl to attain a higher degree of development in terms of character, skill and intellect than if their biological fathers had retained control over their upbringing. Moreover, each protagonist, detached from a father who is poor or, in Ellen's father's case, is plunging down the socio-economic ladder into bankruptcy, is freed to move upward instead as Ellen and Gerty are eventually each adopted into wealthy families and, in the end, marry wealthy men. Thus, in ridding themselves of the protagonist's father, these novels hook into the plot of rising which Leverentz identifies as predominant in American literature from the Civil War on.

It is time now to turn to the three contemporary works which I study closely and situate them in their historical and literary context.

III. THE FIGURING OF THE ABSENT/PRESENT FATHER IN SMILEY, DÍAZ AND UPDIKE'S WORKS

In the post World War II years the absent/present father becomes a focal point for the uneasiness coursing through U.S. society as it grapples with wide-ranging social and economic changes. Absent/present fathers are depicted sympathetically in the immediate literature of the postwar period where they appear worried, restless, bored, or immersed in feelings of failure because they find themselves unable to succeed either at breadwinning or the demands of the "new" more involved fatherhood or both. As the twentieth century proceeds and the father's monopoly on breadwinning erodes, the absent/present father begins to lose the exemption from
criticism and scrutiny he enjoyed in earlier literary periods when his status as head of household was more secure. In a break with the equanimity with which absent/present fathers were treated during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, less sympathetic portraits of the absent/present father begin to appear from the 1970s on. In these works the absent/present father is the target of scorn or jokes; with the feminist movement's rediscovery of family violence, a number of monstrous or dangerous fathers make their appearance.

Towards the end of the twentieth century a group of works takes the scrutiny of the absent/present father in a new direction by situating him more carefully in the socio-economic world and exploring how this world shapes his participation in the domestic realm. The absent/present fathers in this group of works do something unusual in the long literary history of figuring the absent/present father: rather than highlighting the domestic sphere and minimizing the socio-economic sphere or keeping the two separate, these works bring both equally into the test.

In bringing together the two halves of the father’s existence—his life at home in the family and his life as a worker under capitalism—these texts allow for an exploration of the dialectical relationship between the individual father/family and larger socio-economic forces. Instead of serving as a silent, inscrutable barrier, as such fathers have in the past, standing on the threshold and blocking with the dead weight of his body an understanding of the connection between the public and the private spheres of life, the figure of the absent-present father in these literary works becomes something more porous—a portal of sorts—through which readers can view the contradictions that structure the identity of the absent/present father by spotlighting the heretofore neglected in-between space that the individual breadwinner father traverses as he crosses back and forth across the threshold from home to work. In the process, these works also
flesh out a larger historical threshold upon which all these texts stand: the borderland between what political economists call late capitalism and a future that is uncertain but may hold, as one of its many possibilities, the creation of a more equalitarian family and economic system.

Like the English Romantic period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when writers created rich depictions of the natural world just as that world was being radically altered and even, in some places, disappearing as a result of the Industrial Revolution, these texts illuminating the absent/present father appear in the last decades of the twentieth century at a moment when the image and fact of fatherhood is beginning to undergo dramatic revision in the U.S. The changed character of the role that the absent/present father plays in these works is part of a general revision of roles and boundaries occurring in U.S. society as globalization, the emergence of a postindustrial economy, and the re-emergence of feminism cause a sea change in values and material conditions as dramatic as the one which brought the absent/present father into existence at the start of the Industrial Revolution.

The movement in these texts is not towards a liberatory future for fathers or their families, though in many ways these works do lay the groundwork for the appearance of Ellen Friedman's "postpatriarchal" father in other literary works as well as in real life.68 Neither do these texts bend backwards, seeking, however surreptitiously, to apologize for and thereby reinstate the patriarchal father of the past. Instead they stand in the uncomfortable place of transition between fatherhood's patriarchal past and its uncertain future, painstakingly and, at times, painfully, digging down into the makeup of the father who has mostly, until now, escaped this sort of scrutiny. The results are some of the most fully fleshed-out portraits of the absent/present father in U.S. literature.

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68 See Ellen Friedman's “Postpatriarchal Endings in Recent US Fiction.”
The works I have chosen to examine closely in this dissertation—Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1991), Junot Díaz’s *Drown* (1996) and John Updike’s series of four Rabbit novels and a final novella (1960-2000)—are representative examples of this group of transitional works. Before describing more fully the context in which these novels emerged, including both their literary reception and some of the precursor texts each novel is in conversation with, it will be helpful to have a thumbnail sketch of each novel.

Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* rewrites Shakespeare's *King Lear*, setting it on a family farm in Iowa in 1979. The action begins when Larry Cook, a widower and the largest, most prosperous farmer in Zebulon County, announces his intention to turn over his thousand-acre farm to his three grown daughters. The novel charts the unraveling of the family that this decision brings. Whereas our sympathies are aligned with King Lear in Shakespeare's play, Smiley flips the script by making Larry's oldest daughter Ginny, who is also the novel's narrator, the character with whom we most deeply sympathize. The local community views Larry as an exemplary farmer and family man, but Ginny's narration tells a different story, exposing the tyrannical contours of family life under Larry's rule, including his sexual abuse of Ginny herself and her sister Rose.

*A Thousand Acres* is, in part, a portrait of the corporate household economy where production is located in the home and where every family member, under the direction of the patriarchal father, has a role to play in the family's economic endeavors. There is intergenerational unity, tight control of children, and little room for individual development as all work together for the common good. But while Smiley's novel looks back to the type of family structure prevalent in preindustrial times, it also delves into the effects modern economics have
on family life, in particular, the effects of corporate capitalism. We watch as, step by step, the
Cook family farm goes under, gobbled up by a large corporation.

Though the corporate household economy largely disappeared in the United States during
the early years of the nineteenth century, the figure of the patriarchal father so closely associated
with this form of economic organization continued right up through the twentieth century to
occupy a central place in most U.S. families as well as in the public imagination. In *A Thousand
Acres*, Smiley explores the effects that the combined but distinct ideologies of patriarchy and
capitalism, both of which find expression in the idea that the father should be the family's
breadwinner, have had on generations of U.S. fathers and their children. At the same time, the
novel answers the nostalgia for the male-headed household, prevalent especially in conservative
circles during the late 1980s and the 1990s as men's breadwinner abilities erode, with a stark
portrayal of the problems such a family presents.

Junot Díaz's father Ramón in *Drown* is quite different from the absent/present father that
Smiley constructs in *A Thousand Acres*. Unlike Larry who is, for most of his life, positioned at
the center of power, Ramón is a working-class man who has been marginalized in multiple ways:
as a resident of the Dominican Republic during the U.S. economic and then military takeover of
his native country, he is a colonized subject; as an immigrant to the United States in the early
1970s where he comes without his family until he can establish himself enough to bring his wife
and children over, he is slung between two worlds, never quite belonging to either, and, finally,
through all the years he ekes out a bare existence working in U.S. factories or in the service
industry, he is oppressed by ethnic, racial, and class discrimination as well as by the demoralized
behavior of other working-class men at his job or in his community as they struggle against the
same array of oppressive forces. Like Larry, Ramón has inherited a sense of patriarchal
entitlement passed down from a history in previous generations of independent farms and small businesses in the Dominican Republic and reinforced by his having been a member of the Guardia, the Dominican police force.

Ramón's son Yunior narrates Drown. In the early sections of the novel, Yunior is still young so the portrait of Ramón is filtered through the eyes of a child. The action switches back and forth between the Dominican Republic where the family waits in poverty for Ramón, who has gone to the United States, to make good, and urban New Jersey where Ramón eventually manages to bring and settle the family. Even as he loves and yearns for love from his father, Yunior describes Ramón as a man who is remote and tyrannical. Abusive, controlling, restless, and evasive, Yunior's father literally has one foot in and one foot out of his family, disappearing at times to cultivate affairs and even families with other women. In the end, like so many working-class fathers in other literary texts who find themselves unable to live up to the demands of the good provider role, Ramón leaves his family altogether.

In the final section of the novel, Yunior, now a young man, circles back to piece together the story of his father's life during the years when Ramón first left his two young sons and wife and came to the United States. As Ramón's vulnerability in the face of the difficult and dehumanizing experience of being an ethnic immigrant lodged at the bottom of the U.S. economic heap comes to the fore, it forces Yunior's re-evaluation of the distant, tyrannical father he experienced as a child and causes a deeper, more stereoscopic portrait of Ramón to swing into view.

John Updike's Rabbit series, is the saga of a white father who rises, through a mixture of hard work and family connections, from factory work to being the manager of a Toyota franchise. Though he largely fulfills the mission of being a good provider, Rabbit is never able to
feel at home in his marriage or with his son. Set in the fictional city of Brewer, Pennsylvania, we encounter Rabbit in 1960, in the first years of his marriage to Janice. The couple, still practically children themselves, have one young son (Nelson) and another child on the way. Rabbit feels trapped into a life of domesticity. His response in the first novel of the series, *Rabbit, Run*, is to do as the imperative title commands and run. The pattern of leaving his family either physically or emotionally only to subsequently be drawn back into its orbit is a constant throughout the following thirty years until in the fourth novel, *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), Rabbit's ceaseless attempts to find something "more" than he already has end with his death.

Rabbit's anxiety—his last name is Angstrom—and his restlessness unfold against the phenomenon of what historians have called the "new fatherhood," a style of parenting which comes into being in the early part of the twentieth century and holds sway throughout most of the rest of the century, becoming, among other things, a key marker for middle-class family life. Being a breadwinner, though challenging enough for Rabbit with its regimentation and ennui, is not all that is required of a "new father": a democratic, companionate marriage, close, intimate ties to the children, and the ability to provide children with a positive role model as they confront the larger world are all part of the expanded notion of what good fathering entails. Rabbit, however, is not at all comfortable with the level of intimacy required of him. In addition, he is not sure what he is supposed to be modeling for his son as he has lots of questions himself about the meaning of life when everything is awash in meaningless competition and consumerism. Rabbit remains on the periphery of the family, perpetually disappointing his wife and his son as he fails to live up to the new fatherhood standards. The novels explore his confusion at the contradictions inherent in the ideals of the "new fatherhood" which is clearly at odds with the capitalist structure of work and society. Adding to the confusion is Rabbit's resistance to letting

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69 For more about the "new fatherhood" see Ralph LaRossa's *The Modernization of Fatherhood.*
go of the lingering privileges of patriarchy that continue to adhere to family life and the breadwinner role. Much of the last two novels in the series—*Rabbit is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest*—concern the troubled and extremely complex push-pull relationship Rabbit and his son Nelson have. The novella *Rabbit Remembered* (2000) is largely from Nelson's point of view as he both looks back at his time with Rabbit and attempts to be a good father to his own, now teenaged, son Roy.

With short exceptions—usually just a matter of pages when we enter into the consciousness of Rabbit's wife or son—the four Rabbit novels are told entirely from Rabbit's point of view. This choice of narration is extremely important: examples of stories about family life told from the father's or, for that matter, from the mother's point of view are quite rare in American literature. Instead, as happens in *A Thousand Acres* and *Drown*, most authors tend to tell the story of family life from the point of view of its sons and daughters. Updike doesn't, however, go so far as to use the first person to tell his father story. Instead, he keeps a bit of distance between readers and Rabbit by using a close, third person style of narration. We are closer to the father's inner thoughts and feelings than in the other two novels I examine, but there is still an inability to get completely into his head, a fact which supports the feeling that Rabbit, like the other fathers, is an absent presence.

But if the fictional fathers in these three novel are all absent/present breadwinner fathers, differences, as I've tried to indicate above, in their class and in their access (or lack of access) to the means of production, in the gender of the narrator and/or author, and in the race or ethnicity of the characters and the community in which they live also makes each father distinct. In

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70 See my discussion in Chapter One on the reasons so few novels are narrated from the mother's or father's point of view.
addition, each text, as I will show shortly, is engaged in its own unique intertextual dialogue with a set of literary works about similar types of absent/present fathers that have come before.

Despite these differences, all three works share a number of important traits. Each father, for example, is constantly on the move, restlessly seeking something "more" than what he already has, a "more" which, like the American Dream, seems to be always just beyond his reach. Within the capitalist framework, this restless seeking takes the default form of an obsession with acquiring material wealth, but each man is haunted by a nagging feeling that his life is lacking in other, less easily defined ways as well.

Each work offers a long-term, almost historical view of the father as it charts the evolution and impacts of his relationship with his children from infancy thru to adulthood. Smiley's novel is constructed as a memoir in which the narrator looks back at her life with her father, beginning with her perceptions of him as a child in the 1950s and continuing through to the early 1980s. Díaz's work, a series of linked short stories, alternates between views of the father when the narrator is a child in the 1970s and when he is a young adult in the 1990s. Updike's works begin with the portrait of a father and his pre-school children in 1960 and through four novels and one novella traces the history of the father and his children, especially his son, up to the end of the 1990s.

One historical development that each novel follows over the course of these years is the interaction between socio-economic changes during the second half of the twentieth century and the changing face of fatherhood. At the beginning of each novel, the father is the family's designated breadwinner. Over the course of the novel, as wives and other family members move into the paid workforce, the status, identity and meaning of the father, which had initially seemed fixed, become subject to re-evaluation.
The father in each of the three texts is both difficult to read and has difficulty reading himself. Each novel finds ways to scrutinize the father's work life and show how it is connected to his home life, but the father himself is never able to see these connections. Instead, he continues to think in individualist terms, holding fast to the notion that it is all up to him to shape his and his family's life. In the end, each father pays the price for being unable to extricate himself from the mindset he inherited along with the role of family breadwinner: Smiley's father goes crazy, Diaz's father, pushed to the margins of family and economic life, is quietly erased, and Updike's father, attempting to lull his pain and anxiety, eats himself to death. There is no happy end or prognostication of what will help create a better situation for families or fathers. Instead, at novel's end all three fathers are absent or dead while their now grown children appear to be in stasis, stranded, it seems, in a bleak no man's land between an untenable past and a future that cannot be discerned.

Helena Wahlström has made the interesting argument that "the canon that was formed during the twentieth century served to strengthen the dichotomous construction of (white) family and domesticity versus (white male) freedom and individuality" (27-28). With literary critics having focused mainly on the story of the male who strikes out for freedom and independence, and, more recently, on "representations of 'ethnic' American kinship," Wahlström argues that the "white American family largely functions as an unexamined norm within literary-critical discourses, especially outside of feminist studies" (28, n.23).

All three of the works I explore in this dissertation place under investigation the dominant mindset which accepts the absent/present breadwinner father as a given in family life. The status quo way of thinking about this brand of fatherhood is to not think about it, to allow it to fade into the background as if the absent/present father like other dominant societal traits, is a force of
nature rather than a social construction. The difficulty characters have understanding the father figure in each novel and the inability of each of the fathers themselves to process what is happening and their role in it is a reflection of the inability of society as a whole to examine the phenomenon of the absent/present father. It is helpful to begin to think of the absent/present father as part of a larger package of hegemonic thinking which is inflected with the other dominant "invisibles" of American society—whiteness, maleness, and middle-classness.

As I show in Chapter One, the middle-class, white, breadwinning father has been held up as the model of fatherhood for all men, including working-class men and men of color, to be measured against since the early years of the Industrial Revolution. Each of the novels I study takes a look at the way hegemonic notions of fatherhood affect and play themselves out in families. Though two of the three works I study concern white, middle-class families, each explores a different archetype within the larger hegemonic of fatherhood: Larry in *A Thousand Acres* is the authoritarian patriarch, rugged individualist, entrepreneur and self-made man upon whom powerful notions of freedom, nationhood, and the American Dream are anchored; Rabbit, who takes his place in the far less autonomous, far more interdependent work force of twentieth-century corporate America, grapples with the compensatory offer, as individual workers have less and less power and control in their work places, of a more intimate role for himself in the private sphere of family life and relations. On its face, Ramón's story is about the particularities of the Dominican experience, including in its scope the shape of Dominican fatherhood in both the U.S. and on the Island. While it is certainly that, it is also an exploration of the ways in which the dominant U.S. culture informs the actions, desires and thought patterns of both the working class and communities of color. As such, *Drown* joins Smiley and Updike's novels in offering us
a perspective from which to view the hegemonic figure of the absent/present father standing
mutely at the center of so many U.S. stories about fatherhood and family.

By the 1990s, when most of the works I examine in this dissertation were published, the
country was in the grips of a contentious political discussion about the changing nature of the
American family and, in particular, about the many families where fathers seemed to have gone
missing. Given all the attention absent or disengaged fathers were garnering in the public and
political realm, it would be logical to assume that the appearance of Smiley, Diaz, and Updike's
works, all of which have a great deal to say about the physically or emotionally absent father,
would also generate a great deal of commentary on the subject. Such an expectation seems even
more reasonable when one considers that all three authors' works were published to great critical
acclaim and quickly became bestsellers.71

In point of fact, however, only Smiley's novel has stimulated substantial discussion on the
question of fathers and fatherhood. Initial reviews of Drown made note of the theme of the
absent father, but that notice has not been followed by any in-depth analyses of Ramón de las
Casas, the narrator's problematic father or of any of the other father figures in the work. Critics
of the last two works in Updike's Rabbit series (Rabbit at Rest (1990) and Rabbit Remembered
(2000)) have continued to focus, as they have done in the three preceding Rabbit novels, on
themes other than fatherhood.

There are two reasons why the absent/present father in Smiley's novel has attracted so
much interest. First, A Thousand Acres is a rewrite of King Lear, set this time in 1979 on a

71 Smiley's novel won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award as did Updike's Rabbit at
Rest (1990). Rabbit is Rich (1981) also won a Pulitzer Prize. Diaz's Drown was chosen, in 1996, as a New York
Times Notable Book, an American Library of America Best Book, and as one of the Village Voice's 25 Best Books
of the Year, and was nominated, in 1997, for the Quality Paperback Book Club's "New Voices" award.
family farm in Iowa. Because Shakespeare's play is one of the urtexts of patriarchal fatherhood in Western literature, readers of *A Thousand Acres* are immediately alerted to Smiley's feminist intentions by her choice of narrator: the oldest daughter Ginny, who, in a radical flip of the *King Lear* script, is the character we are most drawn to and come to see as "more sinned against than sinning" (*Lr*. 3.2.59).\(^72\) The inevitable result of placing these two texts in conversation is the interrogation of traditional or patriarchal fatherhood and it is this that the critics have picked up on. The second reason critics have focused on the absent/present father in *A Thousand Acres* is that Larry Cook, the emotionally and sexually abusive patriarch at the center of Smiley's novel, is so spectacular in his monstrosity. Not only do the clear feminist themes that the novel sounds as Larry's daughters and sons-in-law struggle to break free of his tyrannical domination resonate with the compelling—and comfortably familiar—narrative of liberation that has been a key component of U.S. literature in general, but the novel also fits into a trend evident in feminist novels from the 1970s on of fathers, step-fathers, and other male heads of household being depicted as extremely violent, sadistic, and/or sexually perverse.\(^73\)

In almost all of the work done on *A Thousand Acres*, patriarchal attitudes are explored and links are made between the male domination of women and girls and the domination of nature and the land which, as the title indicates, is also an important "character" in the novel. A great many articles—perhaps a third—explore the relationship between the novel and *King Lear*. Other critics have focused on the theme of father-daughter incest, some analyzing the family dynamics, others the phenomenon of repressed and recovered memory. Another set of papers has

\(^72\) In *King Lear* these lines are spoken by Lear who, though he takes some responsibility by play's end for his part in the tragic events that have unfolded, sees himself and is figured by the playwright as a wronged father and thus deserving of our sympathy.

\(^73\) See Gloria Naylor's novel *Linden Hills* or Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* for examples of such fathers.
concerned itself with Smiley's depiction of industrial agriculture as a destructive force for both the environment and human health: most of the articles in this group draw parallels between the oppression of women and the oppression or rape of nature. The question of how history is viewed and narrated has also occupied the attention of a number of critics: these papers generally explore how some stories—notably of Native Americans, the natural world, and women—have been repressed or placed in the service of the dominant white, male narrative.  

While most scholars of *A Thousand Acres* concentrate on the theme of patriarchy, many—including a number of those mentioned above—note in passing that capitalism is also an important theme in the novel. The handful of scholars who have chosen to explore this theme have either analyzed how capitalism and the mindset it produces is implicated in the oppression of women and the abuse of the land or have detailed the role it has played in breaking up traditional farming communities. I take these analyses one step further by looking closely at what Smiley's novel has to say about the effects of capitalism on family life, and, in particular, on fathers and fatherhood, as I explore the way Larry Cook's economic role informs his relationship to his children.

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74 Articles which explore the relationship between *A Thousand Acres* and *King Lear* include "David Brauner's "Speak Again': The Politics of Rewriting in *A Thousand Acres*," Susan Strehle's "The Daughter's Subversion in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*," and Iska Alter's "King Lear and *A Thousand Acres*: Gender Genre, and the Revisionary Impulse." The theme of incest is taken up by Susan Ayres' "Incest in *A Thousand Acres*: Cheap Trick or Feminist Re-vision?" and Janice Doane and Devon Hodges' book *Telling Incest*. One article that explores both subjects—incest and the relationship to *King Lear*—is Marina Leslie's "Incest, Incorporation, and *King Lear* in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*." Examples of papers on food production and/or the environmental problems of industrial agriculture include Jack Temple Kirby's "Rural Culture in the American Middle West: Jefferson to Jane Smiley," Amy Levin's "Familiar Terrain: Domestic Ideology and Farm Policy in Three Women's Novels about the 1980s," Steven G. Kellman's "Food Fights in Iowa: the Vegetarian Stranger in Recent Midwest Fiction," and Catherine Cowen Olson's "You are What You Eat: Food and Power in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*." For articles on questions the novel raises about figuring the historical past see John Mack Faragher's "The Historical Imagination of *A Thousand Acres*," Mary Paniccia Carden's "Remembering/Engendering the Heartland: Sexed Language, Space, and America's Foundational Fictions in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*," and Sinead McDermott's "Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender in *A Thousand Acres*."

75 See Almila Ozdek's "Coming out of the Amnesia: Herstories and Earth Stories, and Jane Smiley's Critique of Capitalist Ownership in *A Thousand Acres*," Amano Kyoko's "Alger's Shadow in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*," and Faragher's "The Historical Imagination of *A Thousand Acres*."
Initial reviews of Junot Díaz's *Drown* make mention of the absent father as a major theme. David Gates, writing for *The New York Times*, observes, for example, that the narrator Yunior "suffers emotional disfigurement from having been fatherless until the age of 9 . . . and . . . never drops his psychological mask either with his family or the girls he tries to seduce," while Eli Gottlieb, writing for the *Boston Review*, notes that "the father's ghost-presence is the core of the book, a kind of ground tone or ambient noise which shades the narrator's whole childhood." However, despite these nods to the central importance of the absent/present father, the bulk of the criticism on *Drown* has focused on themes other than fatherhood. Critics—Gates and Gottlieb included—have explored the dynamics of immigration to the U.S, particularly for Dominicans, the problems of being torn between two cultures and two languages, the difficulty of developing an identity in the face of colonial subjugation, and the effects of poverty for Dominicans living either on the Island or in the U.S.  

Since much of this criticism focuses on the effects socio-economic conditions have on *Drown's* main characters, most of whom are male, the work scholars have produced so far is useful in helping to understand the economic environment out of which Ramón's absent/present fatherhood grows. Two articles come close to exploring the theme of fatherhood, though neither actually focuses on the father himself. Both articles explore the problem Ramón's son Yunior has constructing a viable masculine identity. In each case the author connects the violence and

76 For articles on immigration, economics, and the Dominican diaspora see, for example, Bridget Kevane's "The Fiction of Junot Diaz: *Drown* (1996)," Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez's "Movin' on up and out: Lowercase Latin@/a Realism in the Works of Junot Diaz and Angie Cruz," and Ylce Irizarry's "Making It Home: A New Ethics of Immigration in Dominican Literature." Jason Frydman includes an interesting meditation on the theme of being torn between two languages in his article "Violence, Masculinity, and Upward Mobility in the Dominican Diaspora: Junot Diaz, the Media, and *Drown.*" Anne Connor's "Desenmascarando A Ysrael: The Disfigured Face as Symbol of Identity in Three Latino Texts," and Matthew L. Miller's "Trauma in Junot Diaz's *Drown*" explore the relationship between economic dependency or colonial subjugation and the problem of establishing an identity.
tension surrounding Yunior's struggles to establish his masculinity to the difficulty Dominican men have succeeding financially. Jason Frydman argues that Yunior is stuck in the ghetto at novel's end because he has been given only two male role models of how to succeed financially: his father's infidelity which allows him to get a green card and bring his family over to the U.S. and his best friend Beto's homosexuality which allows him to break free of the ghetto and go to college. Frydman concludes that Yunior's socio-economic stasis reflects his inability to resolve the "masculinity crisis" precipitated by the absence in his life of positive male heterosexual role models. John Riofrio also sees Yunior and his young male peers as being in crisis over the construction of their masculinity, but he assigns responsibility for this problem to the boys' fathers' literal absence: they are away working in the U.S. This absence, he argues, forces the boys to create their own version of masculinity: "a hyper-masculinity hopelessly disconnected to reality and selfish in the way that only adolescent machismo allows" (27). Riofrio thus situates the difficulty of developing a healthy masculine identity in the oppressive socio-economic world that the Dominican boys, left behind by their fathers, are forced to inhabit.

With the exception of Riofrio, critics have paid very little attention to the dynamics of fatherhood in Drown. And while there is a good degree of attention amongst critics to the hierarchies of oppression that Ramón and his family suffer as a result of their socio-economic status, very few of the critics have written about the specific role that capitalism plays in shaping Ramón's family. My work on Drown explores the connections between these two neglected areas, offering an analysis that puts Ramón's absent presence and the capitalist ideas and practices that are part of the characters' everyday lives together in an attempt to understand the relationship between economics and the philosophy and practice of fatherhood in Díaz's work.
Drown has garnered only a handful of scholarly articles, most of them written since Diaz's second work, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008. In contrast, the scholarship on John Updike's Rabbit series, comprised of four novels and a novella, is voluminous. Rabbit Angstrom is the most famous of Updike's characters and the series in which he appears is arguably the longest and most detailed portrait of a father in U.S. literature, beginning as it does with Rabbit as a young father in 1960 and concluding in 2000 with a retrospective look at Rabbit—dead at this point for ten years—by his now middle-aged son Nelson. Nevertheless, very little of the work done on the Rabbit novels has taken up the question of fatherhood. Critics have tended to focus instead on the intellectual, spiritual, and moral questions they see the books posing as Rabbit struggles with the dilemmas of living in a materialistic, rapidly changing, me-first society. Sex, religion, the struggle to come to terms with one's own mortality, the tapestry of contemporary politics and social history in which the novels are set, and Rabbit's feelings of anxiety, insignificance and alienation in the face of modern American life have received the lion's share of critical attention.

Those critics who do explore fatherhood generally do so by treating it as a metaphor for "headier" intellectual subjects. D. Quentin Miller, for example, links Rabbit's difficulties and unhappiness with fatherhood to the Cold War and the insecurity it and the atomic age inflict upon family life. Once the Soviet Union collapses in 1990, Miller argues, Rabbit is able to make peace with his son and family. In a similar vein, Kerry Ahearn argues that the push-pull that constitutes Rabbit's relationship with his family, adultery being the main vehicle which moves him in and out of it, provides the necessary dialectic or "pair of opposites" which allows Rabbit to break stasis and change as a character and, simultaneously, allows Updike to move his fictional narrative forward. Rabbit's absent/present quality is understood by Ahearn, then, as a
literary or philosophical device which helps both character and author grasp "the truth" not about fatherhood but about life. As one of the few articles which does take a close look at the family dynamics in the Rabbit novels and particularly at the parent-child dynamics is Jack De Bellis' "Oedipal Angstrom." As the title indicates, however, De Bellis explores Rabbit's fatherhood through a Freudian lens.

Two subsets of criticism on the Rabbit novels come closest to my own study. Rabbit's determined pursuit of financial security and status as he climbs out of the working class, his racist views towards African-Americans and other marginalized groups whom he experiences as threats to his security and upward mobility, his sexist view of women and his feelings of being victimized by what he experiences as female-dominated domestic life, have led to an important subset of criticism which ponder the social construction of Rabbit's masculinity. Another subset critics have worked on is the problem of Rabbit's alienated work life. Wesley A. Kort sees work as a major theme in all of Updike's fiction, where a secular world is depicted as leaving characters without clear meaning or a moral compass. As a result, there is a general descent into exploitation and narcissism. Kort explores Rabbit's struggle to find his bearings in the work world including—and Kort is refreshing in seeing this—the work of being a father and of constructing a family. As with the criticism on Drown which also considers the construction of the father's masculinity and his relationship to an alienating work world, the critics working on these themes in Updike's tetralogy rarely consider how Rabbit's understanding and practice of masculinity or his search for meaning in the field of work affect or engender his fathering

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77 See D. Quentin Miller's "Updike's Rabbit Novels and the Tragedy of Parenthood" and Kerry Ahearn's "Family and Adultery: Images and Ideas in Updike's Rabbit Novels."
practices and abilities. Nevertheless, these two veins of criticism offer a helpful platform from which to launch my study of Rabbit's fatherhood.\textsuperscript{78}

The lacuna that exists in the field of literary criticism around the depiction of fatherhood in U.S. literary texts prompts an important question: Can a literary analysis of fictional texts offer an understanding of fathers and fatherhood that the fields of the sociology, history, and psychology cannot? The answer to this question lies in the fact that fatherhood is a social construction. As such, it is a story that society tells itself about how fathers are made and act, a story that is wrapped up in our dreams and desires, with what is thought, imagined, and feared as well as what is expedient or simply convenient for one or another social group to believe as it jockeys for position, power and a chance to shape the future. While literature is not the only locus from which societal stories about fatherhood emerge—indeed, the chicken-and-egg nature of the relationship between culture and socioeconomic structure makes attributing the construction of such stories complicated at best—it is certainly one of the venues where narratives of fatherhood are produced, rehashed, reworked and subjected to a considerable amount of scrutiny.

In the United States, the set of stories society tells itself about fatherhood at any one period in time is particularly complicated because it must concern itself with two emotionally-fruaght subject areas: the intimate bond between father and child and all the murky twists and turns of feeling that necessarily accompanies such a bond and—because the father is the family's designated breadwinner—the American Dream, that nebulous cloud of longing to make something of oneself in the context of a highly competitive capitalist economy which is another

\textsuperscript{78} For a book-length discussion of the construction of masculinity in the Rabbit novels, see Mary O'Connell's \textit{Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma}. For authors who look at Rabbit's work life, see Wesley A. Kort's "Learning to Die" and Chapter Three of Judie Newman's \textit{John Updike} which focuses on the first three Rabbit novels.
locus of deeply confusing, contradictory feelings and values. Literature is uniquely positioned to get at the complicated, emotionally-difficult material out of which our notion of fatherhood is constructed because—both in the writing and the reading of it—literature is a place where authors and readers can step back and view from a different perspective the facts and feelings, unconscious knowledge and official stories that go swirling through our lives. The contemplative space that opens up for both author and reader in a work of fiction and the imaginative syntheses that emerge as words "cook" together on the page, allows writers and readers to go places they might otherwise not. In a society where both the subject of fatherhood and the subject of our economy and its effects on us are riddled with silences and taboos, literature can provide a way into fenced off areas where the social sciences may have a harder time gaining traction. For all these reasons, a study that contemplates the literary figuring of fathers and fatherhood can help us to understand the phenomenon of fatherhood in new and productive ways.

The lack of literary criticism about the theme of fatherhood in American literature, has created blind spots in our literary understanding. The books I study, for example, all offer revisions and/or counter narratives to earlier literary scripts about the absent/present father. They are, in a sense, meta-texts, commenting not only on the story they actually tell about a late twentieth-century father and his family but also on the stories about fathers and families that have come before and are still quite powerfully embedded in our collective consciousness. Without a history of critical work on the theme of fatherhood in American literature, however, it has been easy for contemporary critics to miss these inter-textual conversations. Through my study, I hope to illuminate a trend I have identified in the literary figuring of fathers and fatherhood in late twentieth century American literature, but I also hope that my work will serve

Peter Elbow, in Writing Without Teachers, uses this image of cooking to discuss how the act of writing often allows ideas to blend together on the page in ways that take even the writer by surprise.
to stimulate more critical interest in the theme of fatherhood in earlier periods of American literature.

In general, the narratives about fathers that my novels place under the literary microscope are ones which extol, exonerate, or otherwise lead readers away from a critical contemplation of the absent/present father. In *A Thousand Acres*, for example, Smiley rewrites Shakespeare's *King Lear* scene by scene, creating in the process a critical reappraisal of, as one of Lear's daughters puts it, a father who has "ever but slenderly known himself" (1.1.295-96). Smiley has said that she wrote *A Thousand Acres* because she wanted to get to the minds of adolescent girls first, before they had read *King Lear*; her novel, she hoped, would serve "as a prophylactic" against the insistence on the primacy of the father in family life and "against the guilt about proper daughterhood that I knew *King Lear* could induce" ("Shakespeare" 173).

Set in the late twentieth century, *A Thousand Acres* provides a platform from which to contemplate the figuring of patriarchy in feudal and early modern times, and to consider in what ways the long-ago ideations captured in Shakespeare's play continue to shape our contemporary notions of fathers and their roles. At the same time, the novel turns our attention, albeit more covertly, towards another kind of literary narrative about patriarchal fatherhood, one that is deeply rooted in U.S. literature and popular culture. This "home-grown" narrative depicts happy, harmonious families flourishing under the leadership of kind, patient (though often abstracted or somewhat remote) fathers. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and its sequels is such a narrative. The fact that so many twentieth-century American women writers—Cynthia Ozick, Ann Petry, Sonia Sanchez, Ursula K. Le Guin and Barbara Kingsolver to name a few—have said they were deeply influenced by Alcott's novels is testimony to the enduring influence that this particular
story of family and fatherhood has had on late 20th century American thought and letters. Nearly a century after Alcott, the image of happy, father-headed families continued to capture the popular imagination in television shows like *Father Knows Best*.

Smiley's novel gives voice to the silences she sees both *King Lear* and these happy father-headed family narratives perpetuating. The novel addresses the nostalgic yearnings for a simpler, more socially harmonious lifestyle that such patriarchal-bolstering tales are built upon. The desire for a relationship-centered as opposed to a money-and-thing-centered family life arises in tandem with the rise of capitalism; part of what Smiley's novel teases out is how the feeling of what has been lost in family life, and therefore has become the subject of nostalgia, is tied up with the effects of larger economic structures on family life. Like the fictional narratives of fatherhood Smiley's novel is in conversation with, the economic structures her characters' lives are shaped by—structures that they themselves are not aware of—are part of an older narrative which has been passed down from generation to generation. The story characters have been told by their elders about the economic progress of their family as they pursue the American Dream is so deeply ingrained into their psyches that, as Smiley's main character Ginny says, it feels "like prayers . . . You know. It's good to remember and repeat. You feel good to be a part of that." But then, Ginny tells us—and here is the pivot point from which Smiley's novel pries apart the older stories about both fatherhood and its economic underpinnings and begins to insert a critical view of the conventional narrative—"I saw what my part really was" (342).

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80 Cynthia Ozick, for example, has said, "I read *Little Women* a thousand times. Ten thousand" (xv-vi). For more, see Janice Alberghene's *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination*. 
Junot Díaz, has said that for "every story I write, there's 400 stories read behind it."\(^{81}\)

One set of stories that *Drown* is clearly in conversation with is the narrative of the immigrant father, a story which is central to U.S. fictional portrayals of immigrant life. Díaz's novel contains many of the traditional elements of these previous portrayals. The father in *Drown*, Ramón de las Casas, for example, follows in the footsteps of countless fictional immigrant fathers: he is hardworking, takes risks and makes sacrifices in order to secure a better life for himself and his family in America. Ramón's machismo, his harsh methods of discipline towards his children, and his overall sense of confusion and alienation from American life and culture echoes another important theme in immigrant literature: the rift between the father, an old-world patriarch who is often only a generation or two away from rural life where patriarchal structures are more firmly entrenched and his Americanizing/democratizing/urbanizing children.\(^ {82}\)

In both of these thematic areas, *Drown* re-evaluates the way U.S. fiction has told the story of the immigrant father. Moreover—and this is a deliberate break on Díaz's part from the usual way the story is told—the novel does not confine itself only to the subject of the immigrant experience in the U.S. Rather, as it mulls over the experience and effects of the notion of the American Dream on fathers, families and communities and explores the complex question of how individual and group identity develop with an eye to the role fathers play in that development, the novel takes its readers beyond the usual boundaries of immigrant literature to a re-evaluation of these themes in U.S. literature as a whole.\(^ {83}\)

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\(^{81}\) Diaz was speaking at the Brooklyn Public Library, Dweck Auditorium on Oct. 26th, 2013, an event which I attended. Diaz responded to a request from an aspiring memoirist for writing advice by saying "Read one hundred, a thousand memoirs."

\(^{82}\) Hard working fathers who sacrifice for their families are everywhere in immigrant literature from Jurgis Rudkus in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, to Esperanza's Papa in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. For a novel that details the rift between an old world father and his new world children, see Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers*. 
Magdalena Zaborowska, in her study of East European women’s narratives of immigration to the U.S., observes that dominant U.S. culture has tended to look for "a confirmation of its ideology in the narratives produced by its margin" (32). Thus, she argues, European immigrant narratives that have become part of the canon of twentieth-century immigrant literature have generally been "in tune with patriarchal American culture, which wanted to read in immigrant literature the reflection and continuation of its Founding Fathers’ 'defections' to the New World in search of economic and religious freedom" (20).

The character of U.S. immigrant literature changes in the second half of the twentieth century when, for the first time, the majority of immigrants no longer hail from Europe. According to Gilbert Muller, post World War II immigrant literature still retains the "quest for an American Dream or New World Eden," but, with the influx of immigrants from so many different nations and cultures after the war and particularly after the U.S. immigration law changes of 1965, that quest becomes "more fluid than fixed" (22). Immigrant heroes and heroines, rather than attempting to blend into what appeared to be a monolithic U.S. culture as they might have done in earlier fiction, are depicted in the second half of the twentieth century as forging their identities and making a place for themselves by picking and choosing from both the culture and traditions of the country they left behind and the multicultural smorgasbord of cultures they discover in an increasingly multicultural United States. In general, Muller argues, these works extol the United States as "a magical realm of transformative possibilities that would not have been possible in the more rigid and hierarchical societies that the immigrant protagonists left" (22). The view of America as a land where newcomers can create themselves anew thus continues to resonate in contemporary immigrant literature, with the twist that what

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83 For examples of critics who note these differences in the way Díaz tells the immigrant story, see Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez's "Movin' On Up and Out" and Ylce Irizarry's "Making it Home."
protagonists in postwar works detailing immigrant arrival discover and celebrate is the multicultural landscape of U.S. life where "an even more pristine Paradise—the world's first universal nation" is under construction (Muller 26).\textsuperscript{84} Thomas Ferraro makes the point that the non-European writers appearing on the U.S. literary scene after World War II—writers from the Caribbean, the Spanish Americas and the Far East—are involved in "the business of cultural mediation" meaning that their texts work to explain and, by combating stereotypes, humanize an ethnic group for the larger U.S. reading public (405). Previous to World War II, European ethnic writers had been engaged in a similar project of cultural mediation between their groups and the dominant American culture. In the postwar years, however, perhaps as a result of having been in the U.S. longer, "the primary business" of European immigrant narratives changes, becoming "far less a matter of intergroup representation and far more a matter of intergenerational tribute and reconciliation" (Ferraro 403).

\textit{Drown} tells the story of U.S. immigration and the immigrant experience with a much less salutary eye than many of the twentieth-century texts that Muller and Zaborowska examine. The novel is not the story of a family's slow upward movement towards economic stability or cultural inclusion, nor does it exude a sense of excitement at the possibilities for self-creation that America's multicultural landscape seems to promise in other authors' works that deal with immigration in the post World War II period. It is also not a story of tribute and reconciliation between father and son, though some slight movement in that direction can be discerned. Nevertheless, all of these subjects are central to Díaz's work with the result that \textit{Drown} is a novel

\textsuperscript{84} In his discussion of literature by postwar Hispanic immigrants from the Caribbean to U.S. cities, Muller points to such novels as Oscar Hijuelos' \textit{The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love}, Christine Bell's \textit{The Pérez Family}, Christina García's \textit{Dreaming in Cuban}, Julia Alvarez's \textit{How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents}, and Judith Ortiz Cofer's \textit{The Line of the Sun} to support his thesis that this literature re-mythologizes the American Dream, portraying the city as a site of quest where there is danger but also "exotic avenues of opportunity" (137).
in conversation with other U.S. narratives about immigration and, particularly, in conversation with how other narratives have figured the immigrant father.

In terms of the narrative of upward mobility, just as *A Thousand Acres* calls us to look again at the story of a farm family’s "proud progress" as it scales the mountain of American success, so Díaz’s narrative of the de las Casas family’s immigration to the United States subjects the narrative of immigration—another story one is schooled "to feel good to be a part of"—to critical reappraisal. From the rather haphazard and mixed set of motives that propels Ramón to leave his family and come to the United States to the last view we get of the family in the United States years later where Ramón, his estranged wife, and his son Yunior, now a young man, seem to be either in stasis or moving downward economically and psychologically, the novel surrounds the notion of the American Dream with question marks. The closely-related narrative of the immigrant father whose sacrifices, stick to-it-iveness, especially in the economic realm, and skillful manipulation of the system in order to secure a better future for his family and particularly his children also comes under interrogation. Díaz's interrogation of the father narrative embedded in the immigrant arrival story resonates with and adds new dimensions to the interrogation of the successful, completely mainstream "American" breadwinner father that Smiley fleshes out in *A Thousand Acres*.

*Drown*‘s epigraph, a poem by Gustavo Pérez Firmat, tells of not being able to belong "to English/though I belong nowhere else." *Drown* is not so much about being slung between two languages, however, as it is about being slung between two quite different notions of the self. Yunior, the narrator, seems, at novel's end, to be either a sensitive young man, perhaps even an intellectual, trying to uncover and make sense of his past or a high school dropout turned small-time drug dealer living a dead-end existence. In much the same way, the novel offers two
disparate views of Ramón, Yunior's father. In one, Ramón appears the way Yunior experiences him as a young boy and adolescent—a tyrannical patriarch. In the other, Ramón appears as a working-class everyman, vulnerable and generally powerless as he struggles to "make it" in the exploitative world of work. The bifurcated views of these two characters rests uneasily within the narrative: it's not quite clear whether or how these disparate selves are related or can be resolved. One of the reasons the father and son in this novel do not swing easily into place is because their story is linked to the trauma U.S. imperialism has wrought on the Dominican Republic and its inhabitants. This painful history, which is not acknowledged and therefore not resolved in larger U.S. society, cannot be put to rest within the novel either.

Another reason for the splitting of both father and son into disparate selves is the repression of certain aspects of the self, especially aspects society defines as "feminine." This erasure or dislocation of parts of the self has been the hallmark of successful U.S. manhood for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is what gives Ramón the air of being an absent presence, an air that is being reproduced in Yunior who is unable to find a more positive adult male role model. Díaz's disjointed presentation of the identity of both father and son is in contrast to the general trajectory of postwar immigrant literature where, as Muller observes, the narrative arc has immigrants and their children moving towards a more unified identity, one in which the children especially are able to synthesize aspects of their originating culture, often symbolized by their fathers, with aspects of cultural life in the U.S. This more traditional, rather cheerful narrative of immigrant arrival in the U.S. has the effect of turning the focus away from the father, who is not well-understood partly perhaps because his chief role is to support his sons and daughters, the real heroes and heroines of the piece. In contrast, *Drown*, which circles round and round over the submerged traumas that give the troubled father-son relationship its shape,
slows the narrative down thereby forcing readers to stay on the subject of the father, looking closely at his makeup as well as at the legacy that he bequeaths to the next generation.

In both *A Thousand Acres* and *Drown* the patriarchal father is a tyrant of monstrous proportions. The sense that these men are sadists without empathy or social conscience dominates Ginny and Yunior’s experience of their fathers and colors the early part of each novel. Both men are the unchallenged rulers of their families. Especially when the children are young, elements of myth or magic cling to the larger-than-life images they construct of their dads. Because both fathers mete out physical and emotional abuse to the children, Ginny and Yunior also come to identify their fathers as torturers.

Tyrannical male characters who both mesmerize and terrify are, of course, not new in literature. One place they appear with regularity is the Gothic novel. The abuse that the children in Smiley's and Díaz's novels are subjected to at the hands of a man who, because he is their father, also inspires love and the desire to be loved resonates with the Gothic narrative where a victim who is emotionally involved with the victimizer is trapped, tortured, or in need of rescue. Michelle A. Massé observes that Gothic novels describe the process by which the victim, usually a woman, comes to accept the conflation of love and domination as "normal." The outcome—that the victim "becomes a masochist and assigns subjectivity to another"—is also the predicament Smiley and Díaz's narrators find themselves in as a result of their relationships with their fathers (Massé 3).

When Massé published her excellent study *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*, she was not able to find any novels in the Gothic mode that succeed in
completely breaking the cycle of masochism and domination.\textsuperscript{85} She posits that the "final step in escaping Gothic masochism is the move to other genres that begin by assuming a distinction between domination and love, genres that figure oppression as inevitably as much a social problem as an individual dilemma" (273). Detective and science fiction novels written by women in the 1980s begin, according to Massé, to evince just such a change in the depiction of this sort of oppression.\textsuperscript{86} James Riemer notes that male writers of detective and fantasy and Sci Fi are also beginning to challenge the norms of male gender roles in liberating ways (299).

Smiley and Diaz's novels, by staying within the realm of realistic fiction and exploring the problems posed by the Gothic plot, including the after effects on victims once the victimizer's power is diminished, constitute a different kind of fictional response to the problem of the endlessly repeating cycle of masochism and domination in the lives of women and children. As Massé predicted, key in Smiley and Diaz's successful alteration of the Gothic plot is each novel's ability to cast the oppression the narrators experience as part of a social as well as an individual or familial problem. Both novels break the Gothic mold by bringing the buried historical record of violence and abuse to the surface and showing how the monstrous father at the center of each novel takes part of his shape from the terrors of the nation's past. Thus, in \textit{A Thousand Acres}, Larry's super-sized stature is linked to the violent repression and displacement of the Native Americans who were pushed off the land, the natural flora and fauna that has been all but erased,

\textsuperscript{85} Massé does locate two types of resistance to the Gothic plot in contemporary novels. One form of resistance is when the victim kills the victimizer in such a way as to end the cycle of oppression as happens in Gloria Naylor's \textit{Linden Hills} (1985). In the other form of resistance, the character becomes subversive, usually by splitting herself psychologically into two parts: a self who goes along with the victimizer and does as he wishes and a more hidden self who develops an independent viewpoint, identity, and plan of action as happens in Margaret Atwood's \textit{Lady Oracle} (1976).

\textsuperscript{86} Massé notes that in contemporary detective novels, women detectives not only bring domestic oppression to justice in the public sphere but also make solving the mysteries of relationships a key element of the plot, while, in the realm of science fiction, authors begin to "examine the future implications of domination for not only couples but for the worlds and civilizations in which they might exist" (273). James Riemer notes that male writers of detective and fantasy and Sci Fi are beginning to challenge the norms of male gender roles in liberating ways (299).
the poorer farmers who were gobbled up by their competition, and countless generations of women like Ginny, her mother, and her grandmother whose subjectivities were taken from them and assigned to fathers and husbands. In *Drown* the history that must be recovered and enabled to "speak" is the long history of U.S. military invasions of the Dominican Republic and its ongoing neocolonial manipulations of the country's people and economy which has resulted in the stripping away of the nation's subjectivity, large numbers of displaced individuals who have been pushed off the land, and a vast pool of unemployed or underemployed Dominicans some of whom, like Ramón, seek their fortunes in the United States only to encounter more violence there in the form of racism and economic exploitation. Such a history does not make Ramón a big man, as a similar history makes Larry, because Ramón is not on the dominant or winning side of history as Larry, at least temporarily, is. It does create in Ramón, however, the sense that violent, abusive behavior is acceptable if not laudable behavior, it being both the means and sign of masculine success. Acting in abusive ways towards his wife and children provides Ramón with some of the perquisites of masculine dominance while at the same time allowing him a way to escape or at least cover over the humiliation he experiences in the work world where, as a working-class Dominican man, he is at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

The tyrannical fathers in *Drown* and *A Thousand Acres* are in conversation with other fictional depictions of male domination and violence as well, most notably 1970s fictions of women's liberation which, as Maria Farland has pointed out, are full of "carceral visions of totalizing and totalitarian patriarchal hierarchy" (386). At the time, Gayle Rubin, Adrienne Rich, Juliet Mitchell, and Shulamith Firestone were challenging the idea that patriarchy and the

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87 See Amy S. Gottfried's *Historical Nightmares and Imaginative Violence in American Women's Writings* for a discussion of contemporary U.S. women writers whose work both recovers buried stories of violence in master narratives of Western culture and incorporates new scenes of violence into the text as a way to break with the traditional (patriarchal) way of telling the story of victimization which, Gottfried argues, generally leads to "re-inscriptions of powerlessness" for the victim (2).
oppression of women could be explained by the Marxist notion that patriarchy is rooted in material or economic conditions. Instead, these writers argued that the oppression of women is rooted in the dynamics of male dominance.\(^8\) The theoretical framework these writers proposed, one in which "sex class replaced economic class," had far-reaching effects as the idea that sex oppression could be found in all societies at all times caused feminists throughout the 80s and 90s to focus on the normative construction of sex roles and gender subjectivity—in other words on the personal and psychological dimensions of gender relationships—rather than on the role material and economic conditions play in creating women's oppression (Farland 392). Feminist novels in the 1970s, springing out of this theoretical context, tend towards an extremely pessimistic assessment of male/female relations by plotting stories where relief for their female characters from the horrors of male dominance can be found only through escape into death, madness, asceticism, or a science fiction-type society where gender has been eliminated.\(^8\)

Reflecting the predilection amongst feminists from the 1970s on to view family and love relationships primarily through the prism of the male/female binary, most literary critics who study the tyrannical male oppressor have concentrated on the effects patriarchy has had on women and girls. Díaz's work offers a chance to explore how the dynamics of this sort of "carceral" patriarchy play out on boys and men.

In bringing the social, historical, and economic back into the story of the patriarchal father and his family, Smiley and Díaz have contributed something new to the literary depiction

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\(^8\) For examples of 1970s novels in which there seems to be no end to the oppressive patriarchal nature of contemporary society see Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying: A Novel*. Piercy's main character finds relief only in an alternative future world where gender distinctions have been eliminated, while Jong's character turns to celibacy at novel's end in order to escape the oppression inherent in male/female relationships.
of the tyrannical patriarchal father figure. In both Gothic novels and the feminist liberation novels of the 1970s, the tyrannical patriarch is offered up as a force of nature. There is nothing to understand about the reason he acts as he does: he is simply evil. The focus of the action in these sorts of novels becomes how the victim can escape his clutches. In Smiley and Díaz's works, however, once the actual physical danger the father poses diminishes, the focus of the narrative becomes the victim's attempt to understand the forces that made him. While Ramón and Larry never change or express regret for the harm they have done, their children, as they begin to piece together the deeper contours of their fathers' stories, including especially the socio-economic forces at play in their formation, are able to re-vision their fathers as human beings suffering from severe traumas of their own.

Each author takes a different route in guiding the narrative towards a deeper understanding of the patriarchal father. The difference stems in part from Smiley and Díaz's differing standpoints as well, perhaps, as the different assumptions they can anticipate readers bringing to their works. Smiley, as a white middle-class woman writing about white middle-class protagonists in America's heartland, embeds her narrator in a community that first resists seeing Larry's behavior as problematic. Later, when his monstrousness can no longer be denied, Smiley's narrator struggles against the tendency in herself and others to cast Larry as an anomaly by attributing his bad behavior to the way he is wired as opposed to the way society has wired him. Such a viewpoint relies, of course, upon the notion that individuals are responsible for their own development and fate, or, as Larry is fond of saying, that each person makes 'his own luck' (132). To counteract these tendencies of thought, Smiley makes a very explicit case in the novel for Larry not being an aberration by showing the major role the socio-economic world has played in his formation.
Though Díaz also places Ramón's behavior within the larger socio-economic context, he is much less assertive than Smiley about attributing Ramón's tyrannical tendencies mainly to the social context. This difference reflects the fact that his novel takes as its starting point a different set of concerns and preconceptions about his readership. As has already been mentioned, there are numerous ways that *Drown* complicates the literary/political expectations readers of American immigrant novels bring to his work. The tendency to position a character like Ramón first and foremost as the victim of an oppressive socio-political system is one such expectation which the novel complicates by essentially saying to its readers "Yes, but. . . ." Instead of emphasizing the sledgehammer of larger economic forces shaping Ramón, Díaz, careful lest these forces become the default explanation for Ramón's behavior, focuses readers' attention on the choices Ramón himself has made, choices which have shaped his life even as he is also shaped by the dominant society. Thus, though taking a different set of stereotypes and preconceptions as his starting point than Smiley does, Díaz, by not allowing Ramón's individuality or his responsibility for his actions to be swept under the rug, also creates a father character that readers must pause and look at more closely, a father who readers can't pigeon-hole into the slot of monster or victim and then quickly move on, but are forced to think about more deeply.  

Critics Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Saez, writing in 2007, suggest that one reason for relatively little being written on *Drown* in the first decade after its publication is Díaz's writing strategy of narrative "opacity" which prevents "easy surface readings" (par. 3). The difficulty of parsing the work's meaning, they argue, is an attempt on Diaz's part to veil the work's "political project . . . a politics of oblique critique, one that [seeks to push the Dominican] community toward a potentially painful recognition of its limits and potential." Limits identified by Dalleo and Saez as part of Díaz's political project in *Drown* include a lack of solidarity with fellow residents of the "ghetto," the lure of consumerism, and fantasies of upward mobility that debilitate characters and make them feel like failures. For other critics who have identified *Drown* as a response to traditional U.S. narratives about immigration, see Bridget Kevane's "The Fiction of Junot Díaz: *Drown* (1996)" and Ylce Irizzary's "Making it Home: A New Ethics of Immigration in Dominican Literature."
attributes Ramón's abusive treatment of his family to the racial and economic oppression he himself has suffered at the hands of the dominant society works to keep readers from seeing the agency that individual men and disenfranchised groups possess.

From whichever way Smiley and Díaz approach the conundrum of how individuals and society shape each other, the effect of their approaches results in the same end: the fathers become more human. At the beginning of each novel, the father is remote and unapproachable, a larger-than-life figure whose power and status resides partly in the vigilant silence he maintains over his thoughts and feelings. As each narrator digs deeper and something of the father's inner life and past makes its way into the narrative, our view of the father begins to change: no longer simply a tyrant or victim or hero, he appears more faceted and so is more interesting to look at. By novel's end, though there are still great gaps in our understanding, our sense of each father and his story has been complicated and it is possible to identify with him as a fellow human being, flawed and vulnerable as we all are.

While Smiley's novel tells the story of the absent/present father from the daughter's point of view and Diaz's novel tells the story from the point of view of the son, Updike's novels about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom tell the story of the absent/present father from the point of view of the absent/present father himself. With the exception of a few strategic sections where another character's point of view is slipped in, Updike uses a close third person narration to tell Rabbit's story. This choice, which contrasts sharply with the first person narratives that Smiley and Díaz construct, creates a certain distance between the reader and Rabbit, a distance which recreates for us the difficulty Rabbit himself has in fully accessing or understanding the story of his own life. Nevertheless, though Rabbit's life is told from a slight remove, the novels still give readers the chance to get much closer to the mindset of an absent/present father than is usually the case in a
fictional work. Rabbit is a sort of native informant whom we follow around: he can show and
tell us about his habits and practices, but because he is both immersed in his culture and because
he is only minimally self-reflective, it falls to us, as readers, to make sense of what we have been
allowed to see and hear.

The never-quite-fully conscious and therefore never-quite-fully present character of the
narration gives the Rabbit novels a dancing about the edges quality which perfectly mirrors the
major conflict in Rabbit's life: his desire to both have a family and to be entirely free of it.
Throughout four novels and across three decades, though it takes different forms as conditions in
the country change and as Rabbit ages, Rabbit never loses the feeling that family life and
particularly fatherhood is a trap (he compares becoming a parent to being "as terrible as pushing
somebody into a furnace") which keeps him away from the "something that wants to find [him],"
the something out there that is better, more meaningful than family life (Rich 165; Run 107).

As already noted, the male flight from domesticity is both an extremely prominent theme
in American literature and the subject of a great deal of critical commentary. Updike's series of
novels on Rabbit Angstrom is in conversation with this long tradition of literary discourse on the
subject of men on the run. While much critical commentary takes the tack that the urge men
have to get out on the road is a reflection of America's most deep-seated and laudatory values—
freedom, for example, or the spirit of individual creativity and innovation—Updike puts the
cautionary brakes on these assumptions by focusing in the Rabbit series on what is lost or left
behind when men run. His first Rabbit novel—Rabbit Run (1960)—grew directly out of
Updike's concerns about the then contemporary literary incarnation of a glorification of men on
the lam from family life: the beat writers of the 1950s. Here is Updike's reflection on the
relationship between Jack Kerouac's On the Road (1957) and Rabbit, Run:
I read [On the Road] with some antagonism because it seemed to me to be so very unreal, so very evasive—about these more or less privileged people zipping back and forth across the country with no visible means of support. And I was trying to make the good Protestant point that we're all involved with our fellow man, and we're all members of families, and so the basic image of [Rabbit, Run] is of a man running or leaving or going on the road and disrupting his own family. (Plath 224)

In another interview, Updike elaborates:

[T]here is a case to be made for running away from your wife. In the late Fifties beatniks were preaching transcontinental travelling as the answer to man's disquiet. And I was just trying to say: "Yes, there is certainly that, but then there are all these other people who seem to get hurt." That qualification is meant to frame a moral dilemma. (Picked-Up 502)

This moral dilemma is at the center of the Rabbit novels. The people who get hurt include Rabbit's wife Janice, his son Nelson, and his infant daughter Rebecca who Janice, drinking heavily after having been abandoned by Rabbit, accidentally drowns in the bath. In Rabbit Redux (1971), the second novel in the series, an 18-year-old runaway hippie named Jill who functions in some ways as a surrogate daughter to Rabbit though they are also lovers, dies when Rabbit fails to protect her from his politically conservative neighbors. Updike explains her death in this way:

The cost of the disruption of the social fabric was paid, as in the earlier novel, by a girl. Iphigenia is sacrificed and the fleet sails on, with its quarreling crew. If [Rabbit] seems hard-hearted, 'hardness of the heart' was what his original epigraph was about. (Hugging 858-59)

The quarreling crew that sails on in the ancient story of Iphigenia, of course, is Agamemnon and his men, bound for their adventures in Troy. Updike's reading of this earlier literary father-daughter pair is that Iphigenia's death is easily erased by her hard-hearted father who focuses more on what will smooth his going than on the wreckage he has left behind. The
problem of the daughter sacrificed on the altar of the father's enormous appetite and needs, is one theme that Updike pursues throughout the Rabbit series. The other is the deleterious effects that Nelson, Rabbit's son, suffers as a result of Rabbit's restless masculine pursuit of "more," a pursuit that, shaped by the overall ethos of capitalism in which he is immersed and which has played such a large role in structuring the shape of his masculinity, has Rabbit turning even his only son into a competitor to be bested.

Though the influence is not explicit the way it is in *A Thousand Acres*, Updike's Rabbit novels meditate on some of the same themes Shakespeare explores in *King Lear*: Rabbit knows himself only "slenderly" and he is so enthralled by acquiring and managing material wealth and social status that he often falls prey, as does Lear, to mistaking appearance for reality. Like Lear, Rabbit learns far too late (if, in fact, he actually learns at all) what is truly important when it comes to human relationships in general and relationships with one's children in particular. Just as Lear has a blind spot when it comes to seeing his role in his family's strife, famously declaring himself more sinned against than sinning, Rabbit routinely casts himself as the victim in the traumas and dramas that permeate his domestic life. He experiences his son Nelson, for example, from the child's earliest years on, as a usurper trying to crowd Rabbit out and take over.

Like *A Thousand Acres* and *Drown* (and arguably *King Lear* as well), the Rabbit novels trace the decline of patriarchal fatherhood: the fathers in these works lose control over family members and also—not coincidentally—over the public sphere where the wealth that supports each family is produced. All three fathers are motivated in the beginning of their working lives by a belief in the American Dream, where the Dream is conflated with the acquisition of material wealth. The quest each man undertakes to make money—and thereby rise in social status—takes up large amounts of their mental, emotional and physical energy. Their preoccupation with this
quest and the energy it takes to sustain is what gives their relationships to their families and particularly to their children its absent/present quality. In the end, however, the material legacy each breadwinning father manages to cobble together and pass on to the next generation is quite small, especially when measured against the hopes with which each father began. This is particularly so in the case of Smiley and Diaz's narrators, who are left, at the end of each novel, nearly destitute, their low economic status reflecting the downward mobility of the U.S. population as a whole in the last decades of the twentieth century. Because Rabbit manages, with the help of the money his wife brings from her family into the marriage, to establish a foothold in the middle class, Rabbit's son Nelson is left with slightly more material resources than either Ginny and Yunior. Still, for a complicated set of reasons having partly to do with Rabbit and Nelson's extremely troubled relationship as well as with Nelson's own panicky feelings about becoming a father, the wealth Rabbit is so triumphant about having accumulated in the late 1970s, begins to slip away from the family again by the late 1980s, leaving Nelson, like so many other baby boomers in literature and life during these years, on a downwardly mobile trajectory. The inability of each father to pass on to his children the wealth and social standing he attained at the apex of his working career is both a cause and another sign of patriarchal fatherhood's decline.

Because the Rabbit novels explore in detail the contours of white, middle-class, suburban family life, they add an important dimension to my study of the absent/present breadwinning father. Suburbs develop in the United States around the middle of the nineteenth century when wealthy individuals, seeking isolation from the lower-class and immigrant populations swelling

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91 In addition to having been given more cultural capital than Ginny or Yunior because of his suburban middle-class upbringing, Nelson appears to be doing slightly "better" materially because we get our final glimpse of him in *Rabbit Remembered* (1999) which is set ten years after Rabbit has died: thus, Nelson has had more time than Smiley and Diaz's protagonists to process his relationship with his father and his society and to figure out a way forward for himself.
the cities, begin to create exclusive residential districts beyond the reach of the hoi polloi. After World War II, middle class families move into suburban areas in increasing numbers with the end effect that by the end of the twentieth century, more Americans live in suburbs than in either urban or rural areas.  

The transformation into "a suburban nation" has, as Robert Beuka points out, "engendered profound . . . cultural effects" one of which has been the proliferation of suburban narratives over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth century in which suburban life becomes synonymous with the middle class (2). This outpouring of literature about suburban life, especially in the postwar years, reflects both the large percentage of the population that has experienced life in the suburbs and the tendency, true of fictional portrayals of family life since at least the advent of the Industrial Revolution, to write the middle-class experience of family life large while pushing the depictions of lower or working-class family life to the periphery. The effect of this skewing of perspective, in which suburban life stands in as a marker for the state of the American family in general, has been to give the impression that the middle-class story of family life is the story of every family. Updike's novels about Rabbit who is widely described by critics as an American Everyman thus joins a large ongoing literary conversation about suburban middle-class family life.

Urban historian Robert Fishman has noted that the classic pre-war suburb, populated by quite wealthy individuals, has left a "dual legacy": "It is first a monument to bourgeois civilization at its most prosperous and self-confident . . . but it is also a testimony to bourgeois

92 According to census data, in 1960 33% of the U.S. population lived in suburbs; that percentage had risen to 43% by 2000 (Beuka 245, n.2). See Robert Fishman's Bourgeois Utopias for a thorough history of the development of the suburbs in England, France, and America. Fishman, writing in 1987, sees the suburbs in the postwar period developing into something he calls "technoburbs" where, as technology and other changes create a more decentralized landscape, residents no longer have to commute to the urban center for work, services, and cultural life.
anxieties, to deeply buried fears . . . [including] a contempt or hatred for the 'others' who inhabit the city" and worries about the unstable and uncontrollable nature of the economic base upon which the wealth of the bourgeoisie is built—the market economy (154). Robert Beuka observes that a "binary way of thinking" (7) about the suburbs has pervaded both popular and scholarly circles in America since at least the postwar years: on the one hand, the suburbs evoke utopian visions of the American Dream where, in the midst of washing machines and barbeque grills and other markers of material prosperity and comfort, harmonious family and community life flourishes; on the other hand, the suburbs evoke a dystopian vision "of a homogenized, soulless, plastic landscape of tepid conformity, an alienating 'noplace,'" where men, forced to conform, are emasculated, where women, suffering from "the problem that has no name," are depressed, and where those who are different are beaten up both physically and emotionally (Beuka 4).

Fictional narratives set in suburbia reflect this tendency to split off and repress one or another aspect of suburban life. Fishman observes, for example, that the tension between the appearance of solid confidence and family togetherness projected by enthusiasts and residents of the classic American suburb and the "deep anxiety over the reality of its values," has resulted in "the great suburban theme in serious American fiction [being] the breakup of the family" (153). Beuka, looking carefully at postwar fictional narratives of suburban life in the U.S., notes that the tendency is to either depict the suburbs as a happy place devoid of serious problems or, on the other end of the spectrum, to depict it as a nightmarish place of detention and arrested development. The majority of suburban fiction over the past half century, according to Beuka, is made up of the former: "lightweight comedies of suburban manners, a breezy but forgettable

93 For more on bourgeois worries about economic instability and the effect of such instability on the development of suburbs, see Fishman's Chapter Four "Urbanity versus Suburbanity."
'tradition' ranging from John Marquand's satirical country club sketches and Max Shulman's suburban spoofs of the 1950s to any number of recent titles that continue the surface-level satirizing of suburbia" (12). By staying on the surface, these portraits of suburban life work to shore up the status quo and, as Beuka astutely points out, make serious consideration "of white, middle-class, family-centered American life . . . seem superfluous at best, if not downright repugnant" (12). Against this culture of cheerful denial, a smaller group of narratives about suburban life—Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) and the short stories of John Cheever, for example—depict an ugly underbelly to suburban life by highlighting the spirit-deadening effect of conformity and showing the violence in store for anyone or any economic or racial group that is unable to fit in. Television shows and films from the 1950s on divide along the same lines with shows like *Father Knows Best* and its successors presenting suburbia through a light comedy of manners and films like *The Graduate* (1967), or, more recently, *The Truman Show* (1998) and *American Beauty* (1999) painting suburbia and the suburban family as a dystopia.  

Updike's Rabbit tetralogy breaks with the general tradition of narratives that either idealize or demonize suburban life. Instead of depicting the suburbs and, by extension, white, middle-class family life as either utopian or dystopian, Updike paints his portrait of suburbia in shades of gray. In this way he turns the task of evaluating suburban, middle-class family life back on his readers to sort out and make sense of the confusing contradictions inherent in the subject. Such a move on Updike's part is in line with his philosophical assertion, previously quoted, that "we're all involved with our fellow man, and we're all members of families": just as Updike urges us to explore men's restless desire to leave their families and go adventuring from

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94 Not coincidentally, the film *American Beauty* makes a cameo appearance in the final text of the Rabbit series, the novella *Rabbit Remembered*. 
the perspective of the family members who are left behind, he also encourages us to look with a less stereotypical mindset at the middle-class family lifestyle that other suburban narratives have typically encouraged us to either desire or disparage (Plath 224). The landslide of details Updike employs as he tracks Rabbit's everyday thoughts and actions sets up in readers something like the sensation of overload and confusion Rabbit himself experiences as he confronts the contradictory state of middle-class breadwinning. The novels don't allow us to escape that contradictory state: instead of getting to follow Rabbit lighting out for the proverbial territory, we are stuck with him in the suburbs where we encounter what gets left out of the narrative of family life when the male protagonist is allowed, as he is in so many other American novels, to go off adventuring. We are also, over the long course of the Rabbit tetralogy, brought face to face with our own unconscious complicity with the bipolar narrative of white, middle-class life—both the way we covet that lifestyle and family configuration and the way we scornfully look down upon and distance ourselves from it.

The Rabbit novels also participate in the ongoing conversation about fathers in postwar American literature who are violent, sadistic, or otherwise act in monstrous ways towards their children by widening the lens to include an exploration of the way class, particularly middle-class aspirations and ideals, inflects men's relationships to their offspring. A clear difference emerges in fathering styles, for example, between the fathers who work with their hands to produce things, as both Larry and Ramón do, and a father like Rabbit who has moved into the postindustrial middle-class workforce, where he is a salesman and, eventually, manager of a Toyota franchise. The style of parenting Rabbit adopts follows the outlines of what family historians have termed the "New Fatherhood," a style which arose in the 1920s and 30s, partly as a result of the corporatization of the work force and the shift in the key economic function of the
American family from production to consumption. Features of the New Fatherhood include fathers playing more of a role in their children's everyday lives than they previously played, paying careful attention to children's psychological development including to the deleterious effect that father absence might have on that development, and operating less as disciplinarians and more as "pals." As the century unfolds, this style of parenting becomes a key middle-class marker. Rabbit's demeanor within the family, influenced as it is by a more psychologically-oriented approach to parenting, is not as overtly tyrannical and domineering as are the fathers in Smiley and Diaz's works—Rabbit doesn't beat or sexually abuse his children—but the effects of his actions as he sulks or passively resists or finds countless tiny ways to ignore or escape his children nevertheless has extremely damaging consequences, the death of Rabbit's infant daughter Rebecca in *Rabbit, Run* being one of the most terrible.

An important literary predecessor for Updike's Rabbit series is Sinclair Lewis' novel *Babbitt* (1922) where the eponymous protagonist, a New Father striving to maintain his middle-class status, is unavailable to both himself and his children. Shortly after publishing *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), Updike remarked that while writing this novel—the third in the Rabbit series—he "worked through *Babbitt* as diligently as he had worked up Toyota dealerships" (Light 487). In fact, one of the two epigraphs for the novel is taken from a speech that Babbitt gives at the annual dinner of the Zeni Real Estate Board on the subject of "Our Ideal Citizen." Here is the epigraph:

> At night he lights up a good cigar, and climbs into the little old 'bus, and maybe cusses the carburetor, and shoots out home. He mows the lawn, or sneaks in some practice putting, and then he's ready for dinner.

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95 See LaRossa's *The Modernization of Fatherhood* and Robert Griswold's *Fatherhood in America* for more on the "New Father" and the relationship between this style of parenting and socio-economic phenomena like work and class.
Babbitt continues on in his speech to describe the folksy after-dinner activities this "Sane Citizen" and his family might undertake. The man then "goes happily to bed, his conscience clear, having contributed his mite to the prosperity of the city and to his own bank-account" (153). Babbitt ends with a definition of "the ideal of American manhood and culture":

[It isn't] a lot of cranks sitting around chewing the rag about their Rights and their Wrongs, but a God-fearing, hustling, successful, two-fisted Regular Guy . . . who belongs to the Boosters or the Rotarians . . . or any one of a score of organizations . . . and whose answer to his critics is a square-toed boot that'll teach the grouches and smart alecks to respect the He-man and get out and root for Uncle Samuel, U.S.A.! (158)

One of the working titles Lewis had for Babbitt was a "A He-man" and indeed attention to the construction of a public masculine He-man persona and to the dilemma this persona poses for men because it ignores or attempts to give the "square-toed boot" to all that doesn't fit its narrow definition of manhood is a central subject of the novel.96 Despite his assertion that the He-man is a "Sane Citizen" who goes to sleep with a clear conscience, Babbitt himself is deeply troubled and lacks a unified sense of self. In fact, he is, Lewis shows us, at war with himself, split between conforming to the status quo so that he can reap the benefits of wealth and middle-class social standing such conformity bestows and rebelling against the standardization that being a "He-man" implies in an attempt to develop his own individual identity. Like countless male American protagonists before him, he makes attempts to get away from the confining code of social conduct that constricts his life and seems to take most of the joy out of work and home: he daydreams of rendezvous with the fairy child who "[w]here others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth," he takes up with a group of Bohemians, begins an affair, stands up

96 See Clare Virginia Eby's "Babbitt as Veblenian Critique of Maleness" for more on Lewis' portrayal of the construction of manhood during this period in American history. For "A He-man" as Lewis' working title for Babbitt, see Eby 21 n. 6. Another of Lewis' working titles was "A Good Practical Man" (Eby 22 n.27).
to the city fathers by refusing to join the Good Citizens' League, and strikes out not once but twice on the most classic male escape strategy of them all: a trek into the woods in the company of other men (6). In the end, however, societal pressure and the desire to hang on to his middle-class status proves too much for Babbitt: he knuckles under, joins the Good Citizens' League, and, with relief and gratitude, finds himself welcomed back into the fold of upstanding middle-class men.

Society puts Babbitt in a series of double binds. In order to maintain his financial and social standing in the Zenith hierarchy, Babbitt has to repress or redirect his thoughts, feelings and perceptions. His success as a businessman, for example, is directly dependent on his being willing to engage in corrupt or unethical business deals even as he is lauded as a "good citizen." He massages his conscience by telling himself that someday, when he is more secure financially, he will stop his corrupt dealings and "leave a clean business to his grandchildren" (322). Having to constantly ride herd on his inner life, including having to contain or deny his feelings of unhappiness and the terrible sense that his youthful dreams of living a more engaged and creative life have been thwarted, is not only tiring but has the effect of making Babbitt a stranger to himself: he is often confused about his feelings or perceptions and this confusion fuels feelings of insecurity, paranoia, and victimization and makes it difficult for him to forge anything more than shallow relationships with family members and friends. The "Standardized Citizen" Babbitt lauds in his speech turns out to be, just as the malapropism "standardized" implies, a mass-produced shell of a man, not well-formed inside because he has not been able, amidst the distracting chatter of a society rooted in deception, materialism, and false consciousness, to develop a more authentic identity.
A recurring criticism of Sinclair Lewis' work is that his protagonists' inner lives are not convincing. Though Lewis tried to address these concerns while he was writing *Babbitt*, the critical judgment is that Babbitt comes across as a cardboard figure made up of disparate parts that do not cohere. That Lewis wasn't able to create a more fleshed-out inner life for Babbitt reflects not only his own limitations as a fiction writer but also the difficulty of the subject matter itself: how does one create a coherent inner life for an alienated character who has been split off by society into parts and so, at any given moment, must deny and repress a great deal of his thoughts and perceptions?

*Rabbit is Rich* revisits many of the themes in *Babbitt*, allowing us to consider what the two texts, one coming close to the beginning of the century and one close to the end, can tell us about the trajectory middle-class family life, breadwinning, and fatherhood has taken over the intervening 60 years. Both protagonists are salesmen which, as Lewis' narrator is quick to point out, means their work "[makes] nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry" (6). Both have succeeded in rising into the middle class where, immersed in the meaningless babble of status and material goods, they continue doggedly to pursue the elusive American Dream and its promise of happiness. Both attempt to rebel against the stultifying conformity that seems inherent in being a good provider and family man, and both experience themselves as victims of an over-feminized, female-dominated world. Neither is able to eschew the confusing messages and the "shoulds" and "don'ts" of the surrounding society and develop an independent sense of self.

97 T.K. Whipple observes there is "no 'real' Babbitt. There are several Babbits who have never been integrated." Vernor L. Parrington, notes that Lewis's work is divided between realism and satire and compares Lewis' work to sketching in a morgue. H.L. Mencken observes that Babbitt's character never develops while Mark Shorer describes the novel as a series of sociological set pieces. Other critics note that Babbitt seems split in two: Frederick Hoffman, for example, sees a Menckenese "boob" and a "doubting Babbitt." For more, see Clare Virginia Eby's "Babbitt as Veblenian Critique of Manliness" (21 n. 3) and Martin Light's "Editor's Preface," especially 487-89, where he discusses the problems Lewis had in giving Babbitt a convincingly round inner life.
One place the texts differ is Updike's ability to flesh out the inner life of Rabbit in a way that Lewis could not. Rabbit is a more developed character than Babbitt partly because Updike's skills as a realistic writer are so well honed. The difference in the degree of rendering of Rabbit's life also has to do with the historical period in which Rabbit makes his appearance. As I have already observed, texts towards the end of the twentieth century begin to pay closer attention to the inner workings of the absent/present father. Further, Rabbit's inner life feels more consolidated and integrated than Babbitt's because Updike doesn't start from the perspective, so pervasive in Lewis' work, that his character is representative of a sociological type. In fact, as a more politically conservative writer, Updike is not interested in pointing out capitalism's systemic flaws, at least not overtly. The intellectual/satiric brush that Lewis uses to render Babbitt allows us to step outside the character and see just how he fits into the larger society and why he and so many others live lives of quiet desperation. Updike, in contrast, never allows his readers to step very far away from Rabbit's own convoluted consciousness. On the one hand, this makes Rabbit a more rounded character because we are intimately involved at all times with his thoughts, feelings and reactions and feel a certain empathy, even compassion for him. On the other hand, the close third person narrative point of view Updike employs to describe Rabbit means that the problem of understanding the absent/present father who censors and represses his thoughts and feelings and who is unable to process things accurately, if at all, remains.

Instead of intellectually pegging Rabbit or judging him from above, Updike turns the question of Rabbit's inner life back on his readers who must wrestle close up with what to make of how Rabbit thinks and the confusing, contradictory, often hurtful things he does to himself and to his family. Immersed in the gray area that is Rabbit's life without much of a guide, readers have to work hard to figure out what story Rabbit's life tells about fatherhood and particularly
about the absent/present father. In this way, Updike's texts, like the texts of my other two authors, encourage readers to slow down and take a second or third look not only at Rabbit, but also, through contrast, at the more conventional ways the literary story of the middle-class breadwinning father has typically been told.

Befitting a more optimistic time in American history, Lewis can still imagine a happy ending if not for Babbitt, for his son Ted, who is deeply in love with his bride and excited about the work he wants to do in the world even though it doesn't conform to middle-class ideals. At mid-century, Biff, Willy Loman's son in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), also seems poised at play's end, having learned from his father's mistakes vis-à-vis work, family, and notions about the American Dream, to establish a happier, more authentic life for himself, though his chances of success are more sketchy and tentative than Babbitt's son Ted. Rabbit's son Nelson, in stark contrast, seems to be stuck in a wasteland, going nowhere. Unlike Ted, he has no idea what he wants to do in life. Like his dad, Nelson is timid and nervous and has made lots of false starts: he has embezzled money from the family business, suffers from drug addiction and is in a marriage that lacks both vitality and romance. In the last scene of Lewis' novel, Babbitt gives Ted encouragement to do what he wants, no matter how unorthodox it is saying "I'll back you. . . . Don't be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself, the way I've been. Go ahead, old man! The world is yours!" (326). In contrast, instead of a blessing the final scene between Rabbit and Nelson in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), when Rabbit is on his deathbed, involves Rabbit figuratively shrugging his shoulders as he says, "Well, Nelson, all I can tell you is, it isn't so bad" (425).

Updike is writing at a time when the world of work and men's status in it is far grimmer than when Lewis was writing in the early 1920s. The lack of a better alternative or a brighter
future for Nelson reflects the general feeling that the American promise of progress and prosperity has ground to a halt by the 1990s, if not before. The sense in the first half of the twentieth century that there was a progressive alternative to capitalism or, at least, that its worst excesses could be moderated has disappeared from the popular radar by century's end. A life not dictated by money, materialism, inequality, and incessant, ruthless competition is hard to envision. Rabbit's anxiety, his feeling that he must constantly be on guard in order to maintain his status and protect his wealth from all takers—even his son—reflects the siege-like mentality that infuses this period of late capitalism and that especially seems to infect men. 98

In all three of the works I examine, breadwinning fathers and their children—characters who, in an earlier time, would be inflected with a sense of purpose and optimism—are left disoriented as the trickle-down benefits of capitalism, upon which the American Dream is based, dry up. Like a ghost, the Dream hovers over men's lives, but the notion that it can be brought down to earth and back to life has receded.

As far back as 1844, Karl Marx begins to write about the effects of capitalism on men's inner lives, pointing to the problem of workers splitting off or alienating a part of themselves as well as to the problem of the fetishization of commodities. Because the worker's activity under capitalism "belongs to another; it is the loss of his self," he writes (74), noting that a further consequence of man being estranged from the product of his labor and from himself is "the estrangement of man from man" (77). 99 In The Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), Marx,

98 Susan Faludi argues in Stiffed that by the 1990s American men, having been pushed into social and occupational obsolescence by the socio-economic changes of the postwar decades, are feeling an extreme degree of stress, anger and frustration.

99 From The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. These and all subsequent quotes from Marx, unless noted, are from Robert Tucker's The Marx-Engels Reader.
still thinking about the effects of economics on intimate life, observes that the "bourgeoisie . . . has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (476).

Robert Stone has said that Updike's work "examines our struggle to maintain a viable center for our inner life while enduring the most revolutionary force in history—American capitalism." In fact, all three of the works I examine in this dissertation share that concern, taking as their subject, the member of the family most affected and inflected by the capitalist work world—the breadwinner father.

It is time now to take an in-depth look at each of these breadwinning fathers. I begin, in the next chapter, with Larry Cook, the tyrannical patriarch of Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. 
ON THE THRESHOLD:
BREADWINNING, CAPITALISM AND THE ABSENT/PRESENT FATHER
IN THE WORKS OF THREE LATE 20TH-CENTURY U.S. NOVELISTS

by

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Chapter Three

OBSIDIAN SHARDS:

PIECING TOGETHER PATRIARCHY, CAPITALISM
AND THE STORY OF THE ABSENT/PRESENT FATHER
IN JANE SMILEY’S A THOUSAND ACRES

Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?
—Lear King Lear

I can remember when I saw it all your way! The proud progress from Grandpa Davis to Grandpa Cook to Daddy. When ‘we’ bought the first tractor in the county, when ‘we’ built the big house . . . . But then I saw what my part really was. . . . You see this grand history, but I see blows . . . . Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own? . . . . No. I think he had lessons, and those lessons were part of the package, along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what, poisoning the water and destroying the topsoil and buying bigger and bigger machinery, and then feeling certain that all of it was ‘right,’ as you say.
—Ginny A Thousand Acres

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.
—Karl Marx "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte"

I: INTRODUCTION

Jane Smiley’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel A Thousand Acres (1991) is the fictional memoir of narrator Ginny Cook Smith’s painful awakening to the consequences of having acted first as a “good” daughter” and then as a “good” wife in a patriarchal American farm family. The novel recounts the events of a few fateful months in 1979 when Ginny is thirty-six years old and
her aging father Larry Cook cedes control of the farm to Ginny, her sister Rose, and their two husbands. Left out of the transfer is the youngest daughter, Caroline. Like so many family farms caught up in the storm of “expand or die” economics sweeping over the Midwest during these years, the farm takes on too much debt after it passes to Ginny’s generation and goes under, succumbing to the auction hammer in the early 1980s. The new owner—the Heartland Corporation—quickly razes all three of the farm’s houses and most of its barns in order to maximize production. A land that once teemed with people and families is wiped clean: “No lives are lived any more within the horizon of your gaze,” Ginny tells us at novel’s end (368).

_A Thousand Acres_ is a novel about inheritance: how to accept “in the right spirit,” as Ginny puts it, “a destiny that we never asked for, that was our father’s gift to us” is at the heart of this beautiful and searing work (34, 220). Overtly, Ginny and her family are wrestling with the age-old problem of succession on a family farm, a problem complicated by the fact that the family has no sons and an overabundance of daughters. Underneath the story of this particular farm family, Smiley has laid an even larger succession plot, one that tells the story of how social and economic structures get both passed on and transformed as they pass from one generation to the next.

A farm in the remote prairie-pothole region of Iowa during the 1970s would seem, at first glance, an extremely foreign setting to most U.S. readers in the early 1990s when the novel was first published. Today’s readers might find it an even more exotic setting as the percentage of the population engaged in farming continues to decline.¹ In fact, like the vanished farm family that Ginny reconstructs in her memoir, the socio-economic forces described in the novel have mostly

¹ In an article written for _Sierra_ magazine in 1994, Smiley points out that “[t]he enormous superstructure of American society rests on a tiny point—the point where fewer and fewer farmers with larger and larger machines mine as much food as they can out of fields that are less and less what they once were.”
passed out of contemporary life—patriarchy having generally been replaced in U.S. society by male domination and its corollary, a growing feminist movement, and the pre- and early industrial stages of capitalism that the Cook family farm exemplifies having been largely replaced by postindustrial and corporate capitalism. Nevertheless, the psychological and the material effects of these earlier socio-economic forms can still be felt today. Smiley’s novel is an extended exploration of the inter-relationship of patriarchy and capitalism and, most particularly, of the way that these two forces continue to haunt the landscape of contemporary family life.\footnote{There is debate about whether capitalism and patriarchy are part of the same system of gender domination or whether they are separate systems that, at times, conflict with one another. For examples of each approach, see the series of articles grouped under the title “What Comes After Patriarchy?” which Teresa Meade has edited for \textit{Radical History Review}. Smiley’s novel allows us to explore the inter-relationship of these two systems.}

\textit{A Thousand Acres} allows us to explore from the inside the process by which people become participants, even cheerleaders, in economic, social, and psychological structures that render them subordinated and voiceless. Though the novel tells us most about what it has been like to be a daughter under patriarchy and capitalism, the other numb place into which this novel sends blood coursing is the silent, inscrutable figure of the father who runs his home as if it were part feudal fiefdom, part bourgeois business.

Ginny’s survival—both psychological and physical—depends upon her being able to move beyond the confines of the traditional succession plot her father offers her. As she breaks the mesmerizing spell her father exerts and begins to decode the power structure in which he is embedded and from which he has drawn his gargantuan shape and sustenance, what Ginny discovers is that she must give up her inheritance—both the material goods her father sought to bestow upon her and the ideas and social arrangements that went along with them.

At the end of her memoir, Ginny catalogues what she has inherited from her life on the farm. Much of what she lays claim to is intangible: “solitude,” “regret,” “the eyes to see” how
humans are degrading the environment, how women and men are shaped by their circumstances, and how the past is “lodged” in the present (368-70). Of all her non-material inheritances “the gleaming obsidian shard [she safeguards] above all others” is being able to imagine what her father “probably chose never to remember—the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed . . . like the very darkness” (370-71).

The “unthinkable urge” Ginny refers to is the incest that Ginny’s father perpetrates first upon her and then upon her younger sister Rose during their teenaged years. But, as Ginny shows us through the course of her memoir, there are other terrible urges inherited from the past that goad and prick the characters, Ginny included, to act in ways that they may well wish “never to remember.” Ginny’s narrative details her slow awakening from the “fog of self” that has allowed her passively and unconsciously to accept for the first thirty-six years of her life the status quo of the family and community into which she has been born, a status quo that justifies violence against women, nature, and anyone who finds themselves on the losing side of capitalism's balance sheet.

Obsidian shards, often found at early human sites, are pieces of hard volcanic glass which archaeologists believe were used as tools and weapons. Ginny refers to the intimate knowledge she has gained about her father as an "obsidian shard" because it gives her both a tool to understand the past and a weapon to defend herself against mindlessly repeating it. It reminds her to choose to remember the kinds of things her father "chose" to forget.

As she delves into her past she recovers feelings and perceptions that have lain dormant under a thick layer of numbness and denial. At the same time, perhaps as a way to deal with the pain of bringing these deadened feelings back to life, Ginny learns to step back and, like an
archaeologist sifting through the artifacts of a long-ago culture, view herself and her society from a distance. She begins to see, for example, that the farm she grew up on never was "the center of the universe" as she once thought, but was rather merely one permutation in a whole series of human living arrangements that have existed over the millennia on the very same land (3).

The reference to an “obsidian shard” in the last line of the novel affirms Ginny’s determination, going forward, to pry her consciousness open to a larger world than the one her father inhabited and sought to pass on. She does not want to wrap herself, as her father did, in a “fog of self” nor find satisfaction in a monoculture worldview, represented on the farm by row after row of the same crop. She safeguards the obsidian shard that allows her to imagine the "goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking" and "pressing" her father not because his heinousness is alien to her but precisely because it is not: during the course of the novel she discovers her own heinous urges, and, because of them, understands how nearly impossible it is to escape becoming caught up in the mores of the dominant society. Thus, Ginny's most important inheritance—her ability to place her own life in historical perspective—is forged out of her struggle to both understand her father and to separate from him and the world he represents.

Ultimately the legacy Ginny is “given” is the story she tells about her father and his world. Like all inheritances, it is not a tale that stays safely lodged in the past: the socio-economic forces that shaped Larry Cook and his world—especially patriarchy and an early form of capitalism—have lost some of their sway but their effect on the present is far from over. They informed the world of the early 1990s, when Ginny is "writing" her memoir and when Smiley publishes the novel, and, even today, albeit less urgently, they mark our lives with their ghostly presence.
Ginny's inheritance, it turns out, is the readers' inheritance too—a past that lies curled within the present, still exerting, as Marx would put it, its "nightmare on the brain" (The Eighteenth Brumaire 595). Perhaps because the haunting of the present by the past is so apparent to Smiley, she does not do in her novel what many feminist writers did in the 1970s and 1980s: excoriate and kill off the tyrannical father in order to make way for the suppressed stories of mothers and other female characters. Rather, as I show in Part II of this chapter, Smiley has her narrator aggressively go after the story of the tyrannical father, holding him close enough and then pushing him just far enough away to give herself—and us—a stereoscopic perspective on this troubling character.

The impetus on Smiley's part to establish such a perspective on the father becomes clear when one considers the context in which the novel was written: the Midwest of the 1980s and early 1990s is the epicenter of the conservative backlash against feminism and progressive thinking in general with its nostalgic and misleading rhetoric about the "silent majority" and "family values." *A Thousand Acres* delves into the consciousness of white, middle America during these years, probing the difficulty this sector of the population has had both in challenging hegemonic structures and in constructing a more accurate representation of the past especially in the areas of family life and economic history.

Smiley accentuates the way that the past haunts the present by having her narrator call the ghosts that populate her family’s history out of the shadows. As Ginny reviews and remembers her childhood and the more distant past, she recalls the violent way her great-grandfather and grandfather “tamed” the land by draining the marshes that had teemed with fish and birds and all manner of plant life for thousands of years in that part of Iowa. Ginny conjures up what little

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3 For more on the native plants and animals that once lived in the “prairie-pothole” region of Iowa where Smiley sets *A Thousand Acres*, see her article in *Sierra* magazine. The region—6 million acres of wetlands and tallgrass
she can remember of her mother who “died before I knew her, before I liked her, before I was
old enough for her to be herself with me” (93). She ponders her paternal grandmother who was
“surrounded by men . . . . didn’t drive a car” and possibly “had no money of her own” and
wonders “if her reputed silence wasn’t due to temperament at all, but due to fear” (133). She tries
to revive the feeling of the body she had before her father began his nightly visits to her bed after
the death of her mother when she was just fourteen. The marsh “sea” which has been repressed
within the land along with the remains of the plant and animal life it once supported, her dead
mother and grandmother, the five miscarriages Ginny has endured over the course of her
marriage (she has no living children), and the young self her father took away from her through
beatings and incest all haunt the pages of this book. But Smiley does one more thing to set the
past and the present, the dead and the living side by side in her novel: she makes the entire work
an allusion to one of the Ur-texts of Western fatherhood, Shakespeare’s King Lear.

A Thousand Acres is faithful to the general outlines of King Lear. The drama centers on
the tensions of two neighboring families as fathers age and the question of the next generation’s
inheritance comes to the fore. Larry Cook (Lear) owns the largest farm in Zebulon County.
Harold Clark (Gloucester), a neighboring farmer who owns exactly half the land Larry does, is
his best friend. The two are peers but also sometimes rivals in the continual jockeying for power
and prestige that seems to make up life in small town Iowa. As in King Lear, the wives of both
these men have died long before the action of the novel begins. It is the return of Harold’s son,
Jess Clark (Edmund), who fled to Canada to avoid fighting in Vietnam thirteen years before, that

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prairie—was the last to be settled in Iowa: “by the late 1880’s and early 1890s the hunger for land made it profitable
to invest in the arduous undertaking of digging tile-ditches, laying tile, and draining off the waters.” The water-
holding capacity of the soil, the biodiversity of plant and animal life, and the incredibly fertile topsoil produced over
the last 7,000 years in the small lakes that once dotted the land of the prairie-pothole region, have all greatly
diminished as a result of the invasive farming methods employed by the early settlers and continued by succeeding
generations right up to the present.
stirs the novel into action. Jess brings with him the stimulating news of a larger world where
economic changes are afoot; he is interested in organic farming, for example. A breath of fresh
air as well as a point of tension, his new ideas and less-repressed manner promise to get
conversations going, which is why Ginny, at the beginning of the novel, looks forward to
“watching Jess Clark break through the surface of everything that hadn’t been said about him
over the years” (7). Jess’s younger brother Loren (Edgar), in contrast, has never left the farm,
and continues steadily to work and live with his father. At a barbeque Harold throws to welcome
Jess home, Larry announces that he has decided to pass his land on to his three daughters. The
two older daughters Ginny (Goneril) and Rose (Regan) along with their husbands Ty (Albany)
and Pete (Cornwall) feel excited by this turn of events: having helped Larry farm the land all
these years, they feel they deserve to be recognized and compensated for their hard work. In
addition, they look forward to having some say, at last, in how the farm is run. When Larry’s
youngest daughter Carolyn (Cordelia), a lawyer who lives in a nearby city, expresses doubt,
Larry’s response is curt and categorical: “You don’t want it, my girl, you’re out. It’s as simple as
that” (21).4

From here on, the novel follows some familiar twists and turns: Larry wanders out into a
ferocious storm, goes mad (he becomes senile), and ends up under the solicitous care of his
youngest child, Carolyn, who sides with him against her older sisters whom she sees as grasping,
self-serving, and cold. In another parallel to the Lear story, Harold is blinded, although not
exactly intentionally: he is the victim of a trap Rose’s husband Pete lays for Larry.

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4 It is never exactly clear why Carolyn objects. Iska Alter finds Smiley’s depiction of Carolyn "not entirely
convincing," commenting that her behavior "remains as inconsistent as the explanations for it are unclear" (150).
Smiley herself acknowledges that she had trouble creating Carolyn out of Cordelia: "Cordelia . . . just wouldn't talk
to me" ("Shakespeare" 173).
But the novel differs significantly from Lear as well: the awful truth revealed during the storm is Larry’s sexual abuse of Rose and Ginny after their mother died; all of the daughters outlive Larry, who dies of a heart attack shortly after being defeated in his legal bid to get his farm back, and, perhaps most significantly, none of the daughters or sons-in-law inherit the family farm. In the end, the inheriting generation is bankrupted and forced from the land. Ginny becomes a waitress in St. Paul and, at 40, a part-time college student studying psychology, Ty heads to Texas to look for work as a hired hand in one of the large corporate hog operations there, Jess disappears, returning presumably to the life he lived during his exile years when he helped to run community gardens and manage a food coop in Vancouver. Pete, demoralized and depressed, becomes self-destructive and drinks himself to death. Rose dies a few years later of breast cancer. Carolyn, married to another lawyer Frank (France), continues her upscale professional life in Des Moines. Only Loren continues to farm his father’s land, but the sense, at novel’s end, is that even should he be able to hold onto the farm financially—and that is a big if—he will be unable to find a woman willing to settle down on the farm with him. Most of the young women have moved to nearby cities, opting for careers or work in the service industry over being farmers’ wives. Unable to marry and produce a new generation, it seems probable that Loren’s tenure on the land will soon be over as well.

After reading through a number of academic papers on her novel, Smiley, an academic herself, has voiced an appreciation of “the habit of mind that ponders a work, finds connections within it and between it and other works.” *A Thousand Acres*, she acknowledges, “grew out of a very similar mental process . . . [It] is my academic paper on *King Lear*” (“Shakespeare” 159). The most obvious connection between Smiley’s novel and Shakespeare’s play is that each work
holds a patriarchal father up to close scrutiny. It is this similarity that critics who have compared the two works generally emphasize.\(^5\)

Another shared feature, one that I have not seen explored in any of the critical literature linking *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*, is that both works deal with the effects of capitalism on human interactions and on the overall structure of society. This blind spot in the critical literature occurs despite the fact that Smiley clearly was interested in exploring both patriarchy and capitalism in her novel: “I was happy to have made my case about what it means to be a father, what it means to be a daughter, about the asymmetry of power in patriarchal capitalist Western European society, about the attempt to possess other persons as objects and to call that love” (“Shakespeare” 173).

“Three . . . threads that tied up for me in *A Thousand Acres*,” Smiley has said, “were feminism, environmentalism, and a vaguely Marxist materialism” (“Shakespeare” 169). The majority of the literary criticism written to date on Smiley’s novel, including both those pieces that explore the connection between *A Thousand Acres* and *King Lear* and those that treat the novel independently of Shakespeare’s play, pick up on the first two threads—Smiley’s critique of patriarchy and her environmental concerns. Very little criticism examines the third thread—Marxist materialism—even though the exploration and critique of capitalism is a central concern of the novel.\(^6\) This reluctance on the part of critics to take up Smiley’s third “thread” reflects the

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\(^5\) Susan Strehle, for example, in “The Daughter’s Subversion” sees both texts as “permeated with the logic of patriarchy.”

\(^6\) One exception is John Mack Faragher’s “The Historical Imagination of *A Thousand Acres*” which argues that Smiley’s work is a historical novel and explores, among other things, the capitalist nature of modern farming. Faragher offers an explanation for the paucity of critical attention to the socio-economic and historical analysis of “Given the parallels with *King Lear,*” Faragher writes, “it is no surprise that critics have given relatively little consideration to the book’s treatment of history” (147). Several other critics consider the theme of capitalism in the novel, though more briefly. Almila Ozdek’s "Coming Out of the Amnesia" looks at the question of capitalist land ownership and focuses on Ginny’s "struggle to liberate herself from the language of ownership" (66). Ozdek sees the
erasure economic subjects typically undergo in American discourse and more particularly in the field of literary study. To address this imbalance, I devote Part III of this chapter to an in-depth exploration of Smiley's "third thread." Once the story of capitalism's impact on family and community life is teased out, a clearer understanding of Larry and his fatherhood can emerge. Before beginning such an analysis, however, it is important to learn a bit more about the process by which Smiley brings the story of the father, repressed and all but forgotten in many cultural narratives, into view.

II: EXCAVATING THE FATHER’S STORY

Ginny’s father, Larry Cook, has “the biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer” in the fictional county of Zebulon, Iowa (20). In fact, the two—farmer and farm—are elided in people’s minds: “A farmer looks like himself, when he goes to the café, but he also looks like his farm,” Ginny tells us (199). Larry is also the embodiment of the dominant social, political, and economic structures that make up life in his community. His role as director and enforcer of the

novel as a "ecofeminist rewriting of the American nation-making" (66). Iska Alter in "King Lear and A Thousand Acres" remarks that agriculture is "a capitalist enterprise in [Smiley's] novel" (156).

A few other critics consider capitalism or related economic themes in their work, but tend to then focus the bulk of their attention elsewhere. Amano Kyoko, for example, touches upon economic questions in "Alger's Shadows in Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres," but concentrates on showing how Smiley "problematises the Alger myth of success as exceptionally masculine-dominated and materialistic." Susan Strehle in “The Daughter’s Subversion” acknowledges that Larry “takes on the mythic identity of Horace Greeley, J.P. Morgan, Horatio Alger characters, and Uncle Sam, living out the rags-to-riches story of the American self-made man in the Iowa heartland,” but she sees these attributes embodying “the American value system,” an apparently cultural or ideological rather than economical construct. Leaving capitalism to the side, her article concentrates on patriarchy and the abuse of the female and the environment. In “‘Writing Back’: Contemporary Re-Visionary Fiction,” Peter Widdowson explores the tendency of contemporary novelists to write what he calls “re-visionary fiction” where they take a classic text and “write back” to it. Widdowson has found that these novelists by and large apply a feminist or post-colonialist critique (but not, apparently, since he doesn’t mention it, a Marxist critique) to the classic text, showing in their own novels what has been repressed or excluded from the classic text. While he emphasizes Smiley’s critique of patriarchy in her revision of King Lear, he does write that A Thousand Acres also offers an economic critique since it “underlines the destructive ‘madness’ of patriarchal and capitalist ‘monopoly’ in modern America” (498). Because Widdowson is concerned about defining the category of re-visionary fiction, he does not go any further along this avenue of linking patriarchy and capitalism together in Smiley’s novel.
status quo is solidified, in a chicken-and-egg sort of way, by the thousand acre farm he owns, a
farm he has partly inherited from his father and grandfather and partly cobbled together out of
other farmers’ failures. Accumulating and managing so much land makes him a big man in the
eyes of the community; other farmers look up to him and seek out his advice. Larry’s imposing
stature is felt at home, as well, where, for Ginny, it is “farmer” and “father” that meld together:
when she first goes to school and hears other children say that their fathers are farmers, “I
knew,” she tells us, that “those men were impostors, as farmers and as fathers, too. In my
youthful estimation, Laurence Cook defined both categories. To really believe that others even
existed in either category was to break the First Commandment” (19).

Another novel, equally feminist in impulse, might have spent its energy exposing this revered
pillar of the community for the incestuous, petty tyrant that he actually is and, having done so,
walked away with a clear conscience. *A Thousand Acres*, however, doesn’t allow itself—or its
readers—to get away from Larry Cook so easily. Instead, the novel circles around this hard,
selfish, brutal man, reading and re-reading him as Ginny’s perspective changes and her
understanding deepens.

It is a hard task the novel sets for itself. Like so many men in positions of authority, Larry
Cook is aggressively silent about both his inner workings and about the system which has
conferred upon him his big man status. Because he never does speak for himself, Ginny has to
piece together the story or stories that lie beneath his silence out of the clues she has accumulated
over a lifetime of living with him. The sketchy portrait of "Daddy Cook" that emerges from these
stories is one important part of Ginny’s memoir; another is the narrative of how she came to
separate herself enough from her father and the dominant ideology he represents to be able to
produce even this limited edition of her father’s story.
Ginny writes her memoir in a state of reflection, several years after the events she
describes have occurred. By the time she writes, her father has been dead for several years, the
farm has been sold and Ginny herself lives a good three-hours drive away in St. Paul where she
works as a waitress. Even at this distance of remove, a part of her father and a part of the farm
still remains within her. She tells us in the memoir’s epilogue that

[l]odged in my every cell, along with the DNA, are molecules of topsoil and . . .
paraquat . . . and diesel fuel and plant dust, and also molecules of memory: the
bracing summer chill of floating on my back in Mel’s pond, staring at the sky . . .
the stripes of pain my father’s belt laid across my skin. . . . All of it is present
now, here; each particle weighs some fraction of the hundred and thirty-six
pounds that attaches me to the earth, perhaps as much as the print weighs in other
sorts of histories. (369)

As this quote implies, writing a memoir has made Ginny’s connection to what has come
before so piercingly real that she can read its text upon her body. It has become part of her,
filling in her identity and anchoring her to the present, “to the earth.” The insight that the past
both negatively and positively affects us, that we are both weighed down by it and rooted by it, is
part of what Ginny discovers as she looks back over her life. Her memoir is not a nostalgic elegy
for a bucolic life that had its pleasures but has now passed, nor is it an expose and exorcism of
the horrors that her tyrannical father visited upon her and those she loved, though it partakes of
both of these modes as the references to Mel’s pond, a natural swimming hole on the farm, and
to her father’s beatings indicate. Instead of being an elegy or a gothic tale of horror, Ginny’s
memoir stakes out a third way to speak about the past which lodges itself inextricably within the
present. This third way sees the past and present as organically connected; the present grows
directly out of the past. Ginny’s narrative probes carefully for meaning, preferring to sit with
painful truths even when their meaning is not immediately clear rather than jump to conclusions
or retreat, as her sister Rose does, into the arms of a consuming rage. Ginny painstakingly seeks
out causes and traces their possible effects. She places a premium on critical thinking, sprinkling
the text with a plethora of close observations—people’s facial expressions, the objects left in a
room—that she ponders, adding them up first one way and then another, in an attempt to sort out
why things are the way they are and how they came to be that way. Rather than distancing
herself from the farm and her father, as her youngest sister Caroline does, or donning the habit of
opposition and anger as Rose does, or clinging to her own familiar role of passive victim,
Ginny’s narrative comes to rest finally on the conviction that she and the other characters in her
memoir have a degree of agency, even a degree of complicity, in the historical processes of
which they are all a part.

Ginny’s father is the palimpsest that enables her to discover this narrative perspective.
The difficulty she has reading him, of reading the partially erased text of his and the farm’s past,
teaches her how to look in general for “what is below the level of the visible” (9). In the
beginning she reads only the approved surface text of her world: as a child everything her father
does “fit, or maybe formed, my own sense of the right order of things” (20). At eight, listening
to her parents critically evaluate the way neighboring farms are run, Ginny tells us that she
“nestled into the certainty of the way, through the repeated comparisons, our farm and our lives
seemed secure and good” (5). As an adult, Ginny looks back on this memory and comments that
her parents “had probably seen nearly as little of the world as I had by that time” (5). The self-
involved worldview her parents inhabit even as adults is recapitulated in Ginny’s own initial
approach to world history: despite what her teachers say about Columbus and the age of
exploration, “[n]o globe or map fully convinced me that Zebulon County was not the center of
the universe” (3).
The struggle to widen her perspective is linked to Ginny’s attempts to separate herself from her father and see him more clearly:

Perhaps there is a distance that is the optimum distance for seeing one’s father, farther than across the supper table or across the room, somewhere in the middle distance: he is dwarfed by trees or the sweep of the hill, but his features are still visible, his body language still distinct. Well, that is a distance I never found. He was never dwarfed by the landscape—the fields, the building, the white pine windbreak were as much my father as if he had grown them and shed them like a husk. (20)

Though Ginny continues to feel that she is never able to cut Daddy Cook down to a manageable size, by the time she writes her memoir in her early 40’s, she has achieved a remarkable degree of distance and understanding: “I can’t say that I forgive my father,” she tells us in the very last lines of the novel, “but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember—the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self. . . . This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all the others.” (370-71)

Despite Ginny’s feeling that she never locates the “optimum distance” for viewing her father, she is actually positioned at a mid-distance from her subject. On the one hand, she is extremely close: of the three daughters, she is the one who is most wedded to her father physically and emotionally, having never left the farm to go to college or live elsewhere. On the other hand, by the time she writes her narrative, she is quite far away, living and working in St. Paul and taking night classes in psychology at the University of Minnesota. In this way Ginny brings a stereoscopic perspective to her tale. If this were an anthropological examination of a twentieth-century Midwest American farm family, we might say that she functions as both native informant and anthropologist.

Adrienne Rich has written that “revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in
cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves” (35). Rich voiced these thoughts in a paper entitled “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” which she gave at the 1971 Conference of the Modern Languages Association. In her talk, Rich hailed the fact that women writers were at last “awakening,” were at last moving away from viewing everything, themselves and their writing included, through the eyes of men. Rich saw signs that women’s anger at their own victimization was beginning to take center stage in female writers’ work.

Writing in 1986, Linda Bamber ponders the problem women readers often have locating themselves in literature written by men. “Who is the ‘like me,’” she asks, “when the character offered as a version of the self is a man?” (235). For Bamber, the “like me” character in King Lear is, “of course,” King Lear since all the main female characters in the text are depicted as “either more or less than human” (235-36). Bamber argues that, in general, female characters in Shakespeare’s plays function as the “Other,” reflecting “the nature of the world outside the Self” (238). The nature of the world outside the Self varies depending upon whether the play is a tragedy, comedy, romance or history; so too does Shakespeare’s characterization of women in each of these four genres. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, Bamber argues, the world that lies outside the Self is murky and hard to understand. It is a place which causes suffering, and eludes human control, remaining separate from us no matter what we do: the tragic world “will not yield to our desires and fantasies no matter how desperately we need it to do so” (240). The

7 In Shakespeare’s comedies, for example, Bamber argues that the world outside the [Male] Self is “reliable and orderly, a source of pleasure rather than a threat—and so is the nature of the feminine” (238). It is for this reason, according to Bamber, that female characters in the comedies are almost universally good; they are faithful and do not betray their men in the same way that the comedic world does not betray our expectations of a happy ending. In Shakespeare’s romances, the world is “a much more serious place . . . because it may be lost altogether,” although it can also be “found” (239). Reflecting this, the female characters come and go in romance plays and the feminine is portrayed as “infinitely valuable, capable of being utterly lost but capable also of miraculous self-renewal” (239). In the history plays, women are basically “unproblematic,” a characteristic that Bamber believes matches the way the world outside the [Male] Self in these plays is “almost wholly a political world” offering “few metaphysical or psychological problems” (240).
women in Shakespeare’s tragedies reflect the qualities of this world outside the Self by, among other things, remaining “separate from us, governed by their own laws whether their natures are good or evil”; they become the foils of desire and resistance against which the (masculine) Self struggles (240-41). Bamber finds the role women play in King Lear aesthetically and intellectually satisfying: “identifying with the intensely problematic world outside the hero gives me another way of participating in the major questions of the play” (241). But though reading in this way has its pleasures, it does not solve the problem of there being no female character in King Lear with whom women readers can identify. “[W]hen nothing will satisfy but a female version of the Self,” Bamber is forced to acknowledge, “I take a break from Shakespeare and pick up Middlemarch” (244).

The most obvious revision Smiley makes to Shakespeare’s King Lear is to make Ginny the narrator and therefore the person most ‘like me’ in the tale. Not only does a female character become the main locus of “Self” in the novel, but the male characters, with Larry in the lead, now seem to assume the role of “Other.” It is Ginny’s father who now becomes the murky, inscrutable figure, the one shaping and determining everything around him while always eluding control himself. “I wish we had understood him,” Ginny says. “That, I see now, was our only hope” (20). Jess, speaking of his father Harold, expresses a similar feeling of distance and confusion: “I never know what he knows,” he tells Ginny (11).

It is not just the fathers in A Thousand Acres who are murky: men, in general, are difficult to understand. Cut off from both themselves and others, men can sometimes seem less than human. But—and this is a departure from Shakespeare’s way of depicting the “Other”—Ginny identifies a cultural reason for the difference she observes between the genders:

[T]here seemed to be a dumb, unknowing quality to the way the men had suffered, as if, like animals, it was not possible for them to gain perspective on
their suffering. They had us, Rose and me, in their suffering, but they didn’t seem to have what we had with each other, a kind of ongoing narrative and commentary about what was happening that grew out of our conversations, our rolled eyes, our sighs and jokes and irritated remarks. (113)

Men lack perspective and a deeper consciousness partly because they do not have access to the kind of speculative conversations, full of give and take, that women do. They are not using language to push out the borders and boundaries of what is known by telling each other counter-narratives about reality or poking fun at the status quo.

The repression of language that counters the “official” point of view is also a central theme in King Lear which opens with Lear’s demand that Cordelia “mend” her speech to say only that which is pleasing to him (I.i.96). Richard Halpern, tracing the political arc of the play, shows how it “opens in the context of an absolutist, ceremonial, apparently demilitarized court; and it devolves, by the combined actions of Lear, Edmund, Goneril, and Regan, into a decentralized and fully militarized set of competing baronies” (242). While Halpern argues that the play overall “narrates the transition to capitalism,” he shows how the plot actually goes backwards: instead of arriving at a “postfeudal condition” at play’s end, the play “collapses back into feudalism” as “a newly remilitarized aristocracy” replaces Lear’s absolute monarchy (242, 247). William Dodd applies Halpern’s political analysis to the realm of language, analyzing how the dialogue between Lear and his subjects and family members in the opening scene exposes the problem of absolutism: Lear doesn’t allow in the beginning of the play for the kind of reciprocal relationships amongst nobles and other members of society upon which feudalism depends, nor does he allow for the kind of give-and-take amongst family members and friends upon which love and intimacy depend. Cordelia attempts to recall her father to an egalitarian dialogue in which both sides have a say. Dodd argues that Cordelia’s “ideal of true interlocution” is rooted not only in the reciprocal imperative of feudalism but also, and indeed more strongly, in the
contemporary discourse of Lutheran Protestantism where the “essential autonomy” of the individual and of the personal sphere are valorized (501, 499). These values, represented by Cordelia’s insistence on her own feelings and point of view and hammered home by the closing words of the play uttered by Edgar—“Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say”—point forward toward the coming bourgeois era (V.3.36). Though the political relationship between Cordelia and her father is ultimately mended as they band together to fight Edmund and his supporters, Cordelia never does get Lear, who by play’s end has gone mad, to engage with her in anything approaching a dialogue. Instead, she remains essentially unseen and unheard by her father.

Ginny also attempts to get her father to “see” her and she also fails. About halfway through the novel, on the strength of a growing sense of her own individuality, Ginny asserts herself to her father in the mildest of ways. After Daddy verbally attacks her, saying that she and Rose are lazy and are not paying attention to him or to the farm, Ginny responds with a conciliatory smile, “I don’t think you can say that we’re lazy. Anyway, I don’t think you show us any respect, Daddy. I don’t think you ever think about anything from our point of view” (175). The torrent of angry words and admonitions that Daddy unleashes in response to her careful statement has its usual effect on Ginny: “Of course it was silly to talk about ‘my point of view,’” she confesses afterwards. “When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished. Not even I could remember it” (176). Larry Cook remains, to the end of his life, wrapped in an “impenetrable fog of self,” unable to see others and a stranger to himself. In this respect he is much like Lear, who, as Regan remarks, “hath ever but slenderly known himself” (I.i.295-96).

While Lear and Larry never establish a “true” dialogue with their daughters, there is a significant difference in the potency of each father’s voice as the works progress. As Iska Alter
points out, though Lear is stripped of everything, including his reason, he “nevertheless retains majesty because his language is allowed to propel and control the play” (152). In contrast, Larry’s voice is progressively silenced as he declines into the childishness of senility. The centrality of the daughter’s perspective is driven home in the very first pages of the novel, where “[b]ecause the plot of Lear has been inscribed so obviously within the action of A Thousand Acres, once the reader hears the retrospective female voice speaking the story, he/she knows . . . that Ginny survives her father’s brutality and his death. . . . and that Larry/Lear’s patriarchal authority will soon be limited” (Alter 152-53).

Smiley seeks to solve the problem of fleshing out a father who will not engage in egalitarian dialogue about either the status quo or his internal world by changing the genre in which the story is told. “Narrative,” she believes, “gives more direct access to the inner life” than drama ever can:

Perhaps what I blamed Lear for was actually a feature of dramatic form that I was uncomfortable with—all the talk, especially talk about emotions, that seemed simultaneously to trivialize and make self-indulgent and shrill the passions being expressed. . . . Drama privileges action over point of view. This privilege can sometimes be mitigated . . . but for sheer relentless inescapable immersion in subjectivity and point of view, you can’t beat narrative. Narrative, in my opinion, always calls into question the validity of appearance, always proposes a difference between the public perception of events and their actual meaning. (“Shakespeare” 162,172)

Another advantage narrative gives Smiley as she attempts to bring the “actual meaning” of the father-daughter story to light, is the way that it enables her to fix Larry’s identity within a specific environment. While Lear lives in a quasi-mythical world, Larry lives in a world hedged round by a host of everyday details and practices, all of which can be closely considered. In
rewriting *King Lear* as a novel of domestic realism, Smiley cuts the mythical figure of the father down to size and thereby makes him available for scrutiny.  

Smiley's ability to tell the father story differently is not only, however, a feature of narrative, but is also linked to the historical and socio-economic changes that have taken place since Shakespeare's time. Smiley could not have rewritten *Lear* as she has without the rise of capitalism and the concomitant rise of bourgeois individualism. Though Cordelia and many of the other characters in the play display characteristics of bourgeois individuality, the language of subjectivity is still in too nascent a state during Shakespeare's time for them to have the amount of inner development necessary to support an exploration, as Smiley puts it, of “the disjuncture between what is felt and what appears” ("Shakespeare" 162).

Paula Marantz Cohen, analyzing the role of women and especially daughters in nineteenth and early twentieth century British novels, finds that they are generally assigned the task of closely reading the family's dynamics and taking care of the feelings and needs discovered there. Often they manage and express not only their own emotions but also the emotions of the male members of the family, most especially the father's. This division of emotional labor within the household can be seen as an extension of the division of labor brought about by the Industrial Revolution where men become the breadwinners and women the housewives. In Ginny and Rose’s case, the heightened alertness to emotions and interpersonal

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8 I am indebted to Iska Alter for the insight that, due to the different forms of narrative each author employs to develop the character, Larry's identity is fixed while Lear's is not.

9 Eli Zaretsky, in *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life*, especially Chapter Four ("Proletarianization and the Rise of Subjectivity" and Chapter Five ("Politics and Personal Life"), connects the discovery of a rich inner life with the rise of capitalism and notes that the kind of individual and family life that forms during the bourgeois era is characterized by such an intense interest in the personal that it gives American families by the early twentieth century the atmosphere of emotional hothouses. For more, see my discussion in Chapter One.

10 For more, see Paula Marantz Cohen's *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* as well as my discussion of her work in Chapter One.
dynamics which has developed as a result of their having to anticipate and cater to their father's every need and mood, results in their being much better at knowing themselves and, as well, being far better able to think outside the box than their father or any of the other men folk in the family are. Not only does their training help them to see things from more than one perspective, but, like Cordelia, they have an interest in seeking out and furthering a more egalitarian give and take between individuals. The impulse to talk and share with each other provides them, as we have already seen, with a means to understand their suffering and, eventually, gives Ginny both the ability and the impetus to tell her story.

Another important change Smiley makes as she re-tells the *King Lear* story is in the handling of good and evil. In *King Lear*, unlike in most of Shakespeare’s other plays, there is an absolutely schizophrenic view of good and evil.\(^\text{11}\) Though King Lear is stunned by the depth of malevolence in Goneril and Regan, he accepts the idea, which is nowhere contradicted by the playwright, that they are completely and irrevocably evil. Larry is depicted as also seeing things in only black and white. In contrast, Ginny does not dichotomize the world or its male characters into a hierarchical set of binaries. That there is evil in the world remains an indisputable fact in Smiley’s novel, but Ginny refuses to cast even her father who has done her irreparable harm, into the devil's camp. Instead, she struggles to understand him, attempting with every fiber of her being to strip away the autocratic mask and find the human being hidden beneath.

This shift in perspective is heralded by the novel's epigraph, a quote from Meridel Le Sueur: "The body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other." Le Sueur's words signal an escape from patriarchal and capitalist mindsets where individuals and fathers stand out and where it seems 'right' for such people to dominate those

\(^{11}\) I am indebted to Paul Delany’s "King Lear and the Decline of Feudalism" for this insight. Delany analyzes "the conflict between good and evil persons" in the play as a device Shakespeare uses to convey a "social meaning" involving the transition from feudalism to capitalism which was occurring during his lifetime (431).
below them on the hierarchical ladder. On the first page of the novel, Ginny tells us that as a child she believed the farm was the center of the universe and that her father was the biggest and best farmer and father of them all. Over the course of the novel, she moves away from this sort of hierarchical vision of life and her place in it to a more ecological or environmental perspective, a perspective where she begins to see that the bodies that interact with the land—human and animal alike—form together a web where all play a role in creating and transforming life. Speaking about the construction of *Moo*, her next novel after *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley calls it a “net-like structure”:

I wanted to be writing about an ecosystem. I think one of the failures or flaws of western thought is that everything has to be about one guy, everything has to revolve about a central person, and the philosophical point of thinking about ecosystems is that no person is god, no person stands out, no person is much more significant than any other person. So part of my point was asking the reader to accept the whole rather than to use one person as the organizational principle. (Shoup 191)

Ginny can yearn for and Smiley can create in her a more egalitarian way of viewing people because the socio-economic basis for patriarchy has been largely overthrown by the late twentieth century. In making Lear's oldest daughter the character readers empathize with, Smiley acknowledges that she was thinking in particular about young female readers: “I hoped that the minds of adolescent girls would encounter *A Thousand Acres* first, and that it would serve them as a prophylactic against the guilt about proper daughterhood that I knew *King Lear* could induce” (“Shakespeare" 173). In wanting to get to the adolescent girls first, Smiley indicates that old texts and old patterns of thought, including those that extol patriarchy as *King Lear* does, are still able to exert a dangerous pull upon the minds of contemporary readers; because Shakespeare
is a revered "father" author to many writers, Smiley might also have been thinking about the undue influence he is still able to exert upon contemporary authors.\footnote{Paul Delany makes a convincing case for the idea that, though he was torn, Shakespeare was ultimately more invested in feudalism than in the emerging system of capitalism; as a result, Delany argues, \emph{King Lear} is emotionally on the side of feudalism and patriarchy.}

With this as background, Smiley’s retelling of \emph{King Lear} resonates with Rich’s comment that, for the sake of our survival, the old stories need to be “known differently.” Alter, writing about \emph{A Thousand Acres}, picks up on the same theme: the “re-inscription of feminine voices into a culturally valorized master(’s) text is to certify survival” (154).

In fact, as the grim outline of \emph{A Thousand Acres} shows, survival is, indeed, at stake: not understanding the story in which one is embedded and particularly its rules has caused a number of women in the novel to die, Pete to commit suicide, and, finally, the economic wherewithal of the family to be lost. Ginny cannot have kids because the destructive farming practices that have been part and parcel of creating her family’s wealth have poisoned the well and caused her to miscarry five times. Commenting on the importance of Ginny being able to tell the story from her point of view, Smiley has explained that Ginny's memoir functions as "a step away from the abyss . . . a way for her life not to end, not to be destroyed by what her father has done to her . . . even in the face of the end of their life on the farm” (qtd. in Alter, 154).

“Hating one’s mother” Elaine Showalter reminds us, “was the feminist enlightenment of the fifties and sixties” ("Poetics" 135). In the 1970s, reflecting the sea change wrought by the women’s movement, feminists made the search for the mother’s repressed story a central project. During these years, Showalter observes, women’s writing went “beyond matrophobia to a courageously sustained quest for the mother” in books like Margaret Atwood’s \emph{Surfacing} and Lisa Alther’s \emph{Kinflicks} ("Poetics" 135). At the same time, as Marianne Hirsch notes, feminist
writers lost interest in articulating the male experience; portraits of fathers, in particular, drop out of feminist fiction in the 1970s and early 1980s (129).\footnote{Hirsch notes that "Whereas in the nineteenth-century novel, mothers had to be eliminated or disempowered so that heroines could have access to plot, in the texts of the 1970s, the elimination of fathers has become either a precondition or an important preoccupation of female plots" (129). In addition to eliminating the father, Hirsch finds that feminists writing in the 1970s also routinely engineered "the death or elimination of . . . the brother, the husband, [and] the male lover from feminist fiction and from feminist theorizing" (129).}

Though Smiley places the daughter’s perspective at the center of *A Thousand Acres*, and though in doing so she attempts to redress the imbalance implied in the father-centered perspective of *King Lear*, she is not interested in replacing one imbalance with another. Specifically she is not interested in highlighting the female perspective to the exclusion of the male perspective as so many feminist writers of her generation have done. In this, her novel is a revision not only of *King Lear* but also of much of late twentieth-century feminist literature, in particular, a response to the abandonment of the father by women writers and theorists in the 1970s and 1980s. Though *A Thousand Acres* comes early in the process, in retrospect it can be seen as the beginning of a return by feminist writers in the 1990s to an exploration of the father.

In *King Lear*, mothers are so completely absent that it almost seems as if Lear’s three daughters and Gloucester’s two sons have sprung, like Athena, full-grown from their fathers’ heads. In *A Thousand Acres*, the mothers of Ginny and her two sisters and of the two sons of neighboring farmer Harold Clark are also absent—each has died by the time the novel’s events take place. The silencing of these women, these mothers, is explored in *A Thousand Acres* as Ginny gently excavates the basic outline of their stories. Their meaning, including the meaning of their erasure, is pondered by Ginny as well as by some of the other sons and daughters in the novel. In acknowledging the mother’s story including how it is repressed by the dominant society, *A Thousand Acres* again pointedly diverges from *King Lear*\footnote{In thinking about the repression of women’s stories, Smiley seems to be not only thinking about *King Lear*, but also about the American literary scene. In 1996 Smiley wrote an article for *Harper’s Magazine* in which she}.\footnote{In 1996 Smiley wrote an article for *Harper’s Magazine* in which she}
But, though Smiley does not permit the mother’s story or women’s stories in general to be erased in *A Thousand Acres*, the novel does not focus on them. Ginny briefly considers becoming the narrator of her mother’s story, but she quickly gives the idea up: “There could be a quest—I might go around to people . . . and ask them about [my mother]. . . . I could become her biographer, be drawn into her life. . . . [But] I was, after all, my father’s daughter, and I automatically did believe in the unbroken surface of the unsaid” (94).

Instead of focusing on the repressed stories of women, Smiley’s novel becomes a sustained attempt to break that “surface of the unsaid” by bringing the repressed story of fathers and of male consciousness in general to voice. The father who dominates the landscape but will not reveal his inner workings is placed at the center of *A Thousand Acres*. Through the device of a narrator coming to consciousness about her father and the role he has played in her life and in the life of the community, readers of the novel are brought up close—perhaps in some cases closer than they initially feel comfortable being—to a tyrannical father and urged to re-view and revise their perceptions about this complicated figure.

All of which brings us back to Adrienne Rich’s observation that revision "is for women . . . an act of survival," since until "we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" ("When” 35). Smiley's novel challenges the assumptions about fatherhood in which many of us have been drenched; specifically, the novel challenges the assumption that fatherhood is almost entirely about gender, whether that assumption has been inculcated by exposure to psychological theories of development and family dynamics rooted in challenged the canonization by literary critics in the 1950s of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as one of America’s greatest books while ignoring the greatness of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a novel that deals with the important subject "of how the various social groups who may not escape to the wilderness are to get along in society." Responding to criticism about her Harper's article, Smiley has said, “For me, a national literature is not a national literature if it denigrates and kicks out all the domestic literature that tells you what it is like to be with a dying child and in the kitchen, a body of literature that only includes Huck Finn and Ernest Hemingway, and all the boys. What nation is that the literature of? Not mine” (Basbanes).
notions of a gender binary, or whether that assumption has been deduced from observing or living under some form of patriarchy, a system which also bases itself on hierarchical notions of gender. The "fresh" or revised view of the father and of family life that Smiley offers in her novel and that is so necessary to women's survival is the story of how capitalism enters into the equation, and particularly how it has shaped fathers, who, as the families' breadwinners, are most deeply affected by its logic. A new way of knowing the breadwinning father is especially critical to survival when one considers the effects being exacted upon gender roles by the rapidly changing conditions of the late capitalist period in which the novel is set.

Because the father is close at hand and a familiar figure to daughter and reader alike, he functions in the novel as an interface between the familiar world of family life and the far less well-understood economic world. The novel itself also functions as a kind of interface between two processes of understanding: decoding the father allows for a better understanding of the society and its political and economic setup; at the same time, information about the overarching society helps to inform and flesh out our understanding of how particular men take shape and perform their fatherhood within the intimate world of family. This recursive flow of information—out from the family as well as back towards it—is one of the techniques Smiley uses to flesh out Larry Cook's inner life since, like so many fathers, he is either reticent or incapable of telling his own story.

Ginny’s ability to pierce the patriarchal mask and construct a narrative that rivals Larry Cook’s official story of how things are and came to be occurs not merely because she is willful or clever enough to do it, nor because she is successfully fulfilling her Oedipal mission to separate and become independent. She is set upon her journey because of wider societal changes afoot: giant corporations, aided by technological innovations and banking practices that favor
large businesses, are making family farms across the county begin to fail and go under. True, Ginny’s family “throws caution to the winds” (322)—as when Larry, seemingly on a whim, turns his farm over to two children and disinherits the third or when Ginny’s husband is suckered by a local banker into taking out a huge loan in order to exponentially expand his hog operation—and these incautious decisions lead directly to the family losing the farm. But Smiley makes it clear that what befalls the Cook farm is not merely due to bad decisions on the part of the family. In the last pages of the novel we learn that many farm families have gone under during these years: “The Boone Brothers Auction House was plenty busy that spring,” Ginny tells us, “and for years to come, riding on the surging waves of the land as it rolled and shifted from farmer to farmer” (368).

But long before these forces become obvious, sweeping the land and leading to foreclosures and suicides and migrations into the cities or towards the sunbelt, Ginny, like the supersensitive instrument she has been trained to be by her role of "good" (bourgeois) daughter, picks up on the seismic patterns of the changing political environment, and starts to register the cracks in her father’s story. As the novel progresses and more discrepancies and contradictions appear, the sins of her father, no longer able to be completely contained under the smooth patriarchal narrative, begin to burst forth. One of those sins is that the pesticides that have allowed for high yields on Larry’s and his neighbors’ farms have poisoned the drinking water leading to a spate of farmwomen contracting breast cancer, Ginny’s mother and her sister Rose among them. Another sin that returns after having been repressed for over two decades, is Ginny’s memory of Larry’s sexual abuse of her and Rose during their teenaged years after their mother dies. And Ginny discovers that the cause of one of the greatest sorrows in her life—her
inability to carry a pregnancy to term—is linked to the runoff from the chemical fertilizers that has made its way into the drinking water.

As the ground beneath her feet sways and buckles, the old story that Daddy presents with his loud booming voice, is no longer satisfying to Ginny. The lifestyle she might once have lived as a farmer’s wife becomes untenable, not just emotionally but also physically: her inability to have children is a manifestation of the kind of material changes that are pushing her to loosen her hold on the old traditions: had she been able to stay pregnant, she tells us,

[a] restraining influence would certainly have been exerted on me, on Ty, possibly on my father. With the future visible, [in the form of a baby] . . . it would have been unwise to question the past, a tempting of fate. There would have been no new buildings, because we would have taken a conservative fiscal line. We would have sought instead to present a different picture: five generations on the same land. (256)

The impetus to create *A Thousand Acres* in the early 1990s can also be traced to a confluence of real world changes: the changing socio-economic conditions, including especially the rise of feminism, the turn towards a postindustrial economy, and the globalization of capital are the conditions which allow this novel to come to voice. Like Ginny’s story, the novel is written at a time when the structure it analyzes and seeks to understand is in the process of losing its monopoly on the truth. The “rightness” of the breadwinner-father/homemaker-mother structure of family, which evolved in tandem with industrial capitalism, no longer fits the changing socio-economic landscape. There are large cracks in that story. At the same time, alternative family/work arrangements—adopted either by choice or necessity or both—are becoming both more common and more visible.

Smiley’s novel rushes like blood into the cracks opened up by these changes, bringing the old story vividly to life and allowing us to view and understand it in new ways. *A Thousand Acres* illuminates the old relationship between fathers and children at the very moment when that
relationship is beginning to break down, and captures in an extremely close-up and detailed way the passing of some of the most significant features of the twentieth century American landscape: the breadwinner father/homemaker mother configuration, the patriarchal structure of family life that such a setup both grows out of and supports, and the dream of being able, starting from humble beginnings but working hard, to climb up the ladder of economic success.

To be sure, these features—breadwinner fathers, patriarchy, and the realization of the American Dream through creating a small-scale profitable capitalist business that would benefit both workers and the community—were all in decline long before the last decade of the twentieth century. In fact, by 1990, most families were no longer organized along the male breadwinner/ female homemaker model, and many fathers no longer even lived with their children, while long before World War II—some historians place it as early as the 1920s—most Americans were already working in large businesses or corporations where they felt more like cogs in a large, impersonal machine than like masters of their own fate.\(^{15}\)

Joy DeGruy Leary has written and spoken widely about a phenomenon she calls post traumatic slave syndrome. Her thesis is that even though slavery in the U.S. was abolished generations ago, it still haunts contemporary African-American life, as habits of mind developed to deal with the trauma of slavery have been passed down through the generations, affecting psychological and physical well-being. *A Thousand Acres* is a novel of domestic realism, a carefully-drawn portrayal of life on a family farm, but there is a gothic quality to it as well. Like post traumatic slave syndrome, many of the habits of mind adopted when patriarchy was a stronger organizing force and when capitalism was in an earlier stage of development continue to haunt contemporary consciousness and inform behavior today. These old patterns of thinking and acting emerge as the driving forces behind the characters and the plot of this novel, pushing

\(^{15}\) See Zaretsky, especially Chapter Four.
and pulling events and people across the pages like poltergeists. As these forces are brought to light through Ginny’s probing narration of her father, these ghosts from an earlier era rise up and take their place amongst the living. Part III of this chapter is devoted to a close examination of the way these two habits of mind—patriarchy and capitalism—shape family life and fatherhood in *A Thousand Acres*.

### III: SOME CAUSE FOR THESE HARD HEARTS

**Understanding Larry Cook**

At first glance, the most important story Smiley’s novel has to tell about the father is the story of his incest. Larry’s sexual abuse of Ginny and Rose is revealed halfway through the novel when Larry, drunk and angry about his declining powers, curses Ginny and Rose in front of their husbands. He calls Ginny a “slut” and a “dried-up whore bitch” before staggering off into the night just as a torrential storm descends (181). Because she has completely erased the memory of his nightly visits to her bed, she believes that Larry’s sexually charged epithets are an indication that he has somehow discovered her recent affair with Jess: “Certainly a child raised with an understanding of her father’s power like mine,” she tells us, “could not be surprised that even without any apparent source of information he would know her dearest secret. Hadn’t he always?” (185)

But it is her father’s secret, the story of his “unthinkable urge,” that emerges during the stormy night. While Ty and Pete search through the wind and rain for Larry, the two sisters huddle together on the living room couch and Rose tells Ginny

> He was having sex with you… I saw him go in [to your bedroom]! He stayed for a long time. . . . after he stopped going in to you, he started coming in to me. . . .
We had sex in my bed. . . . I thought you knew. I thought all these years you and I shared this knowledge, sort of underneath everything else. I thought if after that you could go along and treat him normally the way you do, then it was okay to just put it behind us. (189-90)

At first Ginny keeps a careful distance from what Rose has told her, acknowledging that it may be true for Rose but not for her. A few days later, however, lying on her childhood bed, memory comes rushing back:

Lying here, I knew that he had been in there to me, that my father had lain with me on that bed, that I had looked at the top of his head, at his balding spot in the brown grizzled hair, while feeling him suck my breasts. That was the only memory I could endure before I jumped out of the bed with a cry. (228)

For Ginny, knowledge of Larry’s sexual abuse does more than elucidate the contours of her relationship with her father. The memory of incest is the storm that helps dissolve Ginny’s passive acceptance of the society into which she has been born and to let go of the story she has habitually told herself about the world and her place in it. In the way that a flash of lightning can sometimes bring a landscape into stark relief, knowledge of Larry’s incest illuminates features of Ginny’s world that up until now she had failed to see. She refers to the time that comes after this revelation as her “new life” (206). Everything becomes subject to revision and, as she makes her way into the new landscape, she begins to see that none of her relationships, including her relationship to the land and to the past are what she thought them to be.

While Rose takes the tack that it is impossible to understand Daddy—“if you probe and probe and try to understand, it just holds you back. You start seeing things from his point of view again, and you’re just paralyzed”—, Ginny insists on trying to talk to her father about the incest (212). Her first impulse is to open everything up: she imagines family counseling and, after a certain number of visits to the therapist, the “onset of self-knowledge (Daddy’s mainly, but ours,
too)” (207). But it quickly becomes apparent that Daddy is incapable of self-knowledge. He is stalwart in his denial of any perspective other than his own, for one thing; for another, with the onset of dementia he has, as Rose puts it, taken “refuge in being crazy” (235).

Blocked from working things out with her father, Ginny tries to figure him out on her own. What she realizes as she begins to examine the social context in which Daddy is set, is that he is not an anomaly; rather, he is a pillar of the community. Though neighbors may not know every detail, the way he treats the members of his family has the implicit sanction of the powers-that-be in Zebulon County. As Rose points out,

[H]e’s respected. Others of them like him and look up to him. He fits right in. However many of them have fucked their daughters or their stepdaughters or their nieces or not, the fact is that they all accept beating as a way of life. . . . This person who beats and fucks his own daughters can go out into the community and get respect and power, and take it for granted that he deserves it. (302)

In the end, Ginny comes to believe that Daddy's brutality is more than simply tolerated by the community; she sees it as an integral part of the socio-economic system which Daddy has inherited and seeks to pass on to his children. "Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own?" she asks rhetorically towards the end of the novel. "No. I think he had lessons, and those lessons were part of the package, along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what" (342-43).

The only other family that is depicted in depth in A Thousand Acres is the Clark family. The portrait Smiley draws of this neighboring farm family supports Ginny's contention that Daddy is not an isolated phenomenon: Harold Clark, a highly successful and respected farmer, also treats his sons with brutality and sadism. Since Harold has only sons, the threat of father-daughter incest is removed, but otherwise Harold Clark and Larry Cook run their families in
remarkably similar fashions. Jess tells an emblematic tale from his childhood about his father's sadism: Harold once drove a cornpicker over a fawn lying in the machine's way "rather than leave the row standing, or turn, or even just stop and chase it away. . . . After he drove over it, he didn't stop to kill it, either. He just let it die" (234). When Jess is drafted to fight in Vietnam and deserts just before shipping out, Harold cruelly cuts him off: though Jess' parents know his address during his thirteen years of exile in Canada, they don't contact him when his mother contracts and later dies of cancer. With this as background, Jess’ first reaction upon hearing about Larry's sexual abuse of Rose and Ginny is to include his own parents in his anguished response: “Oh Ginny, they have aimed to destroy us, and I don’t know why,” he cries out, to which Ginny responds, "Maybe they have, Jess. Maybe they have aimed right for it" (196).

Tangled up with the sense of parental betrayal Ginny and Jess each feel is their confusion about why their parents have acted in these hurtful ways. Jess' cry "and I don't know why" pervades the novel: the older generation seems incomprehensible. Jess and Ginny's mothers are submissive figures who support their husbands' decisions even when they disagree with them. They betray their children by acquiescing to their husbands' emotional and physical cruelty instead of standing up against it. Their resigned silence in the face of their husband's brutality coupled with their early deaths makes these mothers inaccessible to their children. Ginny feels "fruitless" when she thinks about her mother: "[h]er images, partly memories of her, partly memories of photos I had seen of her, yielded no new answers to old mysteries" (94). Jess and Ginny's fathers, patriarchal figures who loom over the workings of the home dictating every particle of its operation both before and after the deaths of their wives, are equally mysterious. "I

16 Though sexual abuse does not appear to be present in the Clark family, there is a kind of sexual tension between Harold and his oldest son Jess. Jess, for example, tells Ginny at one point that Harold "loves me like a lover. . . . he wants to win me, and he thinks he can win me with the farm. . . . Harold wants to fix me right here in Zebulon County." When Ginny points out that "fix" is also the word for neutering a bull, Jess responds that "maybe [taking Harold's gift of the farm] would feel like the same thing" (127).
never know what he knows," Jess says, referring to his father (11) while Ginny says of her father, "There's always some mystery. [Daddy] doesn't say what he means" (104). Ginny describes trying to understand her father as being akin to listening to the minister attempt to explain God's goodness:

Finally . . . the minister would admit . . . that things didn't add up, that the reality was incomprehensible, and furthermore the failure of our understandings was the greatest proof . . . of power. . . . My father had no minister, no one to make him gel for us even momentarily. . . . I wish we had understood him. That, I see now, was our only hope. (20)

Generally in literature and in life—at least in the United States—we turn to psychology to help us make sense of an individual's motivations or to get a handle on the dynamics within a family. Psychology, in fact, makes several cameo appearances in the novel. When Caroline first goes to college, for example, she majors in psychology in the hopes of coming up with "plausible theories" about Daddy's "personality structure" which might result in helping him to change. "We were never able to bring things to the conclusion [Caroline] aimed for, though," Ginny reports, "because changing him ultimately demanded his own involvement, which would have been impossible" (118). "Impossible" is also the conclusion Ginny comes to when she first remembers the incest and thinks about trying to get Larry and the rest of the family into therapy (208). Around the age of 40, after she has left the farm and has been working as a waitress for several years in St. Paul, Ginny begins night classes at the University of Minnesota: "my plan was to major in psychology" (358). Seven years later, still working at the same restaurant, she writes her memoir.

While she displays a great sensitivity to the psychological dimensions of her past and especially to the painful process of her own awakening to the Cook family dynamics, Ginny is not able, in her memoir, to flesh out Larry’s inner life. His relationship with his mother, father,
and siblings, other formative experiences he had while growing up, and his thoughts and feelings as a grownup all remain beyond Ginny's reach. Even with the benefit of distance, reflection and whatever college studies in the field of psychology she has undertaken, he retains his mystery status, a hard, impenetrable knot at the center of her story.

The interesting thing about Ginny's memoir is what it ends up doing when it meets the brick wall of resistance to interpretation that is Larry Cook. Because she can't get access to the sort of information that would traditionally, by using psychological techniques, help Larry "gel" into a figure his children or we readers could understand, Ginny widens her field of view and begins to examine the social and economic forces that have gone in to making him. Rose has also made forays in this direction.

Years earlier, when Caroline attempts to use her fledgling knowledge of psychology to understand and change Daddy, Rose responds, “He’s a farmer, Caroline. That is a personality structure that supersedes every childhood influence” (118). Rose's comment has the effect of shutting down Caroline's inquiry, since her point is that Daddy can't be understood because what has formed him—his economic role—lies outside psychology's purview. While it’s possible that Rose's comment partly expresses her own need to repress psychological truths, it also resonates with Karl Marx's important observation that “[t]he mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Contribution 20-21).

Both Caroline and Rose's attempts to explain Daddy result in dead ends; neither sister ever develops a deeper understanding of him and both seem eager to hold on to the static, pat view of him they have evolved. Rose tells Ginny angrily, "I don't [want to understand Daddy]."
Anyway, I understand him perfectly. You're making it too complicated. It's as simple as a child's book. I want, I take, I do" (212). Caroline sees Daddy quite differently from Rose, but with an equally shallow lens: "I think that people are basically good, and sorry to make mistakes, and ready to make amends! Look at Daddy! He knew he'd treated me unfairly, but that we really felt love for each other. He made amends" (362). When Ginny expresses frustration at how much she and Caroline don't know about their past, how in the pictures they are sorting through in preparation for selling the farm after Rose's death "[e]ven Daddy doesn't look familiar," Caroline will have none of it. Staring at the same picture, Caroline insists that Daddy looks "[a]s familiar as a father should look, no more, no less" (361-62). That Caroline wants to keep her picture of Daddy at arms' length is confirmed a minute later when, as Ginny considers whether to tell Caroline about the incest, Caroline, sensing that Ginny is about to tell her something about her father that she doesn’t want to hear, runs from the house, starts up her car, and drives away.

Ginny's desire to understand Daddy is fierce enough that she is willing to let go of easy assessments and, though she doesn't think of it this way, to cross disciplinary boundaries. By combining aspects of each of her sisters' "approaches"—the psychological and the Marxian—Ginny comes up with a method that allows her to go a good deal further down the path of understanding Daddy than either of her sisters do. He is still a tough nut to crack, but she makes progress both because her observations about her family's dynamics and about the socio-economic forces acting upon it are given full expression in the memoir and because these two realms of investigation are placed into conversation with each other.

Ginny herself would certainly not describe the methodology of her memoir in the terms just mentioned. Smiley has seeded the novel with references to the world of psychology and to Marxian analysis, and she has Ginny move, through a careful examination of her lived
experience, towards an understanding of Daddy that borrows from both disciplines, but Ginny herself is much too unschooled a character to use this sort of academic or theoretical language herself.

On the broadest level, *A Thousand Acres* is a novel that explores the psychological effects of patriarchy and capitalism. To crop the picture even more closely, the novel traces the interaction between these two systems and their effects on families and individuals during a moment of economic transition. The form of capitalist enterprise where work is located in the home, such as a family business or a farm, can have a strong patriarchal character since the father is always physically present. As a capitalist economy develops, however, it offers women a means of escape from this sort of patriarchal setup. *A Thousand Acres* chronicles the trajectory of individuals and families away from patriarchy and from the patriarchal father as capitalism evolves into corporate or what Smiley has called "late capitalism" ("People").

Larry Cook is the perfect character to place at the center of such a chronicle. For one thing, because of his role as both head of the family and its main wage earner, he is the conduit through which external social and economic forces enter and organize the family, or, as Ginny puts it when she is still living on the farm and under his direction, her father is "the living source of it all, of us all" (176). Ginny's study of him allows us to begin to understand the effect both patriarchy and capitalism can have upon the family. In addition, both because of his advanced age and because of widespread economic conditions that are allowing corporations to gobble up
family farms, he is a patriarch on the verge of losing power. Larry's decline thus serves as a metaphor for the general decline of patriarchy during this time of capitalist transition.\footnote{Larry's weakening grip on power and, because of that, on the "official story" is what allows Ginny's alternative narrative about his function and about the system he has presided over to come to voice.}

Just as \textit{A Thousand Acres} is not primarily a novel about the workings out within one family of oedipal tensions or sibling rivalry, it is also not primarily a novel about father-daughter incest, though it is true, as I have already noted, that the revelation of Larry's sexual abuse is central to the novel in that it catalyzes Ginny's awakening. What Ginny awakens to, however, is much more than the suppressed story of violence against women. Incest becomes a metaphor through which other features of her world—a socio-economic system where women and children are subservient to men (patriarchy) and where the weak are exploited, often physically, by the strong (capitalism)—make themselves known.\footnote{Barbara Mathieson argues in "The Polluted Quarry: Nature and Body in \textit{A Thousand Acres}" that Smiley uses incest as a metaphor for "the "physical domination and economic exploitation of the natural world by industrialized human cultures" (128) and that Larry's "violation of the older daughters mirrors the system's exploitation and rape of the land and water" (136). For a critic who sees incest not as a metaphor but as Smiley's primary subject, see Susan Ayres' article, "Incest in \textit{A Thousand Acres}: Cheap Trick or Feminist Re-vision?" Ayres argues that "Smiley's re-writing of Lear is part of [a] radical feminist project to recover suppressed stories of violence" (149) and that the novel's primary goal is to show us "the violence of the patriarchy, the oppressive force that destroys women's sexuality" (154). For a discussion of the complex ways that fictional narratives of incest and sexual violence in American literature can serve, reflect, or influence political, national, or societal projects, see Dana Heller's article "Anatomies of Rape" which is a review of three book-length studies on the issue.}

Smiley herself does not seem to see Larry's incest in and of itself as the most important part of the story \textit{A Thousand Acres} has to tell about postwar American fathers and daughters. In an article written in 2001, ten years after the publication of the novel, Smiley points out that incest is a widespread phenomenon which is not directly tied to any one kind of society or economic system. Problems between fathers and daughters, she writes, "are deeply ingrained" and were "already very ancient" by the time Shakespeare wrote \textit{King Lear}.
Considerable drama would come from the contrast and conflict between cultural norms of family life and what you might call the biological or mammalian urges that the dominant male has toward his offspring of the opposite sex. Issues of sexuality are no different from issues of the power hierarchy. The daughters mate and bring alien males into the group. The ownership of the territory comes into question. The question is worked out. It happens every day. It is because the Lear material is so basic and so ancient that we can link it to the behavior patterns of wolves, horses, chimps, gorillas, farmers, corporate executives, movie stars. ("Not" 160-161)

Thus, for Smiley the form incest takes in A Thousand Acres is merely one manifestation of a larger drama being worked out between Larry and his daughters.

In the same article, Smiley rejects the claim put forth by historian John Mack Faragher that A Thousand Acres is a historical novel: "it is not the story of every farm, or of farming in general," she cautions. Instead, she says, the "[t]he obvious internal system of A Thousand Acres is King Lear" ("Not" 160). Smiley explains that she made tragedy the main literary form of her novel in order to conform to King Lear, the "historical details" of A Thousand Acres, she tells us, "are there to build the illusion that the novel is 'reportlike,' and to make the tragic vision of the novel convincing as 'Realism,' a form that novels may take" ("Not"162). Literary form simply imposes "meaning and order upon otherwise meaningless details," Smiley asserts, concluding her argument that A Thousand Acres is not a historical novel with the rather vague observation that the "writer and the reader use the [literary] form together to make a transitory meaning that enlightens them in passing about how the world works" ("Not" 162-3).

While in the statements I have just quoted, Smiley downplays the historical insights which populate her novel, elsewhere she has demonstrated a keen interest in the effects that history, and particularly economic history, can have on family arrangements. In an article in The

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19 For the exchange between Smiley and Faragher on this question, see Faragher's "The Historical Imagination of A Thousand Acres" and Smiley's "Not a Pretty Picture."
Observer, for example, published in 2000—just a year before the above-quoted interchange with Faragher—she writes:

[L]ate capitalism has evidently decided that what is best for us and our children is serial monogamy, frequent changes of employment, and a high degree of instability. It has decided that, on balance, it is better for all adults to work rather than for one designated gender to stay home with the children. It has decided that most children will spend at least part of their childhoods in the care of people outside their families. It has decided that the individual's relationship to society will be less and less mediated through the family and more and more experienced directly. ("People")

In the same article, Smiley discusses "the success of feminism as an outgrowth of the free market," identifies codependent relationships as "an interesting late-capitalist pathology," and concludes with the ringing observation that the "social redemption of marriage in our time is precisely in intimacy as a countervailing force against the chaotic isolation promoted by free-market capitalism."

Against these statements, which draw explicit links between economic history and the sociological and psychological structure of family life, Smiley's assertion that A Thousand Acres is not a historical novel begins to sound a little like Mark Twain's epigraph to The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn which begins "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted . . . " (10). The feeling that Smiley protests too much intensifies when one discovers that Faragher is not the only critic who has found the novel full of valuable historical insight and when one notices that the relationship between economics and family life that Smiley sketches out in The Observer, quoted above, is quite a large part of A Thousand Acres' "internal system." 20

Even the novel's relationship to King Lear, as I shall shortly show, allows the author to consider

20 For other critics who find valuable historical insights in A Thousand Acres, see Jack Temple Kirby's "Rural Culture in the American Middle West: Jefferson to Jane Smiley" and Amy Levin's "Familiar Terrain: Domestic Ideology and Farm Policy in Three Women's Novels About the 1980s."
the historical progression from one socio-economic system to another—from the feudalism depicted in *King Lear* to the capitalism depicted in *A Thousand Acres*.

There are a number of plausible explanations for Smiley's soft pedaling of the role that history plays in her novel. It may be that the creative process she goes through while writing causes her to loosen her grip on other modes of thought so that she is only minimally aware of the way her analysis of economic and social history seeps in to shape her material. In a talk given in 1996 and published in 2000, Smiley discusses the process that goes into composing a novel in just such terms. Describing "an organic machine of composition [that] works 24 hours a day," she explains that much of the machine, though present, is unseen and unknown even to the writer. The visible part is intellect, reason, and intention. But the larger part, lost in darkness, is made up of the body, the emotions, the remembered and the unremembered but still present, the DNA, the immediate environment, the passing currents of attention, dreams, half-thought thoughts, the impressions made by others. ("Shakespeare" 160)

It may also be that Smiley chooses to disavow the political import of her novel for the same reason that many U.S. artists are reluctant to have the "political" dimensions of their work discussed: the fear that once a work is labeled "political" it will be taken less seriously. This fear may be exacerbated in Smiley's case because she takes a long, cold look at the taboo subject of capitalism, measuring its negative effects on families, communities, and the environment quite closely.21

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21 David McNally points out that even as late as 2006 many anti-globalization activists in North America "have displayed a definite shyness about using the term 'capitalism'. . . . [p]erhaps fearing they will be seen as crazy radicals, or identified with the legacy of authoritarian Communist Party regimes." McNally argues that for activists "this avoidance of the term 'capitalism' comes with a cost: it encourages critics and activists to see the problem not as the system that organizes our lives, but merely as a set of policies pursued by those currently at the top" (83). In the literary realm, Terry Eagleton, writing just a few years before *A Thousand Acres* was published, notes that critics who have a radical political perspective "have a set of social priorities with which most people at present tend to disagree. This is why they are commonly dismissed as 'ideological,' because 'ideology' is always a way of describing other people's interests rather than one's own" (*Literary Theory* 211).
Along these same lines, Smiley's attempt to de-emphasize *A Thousand Acres'* relationship to actual U.S. history, may be an attempt to protect her readers' experience of the work. The book is, as she often puts it, her "most famous and admired" novel ("Shakespeare" 177). In a country where words like "capitalism," "socialism," and "communism" carry such explosive charges, keeping mum about what sort of history is being told and what kind of politics such a history either points towards or calls into question affords her readers a greater space for private contemplation and engagement: readers can approach the story on its own terms without the baggage of preconceived notions or labels.

Whatever Smiley's intentions or process of composition, the novel itself plots out a clear correspondence between the psychological and the socio-economic conditions of life in postwar rural America. Smiley's protestations aside, that correspondence is, in the main, historically accurate. And while patriarchy and the form of capitalism that Larry Cook inherits from his parents and seeks to pass on to his children have been largely replaced by other types of economic and social arrangements as the twentieth century comes to a close, *A Thousand Acres* still speaks to us because, as Smiley consistently reminds us, the ghosts of the past and of this past in particular, still walk among us. "[M]y inheritance is with me," Ginny tells us at the end of her memoir. "All of it is present now, here" (369).

As I mentioned, Smiley has identified three “threads” that came together for her in writing *A Thousand Acres*: “feminism, environmentalism, and a vaguely Marxist materialism” ("Shakespeare" 169). It is time now to look more closely at the socio-economic story that lies embedded in *A Thousand Acres*. 
The Third Thread

While Smiley was writing *A Thousand Acres* she was also teaching a class on world literature. Alongside such works as *Don Quixote*, *Candide* and *The Metamorphosis*, Smiley assigned her students a three-volume history called *Civilization and Capitalism* by Fernand Braudel. She writes:

By the end of the semester, the students knew what capitalism was and how the works we read expressed and critiqued it. By the end of three semesters teaching this course, I had a much clearer idea of how our times have evolved out of Shakespeare's times, and how ideas and questions posed in his works have been answered and modified by history. I developed a thought or two about the intrusion of notions of ownership and commodification upon familial and romantic relationships, and a thought or two about the specificity, as opposed to universality, of Western European ideas of family order, of ownership and exploitation of land, resources, and the services of other human beings, of conflict, literary form, ego, power, gender, and the finality of death” (“Shakespeare” 169-170).

Smiley has not, to my knowledge, said anything further about how her pairing of *King Lear* with *A Thousand Acres* speaks to the question of capitalism or helps us understand how "our times have evolved out of Shakespeare's times." In the following section, I explore Smiley's pairing of these two texts with an eye to these questions and conclude that her use of *King Lear* allows her novel to achieve an unusually deep perspective on our economic past and present.

The fathers in *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* are too close to events and, in each case, too much aligned with the status quo to be able to gain much perspective themselves on the socio-economic forces rocking their worlds. The Earl of Gloucester, for example, believing the false rumor that his son Edgar is plotting against him, is reduced to wondering if there is a connection between recent “eclipses in the sun and moon” and the discord breaking out across the land, including between fathers and children (I.2.112-121). Later in the play, King Lear,
helpless to explain why his daughters Regan and Goneril are treating him so harshly, asks if there is “any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?” (III.6.76-77) In *A Thousand Acres*, Harold and Larry are equally ignorant of the reasons why their families are so full of strife and discord. These characters' inability to locate themselves in history is not unusual; indeed, it is the rare person in any age who is able to do so. By setting Ginny's saga in 1979, some twelve years before the novel's publication, and, in addition, by pairing it with a more ancient text which describes a different but related moment in economic history, Smiley gives her readers a chance to view recent and contemporary economic history through a stereoscopic lens.

What ties the two works together is that each speaks to an important moment in capitalist development. Though it is set in an archaic, pre-Christian realm, *King Lear* reflects and comments upon the economic and social landscape of Shakespeare’s own time. Written at the opening of the seventeenth century, the play is concerned with the bourgeois mentality beginning to appear in England during those years as feudalism gives way to capitalism. Nearly four centuries later, *A Thousand Acres* explores the bourgeois mentality in the United States where capitalism, now firmly entrenched, is undergoing major changes as it evolves into what many theorists have taken to calling "late capitalism."

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels describe the wrenching change from feudalism to capitalism in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*:

> The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties . . . and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.” It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value. . . . [F]or exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation. . . . The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation. . . . Constant revolutionizing of production,
uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. . . . All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (475-76)

Marx and Engels' words recall King Lear's speech during the storm when he realizes that, stripped of the trappings of his feudal society—its social contracts, customs, and hierarchies—man is but "a poor, bare, forked animal" (III.4.110). Marx and Engels' description of life under the rule of the bourgeoisie also evokes the image of Larry Cook, especially his egotistical calculations and callous treatment of family and community.

Several critics have written on Shakespeare's handling of feudalism and the rising bourgeois ethic in *King Lear*. Julian Markels argues that the play “dramatizes a revolution in which the cosmology, politics and ethics of feudalism . . . are supplanted by the bourgeois politics and ethics . . . which continue to define our culture” today (11). Noting that Shakespeare “lived at a time when an uncertain balance had been struck in the transition from the feudal-aristocratic society of medieval England to the emergent bourgeois state,” Paul Delany sees the play as pitting “rival concepts of human nature against each other in sharp and mutually exclusive opposition” (429-30). In this contest, Gloucester’s older son Edmund, Lear’s two oldest daughters Goneril and Regan, and Regan’s husband Cornwall typify the new bourgeois ethic where achievement and merit trump inherited status. Edmund, who dismisses obligations to others as “the plague of custom,” envisions a world of unlimited space and boundless individual ambition (I.ii.3). Arrayed against Edmund’s camp are King Lear, his youngest daughter Cordelia, his advisor Kent, his friend and fellow noble Gloucester, Gloucester’s younger son Edgar, and Cornwall’s servant. This group supports the feudal ethic of mutual fealty amongst people of different social ranks. To them the universe is a bounded place where people express
themselves in and through their socially-assigned roles. When, in the mock trial during the storm, Lear cries out, “[L]et them anatomiize Regan. See what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?” (III.6.76-77) he is asking, according to Markels,

whether nature provides warrant for either idea of civilization: fealty among unequals within aristocratic feudalism, competition among equals within democratic capitalism; . . . in pursuing Lear’s question through the . . . play, [Shakespeare] identifies an ideological revolution in which the new cosmology, politics and ethics, however destructive and self-destructive, nevertheless supplant the old and bequeath to the future—to us—their destructive rapacity as unfinished business. (11)  

It is this unfinished business—the “destructive rapacity” of the bourgeois ethic—that *A Thousand Acres* takes up in its portrait of Larry Cook and the capitalist world he inherits from his parents and grandparents. In Smiley’s novel, the bourgeois ethic finds its articulation not, as it does in *King Lear*, in sons and daughters whose bid for power is defeated, but in fathers who sit at the center of power. A self-made man like Larry Cook who has “the lust to run things exactly the way he [wants] to no matter what” (343) and who claws his way to the top of the economic heap in Zebulon County, is not a rude upstart, not a bastard son or one of Lear’s “pelican daughters” (III.4.75). Rather, as Ginny makes clear, he is a respected pillar of the community. This is because by the late twentieth century, the bourgeois values which Shakespeare, with both fascination and considerable apprehension, saw looming on the horizon of his world have assumed center stage and become the status quo.  

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22 For more on the transition from feudalism to capitalism as it is expressed in *King Lear*, see Richard Halpern’s essay “Historica Passio: King Lear’s Fall into Feudalism.”

23 Shakespeare himself was torn between the old aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie. Paul Delany points out that though Shakespeare was born into a bourgeois family and eventually became a bourgeois investor in real estate, his values as a writer tended towards the aristocratic both for artistic and expressive reasons and because the theater's patrons were, at that time, aristocrats. "Unable to reconcile himself with the emerging bourgeois forces," Delany writes, Shakespeare "either associates their predominance with the tragic decay of the old order or else opposes to them a mystical countervailing force: Cordelia's redemptive grace, the patriarchal magic of Prospero." In his later
And yet, like *King Lear*, Smiley’s novel is set in a time of social and economic change. The bourgeois ethic that Larry lives by is characteristic of an early stage of capitalism that has given way over the course of the twentieth century in developed countries like the United States to what Jane Smiley and others refer to as “late capitalism,” a stage characterized by corporate capitalism, the globalization of capital, and an increasingly postindustrial economy (“People”). Just as in Shakespeare’s time, these changes in the economic fabric of contemporary life have prompted a new set of ethics to emerge and, along with it, a contest between rival concepts of human nature and between rival visions of both the past and the future.

Markels has pointed out that in Shakespeare’s play King Lear is “a father to both views” of society—that of a “redeeming corporate existence” under feudalism, as represented by Cordelia who affirms the bonds of feudal loyalty, and that of an “invidious individual existence” under capitalism, as represented by Goneril and Regan (11). Larry Cook is also a father to differing views of human nature and society. Rose, in the spirit of a small-scale capitalist, continues to work the farm to her last dying breath, going “around like some queen. . . . your dad all over,” as Ty reports to Ginny (340). Caroline, Ginny, Ty and Rose’s two daughters all leave the farm and find places as service workers, professionals, or hired hands in large corporate enterprises. The “destructive rapacity” of the bourgeois ethic is still a problem of late capitalism, but a more cooperative, less individualistic mindset is also beginning to emerge, as workers, no longer able to dream of running their own businesses, take their places in the corporate hierarchy, and as alternatives and resistances to corporate capitalism, many of them emphasizing a communal ethos and pointing to a different, possibly non-capitalist, future, begin to appear at the margins of society. These alternative economic futures are hinted at but remain decidedly

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plays, including in *King Lear*, Delaney concludes that his "art may . . . still embody a 'life-affirming humanism' . . . but it is neither an optimistic nor a progressive humanism—rather one whose essence is nostalgia, whose glory is that of the setting sun" (439).
beyond the field of the novel: neither the life that Ginny establishes after she leaves the farm, nor the life that Jess, who has previously had experience running food coops and community gardens, establishes on the West Coast at novel's end is fleshed out (334). This new world coming into being remains beyond the bounds of Smiley’s novel in the same way that the outlines of bourgeois life, which in the early 1600s were still just emerging, are indistinct in Shakespeare’s play. Each author can nod to the present and future, but their works most accurately look back to depict the era that is on the verge of passing away.

Because they affect the old and the new generation differently, economic changes generally create tremendous intergenerational tensions. King Lear and Larry Cook, representatives of the “old” order in their respective times, clash with those of their children who wish or are forced to move in new social and economic directions. Siblings split along similar lines: those who wish to perpetuate the father’s regime find themselves in pitched battles with those who want to embrace the coming economic and social changes.

Both works raise the question of whether and in what way the older generation, wrought under different economic circumstances, can help to prepare the next generation to operate in a different social and economic landscape. This problem becomes particularly acute under capitalism where conditions change rapidly and where people must keep abreast of the latest innovations just to survive let alone flourish. King Lear, representing as he does the end of the feudal era, was a member of the last generation to begin life outside this mode of rapid change and the first to experience the sort of wrenching intergenerational tensions that become commonplace under capitalism and are vividly exemplified in *A Thousand Acres*.24

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24 Describing the era of rapid change that is ushered in with the fall of feudalism, Marx and Engels write that "[a]ll fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify" (*Manifesto* 476).
The pairing of *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* serves as a reminder to the reader of how much the world has, in fact, changed since feudal times. The ghost of the feudal past haunting Smiley's novel also subtly conveys to readers that change, no matter how much we may wish to resist it, is inevitable: a family farm in Iowa in the year 1979 will, like King Lear's kingdom, also pass. Occasionally Ginny is able to detach herself enough from both present history and her own anxiety to tap into this longer perspective. After recounting the way that her father has accumulated his thousand acres of land, Ginny concludes "[b]ut if I look past the buzzing machine monotonously unzipping the crusted soil, at the field itself and the fields around it, I remember that the seemingly stationary fields are always flowing toward one farmer and away from another" (136-37). In this moment Ginny is able to take in what Larry cannot: that his ownership of the fields only appears to be settled, that the seeming solidity of having "the biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer" (20) will eventually, to borrow from Marx and Engels, "melt into air."

The characteristics that Marx and Engels identify as hallmarks of the bourgeois era—"[c]onstant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation"—are in full evidence in *A Thousand Acres* and characters must wrestle with the wrenching effects such conditions exact on the psyche (*Manifesto* 476). When Ginny is nervously awaiting her father's signing over of the farm into a family "corporation," Jess, who has studied Buddhism during his exile years out West, tries to soothe her anxiety: "Change is good," he tells her. "In the Far East, there are plenty of people who own a robe and a bowl. That's all. They throw themselves on the waters of the world, and they know they will be borne up. They are more secure than you or I" (37). Immersed in a society of "everlasting uncertainty and agitation," Ginny, like most of the other characters in the novel, has
learned to live with her anxiety; it is so much a part of the social environment that it becomes, like background noise, something she tends to repress or ignore. By detaching herself for a moment from her usual way of thinking, as Jess helps Ginny do in this scene, she is able to become aware, at least for a moment, of how anxious she does feel and how that anxiety is connected to her overcharged attachment to owning material things.

The repression of feelings, in particular feelings of love and compassion for one's fellows, whether they be family or members of the community, is a major theme in both *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*. In both works the characters who have the hardest hearts are the ones most caught up in the capitalistic striving after material wealth. In *King Lear*, Edmund and Goneril and Regan are portrayed as people in whom compassion has been killed off. In *A Thousand Acres*, Larry Cook and Harold Clark are their emotional counterparts. Larry, for example, barely seems to register his wife's death: "Nothing about the death of my mother" Ginny tells us, "stopped time for my father, prevented him from reckoning his assets and liabilities and spreading himself more widely over the landscape. No aspect of his plans was undermined, put off, questioned" (136). Ginny notes that land was bought both when Larry's mother died and again when her mother dies (133-35). This information leaves readers with the uneasy feeling that Larry's thousand acre kingdom is built upon—even out of—the dead, congealed bodies of female family members. Eight-year-old Ginny believes Zebulon County to be "the center of the universe" (3). While Ginny grows out of this childish perspective, Larry never does: he is always manipulating others for his own gain. In such a schema, other people figure into his egotistical calculations only as stepping stones or barriers to his own progress. They are never people in their own right. "He shouts, 'I—I—I—' . . . glorying in his self-definition," Ginny tells us, "[impressing] us . . . with the weight of his 'I' and the feathery
nonexistence of ourselves" (306). Harold is depicted as similarly self-involved and insensitive to the feelings and needs of others, including, most especially, the members of his own family. The story Jess tells of him deliberately driving over the fawn in his cornfield is symbolic of the hard heartedness he displays in all his interactions.

Harold and Larry never acknowledge nor atone for their callous treatment of others. In contrast, in *King Lear*, Lear and Gloucester begin the play with hard hearts but their feelings towards their fellow human beings are softened as the action progresses and in the end each father attempts to make amends for his solipsistic behavior. Lear, for example, begins by ordering about his daughters and his councilors. As William Dodd has shown, Lear's communication at the beginning of the play is one-way and autocratic: he expects to speak and have others merely listen and obey. 25 As the play progresses, however, Lear is forced to become more democratic in his interactions. His ability to take in another's experience and point of view is not confined to interactions with family members or members of his government, but extends eventually to include the poorest citizens of his realm. Thus, when Lear spends a night out in the storm, he realizes he has taken "too little care" of the poor and concludes that those higher up in the social order need to "Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,/That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,/ And show the heavens more just" (III.4.33-36). 26 Gloucester is similarly changed by his fall from power. The rich man whose every lust is gratified, he realizes, "will not see/ Because he does not feel." Gloucester, completely blind by this point in the play, prays that

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25 See William Dodd's "Impossible Worlds" where he does a close reading of the speech patterns in the first scene of *King Lear*.

26 A.C. Bradley notes that during the storm Lear “comes in his affliction to think of others first, and to seek, in tender solicitude for his poor boy, the shelter he scorns for his own bare head; [he] learns to feel and to pray for the miserable and houseless poor, to discern the falseness of flattery and the brutality of authority, and to pierce below the differences of rank and raiment to the common humanity beneath; [his] sight is so purged by scalding tears that it sees at last how power and place and all things in the world are vanity except love...” (204-05).
the heavens will force such men to see and feel as he has come to see and feel so that they might
distribute their excess wealth and thereby ensure that "each man have enough" (IV.1.70-73).

The difference between Larry and Lear is that when Lear falls, he falls backwards,
historically speaking, into feudalism. With its emphasis on mutual fealty among the different
ranks, feudalism has at its theoretical core an ethic of caring and concern for others, including
those "wretches" who occupy the lowest rungs of society. It is to these communal values that
Shakespeare nostalgically recalls Lear and Gloucester as the play progresses. Larry and Harold,
however, have lived their entire lives under capitalism. They have imbibed its ethic of cutthroat
competition and, along with it, the firm conviction that the right order of things is for the fittest
to survive; as such, they know of no alternative communal system, no kinder, gentler way to
structure human relations that they might return to when their world begins to fall apart. They
cannot access a more compassionate self or view of others because they have not been schooled
to do so by their parents or by the surrounding society. Neither are they able to speak candidly
about their inner thoughts nor to make amends to those whom they have hurt. Instead, they
remain silent monoliths, their insides a mystery, perhaps vacant because never developed,
perhaps full of pain or fury or regret, but in any case so ringed about with defenses that they are
unable to change. It is left to their children, forced by changing economic conditions, to re-
evaluate capitalism's promises and effects and to cobble together new ways to live. The
following section looks closely at the journey Larry and Harold's children go through as they
grapple with the social and economic system bequeathed to them by their fathers and then steps

27 I am indebted to Richard Halpern for this insight which he fleshes out in “Historica Passio: King Lear’s Fall into
Feudalism.”

28 This, of course, raises the interesting question as to whether feudalism, which Marx and Engels defined as
"exploitation veiled by religious and political illusions," can in any way be seen as more humanistic than the
capitalism which took its place (Manifesto 475).
back to survey the overall effect capitalism has had on family and community life in Zebulon County.

The Monopoly Game: Capitalism and Men's Hard Hearts

Soon after Larry signs over the farm, Ginny, Rose, Ty, Pete and Jess begin to gather at Ginny and Ty’s house each night for an extended game of Monopoly. The game, which they dub the “Million Dollar World Series of Monopoly” because they have agreed to play until one of them accumulates a million dollars, quickly assumes the character of an addiction: “none of us could keep away. . . in spite of all the work to be done [on the farm]” (76). In the beginning everyone’s spirits are high and there is much pleasant banter about what the winner’s prize should be, but the tournament comes to an abrupt end two weeks later when, amidst rising tensions, Rose picks up the table and dumps the board and all its pieces into her husband’s lap. There is a shocked silence and then Jess says, “Unrestrained capitalism always ends in war. I think Rosa Luxemburg said that. Shall we count our points overall?” (140) Events intervene and the score never does get added up and so it turns out that in the Monopoly game, as in their real lives, none of the five becomes a financial winner.

Jess’ comment flags the fact that Smiley employs the Monopoly tournament as a metaphor for the characters’ own relationships to capitalism. There are no restraints in the game, no anti-trust laws or other devices to soften, in Marx and Engels' words, the "egotistical calculations" of the players as they compete against each other to accumulate the largest amount of resources and goods. Neither communal activity nor fellow feeling are rewarded; the game validates only the accumulation of material wealth. Winning is all. Further, the accepted premise
is that there can be only one winner, implying that there will be quite a few losers. The obvious extrapolation from the game to the rest of Smiley's novel is the way, just as players around the Monopoly table gobble up the properties of their less-fortunate neighbors, the Cook family farm is gobbled up by The Heartland Corporation. The war which capitalist economics has unleashed amongst the inhabitants of Zebulon County ruptures the community and facilitates the breakup of families alongside the loss of their farms.\(^{29}\)

But in the beginning, before there is all-out war, there are exuberant feelings amongst the players at the table. Smiley captures the initial excited rush of the capitalist enterprise when she has Ginny say, in an aside to her readers as the game begins, "I wonder if there is anyone who isn’t perked up by the sight of a Monopoly board, all the colors, all the bits and pieces, all the possibilities" (76).

Possibilities are, in fact, on everyone’s mind in those first heady days after the transfer of the farm. Even before the papers are signed, Pete comes up with “five or six well-thought-out ideas” including raising gladiolus for the flower market and growing a stand of black walnut trees (36). Within a week of Larry having turned over the farm, Ty, who has always dreamed of enlarging the farm’s hog operation, begins poring over expansion plans. Jess, buoyed up by Harold’s talk of rewriting his will to include his prodigal son, dreams of putting into practice the organic farming techniques he has learned out West. When he discovers that there is a statewide association of organic farmers, he goes to visit a nearby farm and returns to tell Ginny jubilantly, “They’ve got dairy cattle and horses and chickens for eggs. . . .The vegetable garden is like a museum of nonhybrid varieties. . . .[and there are] twenty different apple varieties in his orchard.

\(^{29}\) See Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, particularly chapter eight which is entitled "The Machine Breakers," for another fictional portrayal of this process of monopoly consolidation.
. . .Harold’s got to come around [to organic farming]. . . [It’s like looking paradise in the face” (217).

It is important to note that Rose and Ginny don’t articulate any plans of their own for the farm during this period. Rather, in keeping with the patriarchal ethos the farm families in Zebulon County are steeped in, they support their husbands’ economic dreams and plans, just as formerly they, as daughters, and their husbands, as sons-in-law, supported Larry’s farming plans and practices.

The changes to the two farms that Ty, Pete and Jess are considering “seem radical” to Larry and Harold, who have cut back, over the past thirty years, on raising animals and on growing a variety of plant species in order to concentrate on maximizing the production of just a few crops. Jess complains that when it comes to innovation, his father and his younger brother Loren “don’t have any ideas at all. Just corn and beans, beans and corn” (36).

What Jess has either forgotten or failed to grasp is that Harold and Larry were once at the very forefront of farm innovation: they were part of the generation that pioneered the system of industrial agriculture which developed in the United States after World War II. “Just corn and beans”— the idea of cultivating large swaths of just one or two crops—is so much a part of the status quo by the late 1970s that it may seem to Jess like no idea at all, but it was once the older generation’s Monopoly board of “bright bits and pieces,” its collection of shining possibilities. Over the past three decades, farmers like Larry and Harold have ridden the crest of the new agricultural techniques—chemical herbicides and pesticides, mineral fertilizers, genetic engineering, and increasing mechanization—to prosperity. Ginny’s father proves adept at making the most of the new opportunities; he was one of the first farmers in Zebulon County, for example, to have his crops sprayed from the air (132). His “lust for every new method designed
to swell productivity” is chronicled in a 1957 farming magazine where, amidst pictures of a crop duster flying over the Cook farm, Larry is quoted as saying, “Farmers who embrace the new methods will prosper, but those that don’t are already stumbling around” (45).

In fact, farmers like Larry and Harold did prosper: agricultural productivity in the postwar period grew at twice the rate of manufacturing so that by the 1970s, historian John Mack Faragher notes, “an hour of labor on the most advanced industrial farms produced four times more corn and five times more pork than a quarter-century before” (149). Having accumulated one thousand prime acres of farm land, valued at over three million dollars when the novel opens in the spring of 1979, Larry has done the equivalent of winning the Monopoly tournament of his generation; indeed, if the value of the farm were to be divided equally amongst his three daughters, each would have walked away in 1979 with a real million dollars instead of the Monopoly money Ginny and Rose vie for around the dining room table.

During those first heady days after the transfer of the farm there is a palpable sigh of relief as the inheriting generation feels the weight of their fathers begin to lift off them. One index recorded by Ginny is the difference between how it feels to eat dinner with and without Daddy. With Daddy, Ginny and the rest of the family find themselves eating “with our heads down, hungrily, quickly, because there was nothing else to do at the table.” Daddy himself is clearly “not having a good time”(101). In contrast, Ginny feels liberated from her father’s rigid routines and his oppressive negativity when she eats dinner with just the members of the Monopoly group: “[W]e ate with appetite and joked over our food in a way that was new for us.” Jess, who seems to function as an alternative father figure for the group, sits at the head of the table. He looks, Ginny reports, "as if he were having a good time, and glad of it.” Instead of wishing to escape from the table as quickly as possible as is the case when Daddy is present, no
one wants to leave: the “mealtime sociability . . . lasted and lasted. We were still at the table, talking, at ten o’clock” (100-102).

In the atmosphere of “sociability” engendered by Daddy’s absence, members of the Monopoly group begin to play with the question of how identity might be fashioned or refashioned and they begin to see themselves and each other in new ways. Jess and Pete—the two "city boys" of the group—take turns regaling the others with stories about their travels outside Zebulon County (77). Pete tells of being held down and shaved bald by some Wyoming ranchers he hitchs a ride with and then being mistaken for a cancer patient by the next person who picks him up. As Jess and Pete tell of taking on roles assigned them by total strangers, their stories hint at the possibility that identity is more fluid than life in Zebulon County would allow. Pete was a musician before he married Rose and began working for Larry. During these Monopoly nights, Ginny sees, for the first time, the artist/musician side of Pete that has lain dormant all these years on the farm. He “had certain powers” of expression, she realizes with surprise, and “an intelligence that I wasn’t used to allowing him” (79).

Jokes about Larry’s and Harold’s idiosyncrasies abound during the nights around the Monopoly board. As their fathers’ behaviors are discussed openly, new insights about identity and personal freedom emerge here too. Jess, who has a clearer perspective on his father than the others simply because he has spent so many years away, is able to explain that Harold manipulates people by pretending to be foolish or crazy when underneath he is really “cannier and smarter than he lets on, and in the slippage between what he looks like and what he is, there’s a lot of freedom” (109). This notion causes Ginny to do a mental double take: “what attracted me . . . was . . . the perfect way such a plan could deflect the neighbors’ knowledge of you” (109).
Though she doesn't make the connection here, Ginny herself embarked on a similar scheme to have some freedom several years earlier when Ty, unwilling to face another miscarriage, had insisted that they stop trying to get pregnant. Disobeying Ty, Ginny decides to pretend to use birth control. Having a baby becomes her “private project.” Pursuing it shows her "a whole secret world, a way to have two lives, to be two selves. I felt larger and more various than I had in years, full of unknowns, and also of untapped possibilities” (26).

It is precisely this secret world of "private projects" and "untapped possibilities" that the talk swirling about the Monopoly table teases out into the open as the players begin to verbally try on new identities and dreams. For Ginny the weight lifting from her shoulders is not only the burden of her father's judgments and values; it is also the weight of the censorious community, or, as Ginny puts it, “the great open invisible eye of The Neighbors" (185-86). The insight that she could break the bonds imposed upon her by her small town community comes, fittingly, the night that the Monopoly game comes to its fractious end. Driving by some houses in a nearby city, Ginny suddenly sees “new meaning in them.” Whereas she had once envied the intimacy that city neighbors living close together seemed to share, she now sees that the “families who lived [in the city] had only the most tenuous links to one another. . . . [t]hat was what was to be envied…the uniqueness of each family’s fate, each family’s, each couple’s, freedom to make or find something apart from the others” (147). Fast upon this insight comes another: Ty’s “endless stoicism,” an attitude of patient endurance that Ginny has also always cultivated in herself, “was getting us, getting me, nowhere.” She sees why she has not been able to fulfill her dream of having a baby: “Who would stay with a mother who merely waited? Who accepted things so dully. . . .No! It was time to sit up, to reach out, to choose this and not that!” (147) The ethos of bourgeois individualism, of being free to seize opportunities, to make up one’s own mind about
which risks or gambles to take and which ones to pass up, and, especially, of being able to “make or find something apart from the others” has taken root in Ginny's psyche and is beginning to crowd out her earlier training to always accept and support her father's projects and the status quo of the community that he represents.

Ty’s “endless stoicism” merits special attention because it points to another important way in which capitalism affects the psyche and shapes family and community interactions. Capitalism, in its first flush, may help individuals tap into a spirit of expansive freedom which allows them to break with tradition and move in new directions. But alongside this exuberant opening up of possibilities, there exists another mindset, one which encourages the tamping down of one's own and others' feelings, especially feelings that might interfere with the economic project at hand. Partly it doesn't do to be an open book when one is trying to get the jump on one's competitors. Thus, one of the business lessons Larry tries to pass on to his daughters is "don't tell your neighbors your business" (132). But feelings need to be repressed for another reason, as well: if they were not, the capitalist system, with its ethic of eat-or-be-eaten, would be much less tolerable to its participants and most especially to its victims.

In Ty's case, stoicism is a strategy that he has adopted to improve his financial standing. Ty is Larry's heir apparent; when they were dating, Ginny recalls that the "best thing about Ty had been that he attracted Daddy"(262). He is also, of all the Monopoly players, the most wedded to being a small capitalist producer (262). There is the “unspoken knowledge” that in marrying Larry Cook’s oldest daughter he has “married up” from the small farm he inherited from his dad (104). To prove his “skills worthy of…a thousand acres,” Ty has been, through all the seventeen years of their marriage, a model worker, carefully following Larry’s directions and seldom, if ever, taking issue with his way of doing things (104). To be sure, Ty does this
because, like most of Zebulon County, he respects Larry’s farming abilities, but Ginny gradually comes to realize that Ty is also calculating, “camouflaged with smiles and . . . never losing sight of the goal” which is to one day inherit Larry's farm (306). She comes to see that he has been "pursuing his self-interest all these years, all in the guise of going along and getting along" (154).

Ty is not alone in hiding his acquisitive feelings under a placid exterior. When Ginny observes Harold being abusive to his sons, especially to Loren who takes it all quite quietly, she says to Jess, “I’m beginning to think there isn’t any reward for putting up with all of this.” Jess quickly shoots back, “A big farm and the chance to run it the way you want is a reward” (160). Even Rose sees her life in terms of silent sacrifice and eventual reward: “I want what was Daddy’s,” she tells Ginny. “I feel like I’ve paid for it, don’t you? You think a breast weighs a pound? That’s my pound of flesh. You think a teenaged hooker costs fifty bucks a night? There’s ten thousand bucks” (303).³⁰

The Monopoly game becomes a metaphor for the way financial concerns take center stage while feelings and concern for the quality of interpersonal interactions are constantly being pushed to the side. The night Rose overturns the Monopoly board, she and Ginny have just learned that their sister Caroline has gotten married without telling them. The three men refuse to deal with the women's deep sense of hurt. Instead, they dismiss its importance, contend that Caroline hadn't "done anything especially insulting," and insist on continuing to play Monopoly as if nothing has happened (139). Pete, who is winning, continues to laugh in "greedy glee" every time someone lands on his properties and Ty, sensing Ginny's upset mood, keeps muttering "Ginny, settle down" (140). Jess shows a deep displeasure when Ginny raises her

³⁰ Rose is referring here to Larry's sexual use of her night after night as a teenager and to the mastectomy she has had. Her breast cancer is linked to the contamination of the farm's drinking water by all the pesticides and fertilizers Larry and the other farmers have spread on their fields to increase their yield.
voice at one point in exasperation. Even after Rose overturns the board, the men, with Ty in the lead, continue to concentrate on who won. Ty methodically begins to add up their scores, but Ginny objects, saying "We played. That was the—" (142). Her sentence goes unfinished, partly because the phone rings bearing bad news about her father, but partly because the viewpoint she is trying to express—the idea that the process of playing together was the point, not who won—cannot be clearly articulated or heard in the environment monopoly capitalism sets up. In a world of cut-throat competition, the financial end is what counts.

Though Ginny seems less interested than Ty, Jess, and Rose in accumulating material wealth, she has also been trained to adopt a passive strategy in dealing with her father, putting up silently with his abuse. In one of the few memories she has of the incest, Ginny remembers "[Daddy] saying 'Quiet, now girl. You don't need to fight me.' I didn't remember fighting him, ever, but in all circumstances he was ready to detect resistance, anyway. . . . I tried to make my legs heavy without seeming to defy him. . . . [M]y strategy . . . [a] desperate limp inertia" (280).

This ability to hang on through the most difficult or abusive of situations is a quality that has the approbation of the wider community as illustrated by a conversation Ginny has with Mary Livingstone, a friend of Ginny's mother. Mary has long suspected that Larry abused Ginny after her mother died, but when Ginny assures her that her life has turned out well, in spite of Larry's brutal tendencies, Mary responds, “I’ll say one thing, and that is that you’re a good girl, and unselfish, and you will be rewarded” (92).31

Ty—his full name is Tyler—lives up to his name when, by encouraging Ginny to be passive, he attempts to 'tie her' to the status quo. He counsels Ginny to “handle” Larry by letting “a lot of things slide” (104). Instead of speaking up against her father's tirades and abuses, Ty encourages Ginny to "just endure it" (143).

31 At this point in the novel, Ginny does not recall the incest.
Ty follows his own advice by turning a blind eye to anything outside of his and Larry’s work relationship: “[W]hen your father told me what to do and how to farm, I paid attention. Otherwise, I didn’t” (343). Ty's position makes practical sense: Larry's realm of expertise is his ability to farm, not family interactions. At the same time, by highlighting Larry's economic contribution to the family while ignoring the impact Larry has on other aspects of family life, Ty supports the conventional view that the father's role in the family is chiefly economic.\textsuperscript{32} Such a mindset circles back to the values embedded in the Monopoly game where, as we have just seen, the accumulation of money and property takes precedence over other types of needs and interactions.

Larry himself takes pains to train Ginny and her two sisters to see the family and its history in Zebulon County as, above all, an economic story. Taking his children for drives about the county, Larry 'reads' the farmland to them, recounting "who owned what . . . how he had gotten it, what he had done, and should have done, with it, who got it after him and by what tricks or betrayals" (132). Other stories about the land and its inhabitants go unmentioned. Larry's constant use of the pronoun "he" as he parses the land conveys the message, once again, that in his mind it is the men who play the starring economic roles.

One of the stories that Ginny and the other children of Zebulon County is told is the story of how the land came to be settled by their pioneering ancestors. The Cook family's version of this origin story provides the basic template: In 1890 Ginny's great-grandparents arrived to take possession of the land they had bought when they were still in England and discovered that their new property was a marsh, much of it under two feet of water. Having been “sold a bill of goods

\textsuperscript{32} As I show in Chapter One, the notion that the father's chief role is to provide materially for the family arose in the United States during the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. It is a notion of fatherhood that is still current in the late 1970s, though it is beginning to be challenged as the economy shifts towards a postindustrial base and women begin to work in increasing numbers outside the home.
by speculators,” Ginny's ancestors turned failure into success by figuring out how to drain the water off the land, using a system of ditches, tile piping, and underground cisterns (131). Once these drainage lines were laid, the land, made rich by thousands of years of plant and animal deposits, turned out to be some of the most fertile farmland anywhere on earth.  

This story which highlights how the settlers' dogged persistence leads, in the end, to great material reward, is part of what has primed Ty and Jess and the others in Ginny's generation to adopt a stoic stance vis-à-vis their father's abusive behavior: the problematic father is not a person to engage or confront or understand; rather, like the speculators, he is someone to endure, someone to quietly maneuver around on the way to one's own financial success. Larry himself encourages this damping down of information and interaction; one of his favorite remarks "about things in general," but especially about any story that might cast his land dealings in a less-than-flattering light is "Less said about that, the better " (135). Larry promotes the notion that merit is what has made the Cook family winners in the real-life Monopoly game they are playing: "Luck," he tells his daughters over and over, "is something you make for yourself" (132). But Larry is silent about the more troubling aspects of his success: especially glossed over is the unsettling fact that his family's achievements are built upon other farmers' failures and losses. The history of those losers and of the losses suffered generally by the community as capitalism has shaped its development has been largely repressed. Piecing together the scraps of stories she has received from relatives and community members over the years, Ginny's memoir brings the buried history of Zebulon County back to the surface. While Larry's stories paper over the violence and manipulation involved in capitalist accumulation, Ginny's alternative narrative places these elements at the center. The story of the

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33 The fictional history of the Cook farm and the settling of Zebulon County is found mostly in Chapters 3 and 18 of the novel. For more on the actual historical account and the ecological impact of settling this area of Iowa, known as the prairie-pothole region, see Jane Smiley's excellent article "So Shall We Reap" in Sierra magazine.
acquisition by her father and grandfather of neighboring farmer Mel Scott's land in 1938 is emblematic of this process. Mel was an unskilled farmer who couldn't bear to ask his wealthy farming relatives for help when he got into financial trouble during the Depression. Instead, he turned to Larry and Ginny's grandfather for advice and, eventually, for money. In the end, Mel sells his land to Larry and Ginny's grandfather for far less than it is worth. Larry never speaks of this transaction except to say in general terms that "frugality was the key," implying that when land became available he and Ginny's grandfather had simply saved enough to be able to buy it (133). At first, still steeped in the mindset her father has cultivated in her, Ginny's reaction to the negative gossip she hears about the land deal is both dismissive and defensive. She accepts her father's version that Mel's land came to the Cooks "through hard work, good luck, [and] smart farming" (23). Her father proclaims "Envy likes to talk" when the subject of Mel's land comes up and Ginny seems to agree, telling us, "I didn't see how it especially redounded to my father's or grandfather's discredit. A land deal was a land deal, and few were neighborly" (23; 134-35).

As she separates from her father and his worldview, however, she begins to re-evaluate the story of how her family acquired Mel's land: "I now wonder if there was an element of shame to Daddy's refusal ever to speak of it. I wonder if it had really landed in his lap, or if there were moments of planning, of manipulation and using a man's incompetence and poverty against him that soured the whole transaction" (135).

Mel's farm, now owned by the Cooks, is "obliterated" in the early 1960s when "new, bigger tractors meant greater speed" and fences were taken down to create larger fields (205-06): the old farm's buildings are bulldozed and burned, the pond is drained, and any trees still left growing around it are pulled up so that Larry can "work that field more efficiently" (85). One of the first things Ginny does after learning about the incest with her father, is to walk over to
"Mel's Corner" of the Cook farm and look for the pond where as a girl she spent so many joyous hours "contemplatively immersed" (95). But Larry has completely erased the old landscape; she cannot find "even the telltale dampness of an old pothole to orient myself" (206).

The physical rubbing out of Mel's farm and pond serves as a metaphor for the way the past and its import has been erased not just from Ginny's memory but from the collective memory of Zebulon County's residents. As Ginny indicates when she isn't able to find the old pothole, being cut off from what has come before makes it difficult, if not impossible, to orient oneself. The draining of Mel's pond stands in for the massive draining of the land undertaken by its first settlers. That water is now out of sight, but it sometimes makes itself known in places where "the surface of the earth [dips] below the surface of the sea within it," places like the old rock quarry that has filled with water (9). Like the "sea" which lies within the land, another view of reality lies below the surface of everyday life; occasionally bits of it emerge into view.

The divisive feelings bred by the capitalist dictum to "expand or die" is one of the bits that has been buried. Those feelings come snaking into view when the Cook family acquires Mel's farm. Mel's cousin, Newt Stanley, stops speaking to Larry and when he dies, decades later, his last words to his son are "Goddamn Larry Cook. You get that farm from him if it's the last thing you do" (34). The wheel of eat-or-be-eaten turns again in the Stanley's favor when Ginny and Caroline are forced to sell the farm to The Heartland Corporation which "may or may not have had some of the Stanleys in it—perhaps some of the Stanley cousins [possibly Mel] who'd long ago moved to Chicago" (368).

What is exposed in the feud between the Cooks and the Stanleys is the contradiction that capitalism infuses into nearly all personal relationships. No matter how much joviality there is around the Monopoly board or at the church suppers, a successful farmer puts his own self-
interest above that of his peers. The surface of conventional niceties is broken in the case of the feud between the Cooks and the Stanleys, but generally the fact that neighbors, friends, and family members are engaged in a fierce struggle for land and resources goes unacknowledged.

Such is the case with the Ericson family, whose farm, which lies between the Cook and Clark farms, is gobbled up by Larry in the late 1950s amongst an atmosphere of relative good cheer. Because the Ericsons do not "discipline" themselves—they are not big on technological innovation and show such a "fondness" for their animals that the place reminds Ginny of a "petting zoo"—the failure of the farm is seen as "inevitable" (44-46). As a child, Ginny remembers Harold and Larry arguing "about who should get the Ericson land when they finally lost their mortgage" (4). At the time, Ginny, whose best friend in the world is one of the Ericson girls, nevertheless eagerly hopes that her family will get the farm, not least because she covets the window seat in Dinah Ericson's bedroom. Years later, when Ginny and Ty actually live in the Ericson's old house, Jess will jokingly remind her that Larry "stole [the Ericson farm] from Harold" (71).

Harold is Larry's best friend, but, as Jess' comment indicates, that doesn't stop the two of them from also engaging in a continual battle of one-upmanship. As the novel opens, Harold's buying of a new International Harvester tractor is the current focus of their rivalry: Harold has driven Larry "over the edge" by refusing to tell how he has financed this expensive new piece of machinery (23). Harold owns less land, but Larry fears he may nevertheless be "doing better" (17). Larry chooses the party Harold throws to celebrate his "twin exhibits"—Jess's return and the new tractor—to strike back at Harold for "[pulling] ahead of [him] in the machinery competition" (17). With Harold listening in, he announces that he has decided to turn over his land to his three daughters: "You wouldn't catch me buying a new tractor at my age," he says.
pointedly (19). Ty learns from Harold's son Loren that Harold has, in fact, gone into debt to buy the tractor, but Loren keeps the game of withholding information going by refusing to tell Ty how much money Harold put down on the deal. By the time Larry transfers the farm to Ginny and Rose, he has found out ("somehow") about the loan: "I'll be sitting here watching other people work for me, while you're out running that tractor, trying to pay it off," he says to Harold gleefully (38–39).

Harold's and Loren's refusal to divulge the financing details of the new tractor to the Cooks is symptomatic of the feeling of distrust that, reflecting the capitalist ethos of eat-or-be-eaten, pervades every relationship, no matter how close, in Zebulon County. By the time Ginny is an adult, she has internalized this sense of distrust for others to the point that she envisions being surrounded not by a supportive community but by "the great open invisible eye of The Neighbors" which watches and judges her from afar, ready to turn any farming mistake she and Ty might make into a way to strip them of the farm (285-86).

Ginny's "invisible eye" recalls, at least on a linguistic level, eighteenth-century economist Adam Smith's "invisible hand," a term he used to describe the ideal workings of the capitalist market. In contrast to Ginny's "eye," Smith's "hand" has a rather positive feel to it: the market, he theorized, will impartially dole out economic rewards to everyone who participates in it. Smith offered one caveat: for the market to behave in such a benign fashion, it had to be closely regulated. Though today he is viewed as an apologist for capitalism, Smith believed in regulation because he had some of the same concerns about how human beings relate to each other when under the sway of capitalism that Smiley explores in A Thousand Acres. Smith had an extremely low opinion of the kind of behavior capitalism encourages: condemning "the mean rapacity, the monopolizing spirit of merchants and manufacturers," he warned that capitalists will always seek
"to deceive and oppress the public" (qtd. in McNally, *Another 84*). For the invisible hand to be a positive force in the community, Smith argued that governments would need to prevent monopolies and be extremely vigilant against the capitalist tendency to trick and cheat others.\(^{34}\)

Against this background, even the name of the game Smiley has her characters obsessively playing throughout the early part of the novel—*Monopoly*—should sound alarm bells about the fractious state of human relations in Zebulon County.

While American farmers participated in a capitalist market economy during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, there is a consensus amongst historians that the sense of community in rural areas remained quite strong during these years: families and neighbors were bound together through multiple channels and people regularly helped each other out, sharing both labor and resources.\(^{35}\) Up to about World War II, then, the market economy in farming regions seems to have functioned somewhat along the lines Smith had hoped for: "The conflicting traditions of community and commerce—of sharing and acquiring—were always in tension," according to historian Jack Mack Faragher, "yet both remained vital forces into the twentieth century" (153). What ruptured the community and "tipped the scales away from sharing and in favor of acquiring," according to Faragher, was the agricultural industrial revolution which took place during the postwar years (153). *A Thousand Acres* gets it right, according to Faragher, when it shows that "modern farming [has come to be] determined by the logic of capitalism, not the logic of community" (152). The novel also shows how technological innovation under capitalism, represented in miniature by Harold's acquisition of the latest tractor and in general by his generation's overall rush to embrace scientific innovation no matter the

\(^{34}\) For more on Adam Smith and his concerns about capitalism, see pages 84-85 of David McNally's *Another World is Possible* and also Chapters 4 and 5 of McNally's *Political Economy and the Rise of Capitalism*.

\(^{35}\) See John Mack Faragher's "The Historical Imagination of *A Thousand Acres,*" especially pages 152-53.
collateral damage it may cause, has played a role in fracturing the community and weakening relationships within families.

Kathryn Marie Dudley, an anthropologist who has studied farm families in a small Minnesota town, paints a detailed portrait of the stresses and strains that capitalism has placed on farming communities over the last few decades of the twentieth century. Her research supports Faragher's observations and is also strikingly in line with Smiley's novelistic portrait. In fact, Dudley uses a passage from *A Thousand Acres* to introduce "Fragile Community," the first chapter of her book *Debt and Dispossession*. About half of the fifty families Dudley interviews lost their farms or came close to losing them during the 1980s (xiii). The pain of farm loss, she writes, "is a cultural phenomenon. It is part and parcel of a culture in which members of the community are empowered to ignore—and profit from—the suffering of their neighbor, even when that suffering is no secret and right next door" (131). It is not, she tells us, a "naturally induced trauma. The erosion of human dignity that accompanies it happens at the hands of those who are your friends" (139). Torn between "the Darwinian logic of capitalist enterprise [which] puts [people] in competition with their own neighbors" and the attempt "to uphold a sense of community . . . in which everyone contributes to the common good," the community has become frayed (164-5). Dudley concludes that the town she studies reflects a "quintessential" trait of contemporary American communities: an "inability to resist—and tacit collusion with—the forces that threaten to destroy it" (165).

As Dudley's research indicates, to be successful in capitalist society, participants need to be able to harden their hearts to the plight of those being exploited. Political scientist David McNally has written about the psychological effects capitalist competition has on its major players:
[C]apitalism requires its dominant participants to behave in an exploitative and destructive fashion. No amount of moral lecturing or enlightenment will change the behaviour of capitalists as a group, since only by doing what they do will they survive as capitalists. If they do not exploit the poor, grab land and resources, commodify the globe, and act in environmentally destructive ways, they will not persevere in the war of economic competition. The imperatives of cost-minimization and profit maximization compel capitalists to do these things. If a given company stops doing them, it will simply be replaced by others who will do so. (Another 122)

Larry is successful as a farmer because he has learned how to rule out extraneous emotions and focus on "winning" in the business field. In particular, he has learned not to empathize with those that are suffering. He tries to persuade Ginny to view things in a similar fashion using a story from his childhood about a boy on a neighboring farm as illustration. The boy contracted polio and became crippled, but, as Larry tells it, his father still "made him plow his furrows as straight as the other boys, and he whipped him, too, to show that there wasn't any way out of it." Larry concludes that "that boy did his share, and he respected himself for it. It was the old man's job to see to that" (175). Ginny, struggling at this point in the novel to escape the orbit of only seeing things from her father's point of view and especially of only seeing relationships from the vantage point of what will succeed economically, responds with a challenge: "How do you know he respected himself for it, or that that was what he needed?"

Larry flies into a rage at Ginny who seems to him to have altogether missed the point of the story: that the father's job is to force his child into a mold that will make him successful economically. The child's own feelings or abilities don't matter. Larry so seldom speaks about his own childhood that it is shrouded in mystery. For this reason, the story he tells about the crippled neighbor boy becomes one of the few windows, albeit at a slant, that Ginny and, through her, the readers are given into his early years. Extrapolating from it, we can assume that Larry, like the boy with polio, has had to repress some parts of himself, has experienced a honing that has pared
him down to the narrow purpose of becoming economically successful. As an adult he stands before us both a successful farmer and an emotional cripple. His heart has been hardened, the space in it where love, compassion, or even enjoyment should be has been scooped out and scarred over. We see this most starkly when his wife dies. As Ginny relates it, "[n]othing about the death of my mother stopped time for my father, prevented him from reckoning his assets and liabilities and spreading himself more widely over the landscape" (136) In place of positive feelings about himself and his fellows, Larry is filled with the attributes that have helped to make him, referencing McNally, a "dominant participant" in capitalism: a ready anger towards anyone on the farm who does things incorrectly, a calculating self-centeredness, a ruthless spirit of competition, a strong conviction of his own superiority, and a paranoid reaction towards others, especially towards those who threaten, even in the smallest way, his power.

The Ericsons' failure at farming becomes, in Larry's hands, another cautionary tale about the importance of disciplining the self towards the end goal of economic success. Larry disapproves of Cal Ericson, whose aspiration "seemed to be merely to get along, pay his mortgage, and enjoy himself as much as possible" (44). Contrasting the Cooks' hard work ethic and continual striving towards some future goal to the Ericsons' present-oriented, more relaxed and communal approach to life, Larry teaches Ginny and her sisters "to discipline the farm and ourselves to a life and order transcending many things, but especially mere whim" (46). Ginny remembers that her mother, who visited Elizabeth Ericson every day, frequently exclaimed upon the difference between the two households: "When I'm home, I've got to get things done, even if there are visitors. Elizabeth knows how to relax in her own house." Ginny's mother "would shake her head, as if Elizabeth had remarkable powers" (46).
In place of enjoying life and each other, as the Ericsons so obviously do, Ginny is encouraged to take pride in the fact that "we were engaged in toiling steadily up a slight incline toward a larger goal" (46). When the Ericsons are finally forced to sell their farm and depart, Ginny, just 14 at the time, begins to feel "everything gentle and fun and happy draining away" from her (136). There is no space for such things in the successful life her father has carved out for himself and his family.

"Farmers," Ginny tells us, "extrapolate quickly from the farm to the farmer. A farmer . . . looks like his farm. . . . What his farm looks like boils down to questions of character" (199). Larry has so thoroughly matched himself with the farm, making its needs his needs, that he does not seem to exist independent of it. This lack of personhood explains his inability to connect to other human beings as well as his ability to commit incest and other immoral acts. It also explains why, once he signs the farm over to his daughters, he quickly becomes unrecognizable to himself and to others. His identity is so fused with the farm that he is quite literally nothing without it.

Though Ty is not the tyrannical monster that Larry is, he also places his relationship to the farm above his relationship to Ginny and the rest of the family. When Ginny leaves him, he never comes to the city to look for her. "You don't understand how full my hands were," he tells her by way of explanation. "I couldn't leave the place for a minute. It was all getting away from me all the time—" (341). Even when they were still together, he never takes the day off from working in the fields to celebrate her birthday. As regards the family feud between the sisters, he insists that he was emotionally attached to neither side: "I was on the side of the farm, that was all" he tells Ginny, almost as if he has married the farm, not her (341). When Jess informs Ginny that the cause of her five miscarriages is the farm runoff that has made its way into the drinking
water, Ty blocks further inquiry, dismissing Jess’ ideas as “harebrained” (259). As critic Amano Kyoko has pointed out, it is almost certain that Larry, an avid reader of farming magazines, has known about the link between fertilizers and infertility for some time since, as Jess tells Ginny, “[p]eople have known for ten years or more that the nitrates in well water cause miscarriages and death of infants” (165). The information, however, doesn't bring either Larry or Ty up short. Instead, the idea that the chemicals which create each year's huge yield may also be causing female family members to become infertile or to get breast cancer and die is pushed to the side as both men continue to focus on the farm and its needs.36

A general feeling of scarcity accompanies the economic set up of farming. There is little time to cultivate personal relationships or simply to take a step back and consider all the options. There is definitely no time for inconvenient questions. A frequent refrain on the part of the men in the novel is that there is "no room." Larry makes the pronouncement to a reporter in 1957 when his farm is one of the first in the county to spray pesticides from airplanes: "There isn't any room for the old methods any more" (45). Ginny imagines him looking over at the Ericsons' farm as he is speaking. Years later, Ty will echo Larry in his dismissal of the organic farming techniques Jess wants to try out, telling Ginny "People don't realize that there isn't any room any more for something that might not work out" (110). When Ginny tentatively offers "there's room for lots of ways, isn't there?" Ty responds, "sure, in principle. I sometimes wonder how that principle works in action, though" (111).

Ty's response to Ginny is mild, but his years of farming tell him that capitalism is a system that swiftly punishes those who don't jump fast enough. In fact, in this regard capitalism plays the role of a second tyrannical King Lear in A Thousand Acres. In Shakespeare's play,
King Lear demands that Cordelia make an immediate response to his request. There is only one correct answer as far as Lear is concerned, and when she does not immediately make it, she is disinherited. In the parallel scene in Smiley's novel, Larry says to Caroline when she hesitates, "You don't want it, my girl, you're out" (21). Caroline, too, is swiftly disinherited. During the early 1970s, farmers were confronted with a very similar predicament couched in almost the exact words: after the U.S negotiated a large grain deal with the Soviet Union, Earl Butz, Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture, told farmers to plant "fencerow to fencerow" warning them that they either needed to "get bigger, get better or get out" (qtd. in Dudley 23). There was no time for debate or a careful consideration of the alternatives. The race was on: those who were able to take advantage of the new opportunities would become the next round of winners.

Many farmers, spurred on by Butz's words, threw "caution to the winds," as Ginny characterizes her family's decisions during this period, and took out huge loans to fund expansion, using the equity in their farms as collateral (322). The previous generation of farmers—Larry's generation—also raced to grow big and used the latest round of technological advances to do so, but they lived by a different set of financial assumptions. For them, debt was a badge of shame because it signaled a lack of independence. "Acreage and financing were facts as basic as name and gender in Zebulon County," Ginny tells us on the second page of the novel (4). By the time she is eight, Ginny knows two important facts about every nearby farm: how many acres the farm has and whether or not it has a mortgage. She already knows that it is a sign of her family's superiority that it owns the farm and all its equipment outright (4). By the 1970s, however, capitalism's "constant revolutionizing of production," as Marx and Engels put it, has

37 For more on the political and economic forces impacting American farming in the 1970s, see Debt and Dispossession by Kathryn Dudley, Rural Literacies by Kim Donehower et al., or Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto by Osha Gray Davidson.
caused the economic landscape to shift and many farmers, both in real life and in Smiley's novel, have come to see debt financing as the best way to grow their farms and maintain a competitive edge (Manifesto 476).

Local banker Marv Carson oils his way from household to household in A Thousand Acres like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, encouraging farmers to take out loans against the inflated value of their farmlands. It's Marv, it turns out, who "put [the] bug in [Larry's] ear" to sign the farm over to his daughters and it was also Marv's idea for Harold to buy a bigger tractor (23). Ty finally admits to Ginny that he's been talking to Marv himself about ways to finance an expanded hog operation on the farm. A week after Larry signs over the farm, Ty and Ginny begin planning that expansion. While Ty initially merely hopes to double the number of hogs raised per year from the current five hundred to one thousand, it “rapidly [becomes] clear” to him, after looking at the brochures and talking with Marv and the hog equipment dealer, that the “optimal number” of hogs per year a farm the size of the Cook family farm should raise is four thousand (167).

A Thousand Acres shows us how technological development, far from being guided by some combination of objective science, economic rationality and the self-regulating mechanism of the market to come up with what's best for individuals and for society, is influenced by far more human—and less rational—emotional and social processes.38 On the question of farm expansion, for example, a cloud seems to settle over the inhabitants of Zebulon County and no one is immune from the group think it induces. Smiley signals this phenomenon by placing the word "knew" in the following passage about expanding Ty's hog operation in scare quotes: "Four thousand was a number that Marv Carson liked, for one thing. . . . It was also the number

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38 For more on how the development and use of technology in influenced by sociological factors, see David F. Noble's Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation, especially the preface.
that bounced off the walls at the café in town, the number that other farmers fantasized about and "knew' was the best economy of scale" (167). Once Ginny and Ty settle on the number everyone "knows," Marv Carson quickly extends a $300,000 line of credit to the farm—“one of the biggest [loans] in our portfolio”—and Ty begins ordering the equipment and planning out where the new buildings and silos for the vastly expanded hog operation will go (201). Years later, when Ty cannot make good on the loan and the farm must be sold to pay back the bank, Marv is still going strong. Presiding over the auction without any apparent sense of his own responsibility for the loss of the farm, he munificently tells Ginny and Caroline (Rose is dead at this point) that they "can take whatever personal possessions [they] liked . . . he wasn't going to say a word about it. 'You girls deserve that much,' " he tells them (357). And thus the Cook family joins Mel Scott and the Ericsons and the lengthening list of names on the losing side of the balance sheet as land in the American heartland continues its trajectory into the hands of fewer and fewer owners.

The story of people being forced off the land is, of course, not new to the 1980s. Smiley signals the longer arc of this theme and its centrality to her work by choosing an epigraph from Midwestern writer Meridel Le Sueur. The epigraph reads in part "We were marked by the seasonal body of earth, by the terrible migrations of people, by the swift turn of a century, verging on change never before experienced on this greening planet." This passage comes from an essay entitled "The Ancient People and the Newly Come" in which Le Sueur describes her experiences growing up on the plains in the early 1900s. Especially prominent in the essay are the conversations she had as a girl with local Native Americans about the irrevocable changes white settlers had made in just a few decades, with their plows and fenced-in cattle, to the prairies. Gone forever were the buffalo and the special prairie grass that "was one of the richest
foods on earth" (45). David McNally reminds us that it is a "commonplace of liberal ideology that capitalist market economies are natural" whereas, in fact, market economies and the profit motive are recent developments in human history (Another 86-87). The epigraph Smiley has chosen reminds us in more poetic language of the same general idea: the changing ownership of the land on the Midwestern prairie is not merely part of a natural, repetitive cycle of birth and death (though that cycle is acknowledged in the words "seasonal body of earth"), but is also informed by specific social forces: the notion of a "century" places the "terrible migrations of people" in a historical context as does the notion of a "change never before experienced." For Meridel Le Sueur, the change "never before experienced" is the capitalist economic system that the white settlers brought with them, a system which quickly swept away the non-capitalist Native American way of life.

The stories Smiley tells of Mel Scott losing his farm in the 1930s and of the Cooks losing theirs in the 1980s are illustrations "of a recurrent cycle of depressions that have marked the history of agriculture in the United States" (Alter 153). Taking an even longer view, a similar pattern of "terrible migrations" existed in the England of Shakespeare's time: the rise of capitalism there during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries coincided with the uprooting of millions of peasants from the land. Indeed, land dispossession and capitalism are intimately related: "Only when they were thoroughly dispossessed of both land held as personal possessions (often on some kind of lease basis) and of access to what were known as common lands did large numbers of the English poor turn to waged work and submit to the disciplines of the labour market" (McNally, Another 91). In sixteenth and seventeenth century England, as in the 1980s,

39 See McNally's Another World is Possible, especially pages 86-88, for a discussion of the historical and anthropological evidence that refutes the "naturalness" of capitalism. The importance of this point is that if capitalism is, in fact, "natural," then "every attempt to organize a human society on non-capitalist lines is by this logic doomed in advance to failure, and . . . can only be foolhardy, if not outrightly dangerous" (McNally, Another 86).
debt foreclosure and other financial and legal maneuvers allowed rich farmers to take over smaller plots and consolidate the arable land into larger and larger parcels. Like Ty and Ginny, displaced English peasants four hundred years ago found themselves forced either to become hired hands working for larger farms or to make their way to cities where they became wage laborers.⁴⁰

In addition to *King Lear*, Smiley has layered the text with another connection between this early era of capitalist dispossession and the setting of her own novel by making almost every place or family in *A Thousand Acres* bear the surname of a historical figure from the age of exploration and colonization, including a number who engaged in military campaigns against the Native Americans. These figures, seeking their fortunes at the rise of capitalism, might be Lear's wayward children.

Ginny's great grandfather Sam Davis, for example, who buys the first parcel of land that is to become the Cook farm, bears the same last name as John Davis, Elizabeth I's chief explorer and navigator.⁴¹ There is also Ginny's father Larry (Captain James) Cook, her husband Ty (Captain John) Smith and her brother-in-law Pete (Meriwether) Lewis. Then there is neighbor Harold (William) Clark, the ministers Dr. (John C.) Fremont and Henry (Richard Irving) Dodge, the banker Marv (Kit) Carson, the lawyers Ken (Robert de) LaSalle, Mr. (Dave) Crockett, and Jean (Jacques) Cartier, the medical doctor Bob (Henry) Hudson, the funeral home owner George

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⁴⁰ Between 1540 and 1640 the number of landless peasants in England and Wales jumped from slightly more than one third of a million to two million and the overall population of landless peasants jumped from 10% to 40% of the population. By 1688, the majority of peasants had become wage laborers (McNally, *Another World is Possible*, page 93-94).

⁴¹ The correspondence between such characters' names and the England of Shakespeare's time has a resonance not only because the novel is paired with *King Lear*, but, perhaps more importantly, because this is the period when capitalism begins to take off in England. Other European countries--notably Spain, Portugal and Holland--were involved in exploration, trade, and plunder of far-off sections of the world, but capitalism flourished in England first because it alone amongst the colonizing countries had created, through the displacement of huge numbers of peasants from the land, an extensive pool of people ready--indeed, desperate--to sell their labor power in exchange for wages. For more on this, see McNally's *Another World is Possible*, page 89.
(Sir Francis) Drake, the butcher Shorty (Alexander von) Humboldt, and Ginny's teacher Mrs. (William) Penn.42

In terms of place names, the Cook farm is situated in Zebulon County and the closest towns are Cabot, Pike, and Mason City. John Cabot was the first European explorer (after the Norse) to visit North America. George Mason emigrated from England in the mid-1600s to set up a plantation in Virginia where, as a militia man, he battled the local Native Americans; his plantation, which grew to be just over 1,000 acres, was named Accokeek Plantation after the Accokeek Native Americans he helped to displace. Zebulon Pike, an explorer of the Mississippi River, the land of the Louisiana Purchase, and the Southwest, helped defeat Tecumseh's Native American confederation at the Battle of Tippecanoe. His journals were considered required reading by the American explorers of the nineteenth century who would follow him.

As if winking at the reader, Smiley buries little jokes in the names. The Ericson family comes for a brief time and then, unable to make a go of it, leaves just like Leif Ericson, whose settlement at the tip of Newfoundland in the eleventh century was only temporary. Mel Scott is bested by Larry Cook whose wife's maiden name (Amundsen) recalls the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen who triumphed over the English explorer Robert Scott in the early part of the twentieth century, beating him to the South Pole by all of five days. Tucked into most of the names is a story that has moments of excitement and wonder: Caroline's husband, for example, shares his surname with Knud Rasmussen, a Greenlandic polar explorer who crossed the Arctic several times and wrote numerous books on the Inuit. But the wonder of exploration, like the initial excitement of capitalism that Ginny and her peers experience around the Monopoly board, is almost always coupled with a grimmer story: the dispossession and forced subjugation of other

42 This is only a partial list! There are also several characters named Boone, presumably after Daniel Boone, and a cameo appearance is made by an Ina (William) Baffin.
peoples. Along these lines, part of Knud Rasmussen's mission was to claim the land he explored for Denmark. Larry's chief rival, the Stanley family, offers a number of historical figures with the same surname to chose from, but since another prominent family in the novel is the (David) Livingstones, it is probable that we are meant to remember Sir Henry Morton Stanley who led a number of expeditions to Central Africa and helped deliver the Congo into the hands of the Belgian king Leopold II, thereby starting what has generally been seen as one of the most bloody chapters of colonization in history. Another Stanley—Sir William Stanley—was a soldier for Elizabeth I and helped, among other things, to subjugate England's first colony, Ireland.

While Smiley's historical references are spread too thickly across the novel for a reader to miss, it is noteworthy that not a single character in the novel comments upon them. The effect of this silence is that the past, like Ginny's repressed and repressive father, hovers like a ghost over the action of the novel, simultaneously present and absent. The stories of exploration and capitalist acquisition are so tightly woven into the fabric of everyday life that they recede into the background: everyone knows they are there but no one really thinks about their meaning so that eventually that meaning becomes unavailable. Even the quote by Meridel Le Sueur that Smiley uses as her novel's epigraph leaves things vague, never directly mentioning the conquest and overthrow of the Native Americans.

Without a critical understanding of the past, the people of Zebulon County see themselves and their present situation in a distorted way, ignoring unpleasant news or manufacturing meanings that do not conform to reality. Critic Neil Nakadate has noted how the reading and teaching about capitalism that Smiley was doing while she wrote the novel revealed "the subtext of American culture to be conquest, possession, and control" (qted in Ozdek 64). It is this subtext that the characters of Smiley's novel seem to have forgotten. If they could "read"
the story embedded in their names, they would see that Europeans didn't always "own" the land and that, as Meridel Le Sueur points out in her essay, the Native people who lived there before them didn't believe land could or should be owned. Such thoughts would challenge the dominant American notion that identity, particularly male identity, is inextricably bound up with capitalist ownership. It is precisely this cultural belief that Larry represents when, separated from his farm, he appears stripped of his personhood. If Smiley's characters were able to parse the way capitalism worked during the colonial period, allowing those with the most power rather than the most merit to win, they would begin to envision their own circumstances and futures quite differently: instead of blaming individuals—theirself or others—for their loses, they could begin to cast a critical eye on the overall system and seek to combine with others to find collective solutions.

The historical figures scattered through Smiley's novel provide a window into an alternative viewpoint, but only if one is able to step back and see them in their larger historical context. Viewed uncritically, they offer permission for modern-day "heroes" like Larry to follow in their footsteps. The historical figures that shadow Smiley's text share several key attributes. All are male. All engage in heroic undertakings which entail breathtaking physical and emotional feats. All display hard-hearted, if not downright savage, behavior towards both members of their own group as well as towards the native peoples they encounter. Finally, the story of these men and their achievements is generally figured as the story of a rugged individual who acts alone against great odds: whatever credit is due to women or family or even to other members of the exploration team does not make its way into the story history tells of these men.

43 For more on the connection between the paradigms of capitalist ownership and American identity, see Almila Ozdek's article "Coming out of the Amnesia." By novel's end, Ginny has learned to safeguard the "gleaming obsidian shards" of her past; they are the mirror through which she is able to see herself and her world more clearly (371).
These qualities still inform the men of Zebulon County. As the novel opens, Ginny uses the word "heroic" to describe the way the male farmers are feeling after rising to the challenge of bad weather by planting all the corn in the county in less than two weeks (6). Though Larry Cook operates on a smaller stage than Captain James Cook did, he fits the basic paradigm: obsessed with the mission of having the "biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer," he lets nothing, not even concern for the well-being of family or neighbors, stand in the way (20). His hard-heartedness is ignored—worse, accepted—by the community which confers almost mythic stature upon him for his farming success: he is respected by the other farmers and grows so large in Ginny's eyes that even as a grown woman she finds he is "never dwarfed by the landscape" (20). Finally, like the bold explorers of earlier times, Larry too has a supporting cast whom neither he nor the community acknowledges, a cast that includes all the other workers on the farm, including the women. The contribution nature makes to his success—providing him with a soil, for example, that was "richer . . . than any soil anywhere" (132)—is also eradicated by Larry who "always [speaks] of the land his grandparents found with distaste" (46).

If Smiley's male characters are influenced by the stories of explorers and colonists whose long-ago historical exploits form a vague, fictional-seeming backdrop to contemporary life, they are also influenced by a more recent group of actual fictional figures whose stories do much to affirm the classic outlines of the American Dream. Critic Amano Kyoko has done an admirable job showing how Smiley's portrait of Larry conforms to the mythic image of the characters which American author Horatio Alger created for his nineteenth-century novels. A key plank in the mythology that has grown up around Alger's protagonists is the notion of the rugged individual who makes it on his own. Larry impresses a similar lesson onto his children in the
"catechism" that defines a "good farmer" as one who has "no debts" and "will not ask you for any favors" (45). 44

As Ginny delves into the past, she begins to look critically at this veneration for the rugged individual and for the notion that those that succeed do so because of superior merit. In the following quote, while she does not yet seem to have her own analysis, she looks past the present and notices a truth and is able to separate it from what her father "might say" about that truth. This is the first step on the road to separating the past from the seamless background of the status quo and giving it its own voice: "[I]f I look past the buzzing machine . . . at the field itself. . . I remember that the seemingly stationary fields are always flowing toward one farmer and away from another. The lesson my father might say they prove is that a man gets what he deserves by creating his own good luck" (136-37).

Ginny finally gives up on the notion of rugged individualism about halfway through the novel when the labor of maintaining her life under Larry's and Ty's direction suddenly feels as "impossible as standing in your boots and lifting yourself into the air by the bootstraps" (198). It is no accident that Ginny first rejects the myth of rugged individualism on the morning after she learns of her father's incest. With the cruel image of how her father has used her and Rose in mind, she replaces the image of pulling herself up by her own bootstraps with a new vision, one of terrible subjugation: "I felt another animal in myself, a horse haltered in a tight stall, throwing its head and beating its feet against the floor, but . . . the horse wears itself out, and accepts the restraint" (198). The Alger myth may work for men, but for women, this passage implies, it is impossible, first because Ginny cannot exclude the contributions of others or, for that matter, of nature itself in the farming project and second because, as the image of the captive horse coming

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44 In "Alger's Shadows in Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres," Kyoko differentiates between Alger's actual heroes, who with help from others, rise from rags to respectability, and the mythic Alger hero, constructed in the popular mind, who rises from rags to riches. Larry, Kyoko argues, is a reflection of this mythic Alger hero (n. 5).
right after the bootstrap trope implies, "in the Alger myth the dark shadow of men's capitalistic
and materialist pursuit repeatedly suppresses women" (Kyoko). Ginny, in aligning herself with
the horse, finally sees herself as her father sees her: as something, like the fields and the crops
and the other farm animals, to conquer, possess, and control.

While *A Thousand Acres* debunks the myth that Larry's "success" rests chiefly on his own
hard work, its most important contribution lies in the novel's careful depiction of what happens
when an Alger-like hero like Larry enters the private space of the home. Smiley shows us that
Larry's hard heart, fashioned for success in the capitalist world, cannot be checked at the door
like muddy work boots when he reaches the threshold and crosses over into family life. Instead,
Larry brings the rules he has learned to live by in the public world, including competition and
ruthless self-interest, into the family sphere. To say this in reverse, Larry's family exercises no
redemptive power over him. Far from being a haven in a heartless world as the bourgeois
ideology of family life which became prevalent during the rise of industrial capitalism in the
nineteenth century would have it, the home in *A Thousand Acres* has been breached by the hard
heartedness of the world beyond its doors. The vehicle of this incursion is the father who, as
head of the economic project, has pared all the softness out of him in order to better serve the
interests of the farm.

To return to the Monopoly game with which this section opened, Smiley uses the game to
flag the fact that the ethos of capitalism has come to dominate home life. The image of friends
and family coming together after work to eat, socialize and settle into a board game seems, at
first glance, quintessentially domestic. All the more so because Larry himself, who seems the
antithesis of anything domestic, is absent. But as the nights progress it becomes apparent that the
game is a metaphor for the way capitalist values inform the most intimate family relationships.
The obsession with winning and with accumulating money, particularly on the part of the male members of the family, blunts interpersonal sensitivity, just as in the running of the farm, fellow feeling is belittled and repressed. The dissension that arises amongst the Monopoly players, and, in particular, the anger that Ginny and Rose begin to feel towards the men who ignore their feelings, foreshadows the downfall of the farm itself which is lost partly because family members—particularly female members—are no longer able or willing to pull together as a unit as they have in the past.

The strife between the genders and the gradual dissolution of the family into its individual members is closely tied to the changes that capitalism has brought to family life as it has developed over the centuries. Like a set of time-elapsed photographs, Smiley's novel shows us first an early type of family under capitalism and then, as that family dissolves, the outlines of family life in the late twentieth century. At the opening of the novel, the Cook family farm shares many of the attributes of the type of family that arose between feudalism and the rise of capitalism in the sixteenth century. The hallmark of this type of family, sometimes called the early bourgeois family or, more often, the patriarchal family, is its ability to function as an independent unit of commodity production: the family contains both laborers (family members) and the means of production (the land and the equipment to work it, in the case of agriculture, the raw materials and the looms in the case of textile manufacturing) under one roof. Directed by the paterfamilias, all the family members work together.45

The early bourgeois family replaced the feudal manor as the smallest social unit. The independence this type of family enjoyed from society was coupled with another new development: the increasing authority of the father which was vastly heightened compared to the

45 I am indebted to Eli Zaretsky's excellent book Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life, especially chapters three and four, for the stages of family life under capitalism put forth in this paragraph and in the two that follow.
father's role during feudal times when the basic economic unit had been a larger multi-family arrangement and men and women had been treated more equally. At the same time, the strong emphasis that the early bourgeois family placed on the ideal of independence, the raising status of the family and its work—which during feudal times had been looked down upon—and the new idea that romantic love and marriage could be coupled, meant that women in the patriarchal family began to experience themselves as independent beings in their own right. As early as the seventeenth century in England there were stirrings for women's equality. As Eli Zaretsky points out, the rise of the novel as a genre during these years seems tied to "the problems posed by the bourgeois family" (28). Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), for example, pits a dominating father figure against a daughter who desires to "dispose" of herself.

Over the next few centuries the ideals of independence, family unity, and male supremacy continued as philosophical mainstays of the bourgeois family, but the reality, often overlooked at the time, was that fewer and fewer bourgeois families actually were economically independent anymore. Though they might own private property—a house or other items—most middle-class families were no longer commodity-producing units. Instead, by the nineteenth century in both Britain and the United States, the means of production had become concentrated in a small, centralized ruling class and work had moved outside the home, beyond, in most cases, the direct control of the father. With the increasing importance of money and with more men, women, and children leaving the home to work for wages, the male-dominated bourgeois family began to dissolve, and, in Zaretsky's words, "to be reduced to its individual members, including women and children" (20). In the nineteenth century the response to the slow dissolution of the bourgeois family as a commodity-producing unit was the emergence of an abstract narrative about the family's function which included the notion that the family was a refuge from the harsh
world surrounding it, that men and women occupied extremely separate spheres of influence and expertise, and that women were endowed with a natural moral superiority. In the twentieth century, with the rise of corporate capitalism and the increasing proletarianization of the workforce, a new kind of family developed. This family, which Zaretsky has called the working-class family, was one that "understood itself to be operating in apparent freedom from production, and that placed a primary emphasis on the personal relations of its members" (48).

The working-class family adopted the previous century's ideal of the family as a utopian retreat but adapted it to the changing economic landscape, by responding to the increasing alienation workers felt about the work world. Whereas "freedom" had previously meant a certain amount of economic independence, in the twentieth century it came to signify something altogether different. Now it signified the leisure time people spent outside of work. During this period, the realm of personal life expanded and came to be thought of as an end in itself. Unable to form an identity through work or property ownership, individuals turned to the family in the hopes that there they would be valued "for themselves." With the concomitant growth of subjectivity and introspection, family relationships became charged with a new depth of intensity. At the same time many of the ideals of the nineteenth century bourgeois family, including the notion of a gendered division of labor within the family and the supremacy of the father as "head" of household for his breadwinning role, persisted in the new working-class family of the twentieth century.

The landscape of personal life and subjectivity that opens up to individuals and families in the twentieth century is largely beyond the scope of Smiley's novel which is set almost entirely within the ethos of the early commodity-producing bourgeois family. Nevertheless, we can hear the theme of subjectivity and individuality sounded with increasing urgency as the
family begins to lose its hold on economic independence and to disintegrate. The growing focus of Smiley's characters as the novel progresses on feelings, personal relationships, and on each member's own individual needs as this economic change takes place conforms to the experience the U.S. family has undergone in general over the past 150 years of capitalist development. Also reflecting the historical trajectory of the past century and a half, the first and most succinct voices of change to be heard are those of women who have the most to gain—and the least to lose—from the breakup of the bourgeois family. Ginny's increasing ability to think introspectively about the bourgeois patriarchal family and its dynamics, in addition to making her a compelling narrator for her twentieth century audience, functions as a signal that she is beginning to leave the orbit of the bourgeois family and enter, instead, into the contemporary terrain of family life. Where she comes to rest by novel's end is in a family that goes beyond the twentieth-century, working-class family that Zaretsky describes, since that family, too, is deeply inflected with bourgeois ideals.

In the next section, I follow the trajectory of Ginny's development and, through her, the slow trajectory of women in general as the twentieth century progresses away from the ideals and constraints of the bourgeois family. It is a trajectory which deconstructs and leaves behind the notion that men should hold a privileged position in the family, acting as its "head," or that women should be in charge of the family's interpersonal work. In the end, the demise of these bourgeois ideals allows for the rise of "fatherless" families as more and more women form families without men. It is just such a family that Ginny forms with her two nieces after she leaves the farm. Though it lies beyond the scope of Smiley's novel, the economic and psychological changes charted by A Thousand Acres point towards the possibility of more egalitarian families emerging in both life and fiction. Ellen Friedman provides examples of the
latter in her study of what she calls postpatriarchal novels. Emerging towards the end of the twentieth century, these are novels in which the gendered division of labor within the family has weakened if not dissolved entirely and where the father no longer acts as the family's "head"; instead, he takes his place alongside the family's other adult members.  

The Monopoly Game Revisited: Women No Longer Have to Play with the Men

What gives the Monopoly story Smiley tells in *A Thousand Acres* a particular twist is the special relationship women have to the game. When Rose dumps the board into her husband's lap, it is tantamount to saying that the women don't have to play with the men anymore. It is not that women like Rose are rejecting capitalism and opting for a different economic system. Rather, because of the level of development that capitalism has achieved, women are now able to become economically independent of men as jobs in corporations and in the service industry become available.

Caroline signals this change early on, when, at the age of five, she announces to her mother and sisters that she intends to be a farmer not a farmwife when she grows up (61). Caroline, 28 when the novel opens, has, in fact, become a career woman, though not a farmer: she works in a law firm in Des Moines. When Ginny complains that Caroline is not being careful enough in the way she talks to Daddy about the transfer of the farm, Rose retorts tellingly, "She doesn't have to be careful. She's got an income" (60).

Having an income of her own is, indeed, key: Caroline moves away, sets up a different lifestyle, and, when a family issue arises, feels free to speak her own mind. In contrast, Ginny remains stuck in her father's orbit, carefully stepping around any difference of opinion with him or with others in the family. As Larry loses power, Ginny begins to find some of hers; she begins

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46 An example of such a father in fiction is Kevin Shaw in Jane Hamilton's novel *Disobedience*, written in 2000.
to question and speak up, joining and amplifying Rose's already critical voice. As the women's voices rise so does the tension between them and the male members of the family. When Rose dumps the Monopoly board in her husband's lap it is a metaphor for this gender strife which has come rocketing to the surface as the repressive weight of patriarchy lifts off and as, simultaneously, new economic opportunities become available to women. Farm women have options that their grandmothers did not: they can decide not to put up any longer with the physical and mental abuse that patriarchal family life implies or with the hard-hearted men engendered by capitalist competition. In fact, the men's hard-heartedness, grown worse as the struggle for survival amongst small capitalists intensifies in the face of corporate capitalism, makes it all the more important for women to gather up their children and get away. In the end, this is exactly what Rose and Ginny, in different ways, opt to do.

But before Ginny can walk away from her marriage, the farm, and—a wonderful detail—the dinner she was cooking still simmering on the stove, she has a long history of patriarchal indoctrination to overcome. Much of the novel is about the mental and emotional process she must go through in order to get to the point where she can leave. Ginny has been trained to think, for example, that the survival of the farm depends upon the family sticking together no matter what the cost may be for individual members. As Harold angrily puts it when, a few weeks after the transfer, Ginny and Rose begin to question Larry's authority and assert their own, "One person don't break a farm up that lots of people have sweated and starved to put together. . . If you'd have been sons, you'd understand that. Women don't understand that" (204). Ginny's minister, Henry Dodge, puts it more gently, but just as insistently, when he urges her to make peace with her father because "Families are better together. Working together. . . .Three generations on one farm, working together, is something to protect" (266). To convince Ginny,
Henry recounts how some of his "best memories" as a child were making hay with his
grandfather and his uncles and experiencing how the men "worked like one body, they were that
close" (266).

Harold and Henry's comments expose, without their meaning to, an aspect of the
patriarchal farm family which is generally kept under wraps in the triumphant success stories
Ginny and her peers have been told about their farming community. What is glossed over is the
tension between the genders and the fact that farm life often inflicts a much higher cost on
women than it does on men.

A large part of the hardship women experience is caused by the patriarchal structure of
farm life. Feminists and others frequently use the term “patriarchy” to refer to all forms of male
domination, but sociologists define patriarchy more narrowly as a “social/economic/political
system of father domination” (Gordon 72). Under this more narrow definition of patriarchy,
generational and gender power are fused in the figure of the father who exercises control over
both women and children and essentially directs every aspect of family life. Because patriarchal
societies are generally feudal and hierarchical in nature, they are no longer the norm in most of
the developed world where capitalism and the democratic revolutions that often accompany it
have steadily swept away the primacy of the father-child bond and replaced it with “fraternity,”
the bond among brothers. U.S. society, for example, while still male dominated, has largely
moved beyond patriarchy. In agrarian and artisanal societies, however, patriarchy is still the
norm. This is because, as discussed in the previous section, in such economies the home is also
the workplace. Everyone in the family plays a role in the productive enterprise and, most
important of all, the father is constantly present directing all that occurs under “his” roof (Gordon
73). In choosing a late twentieth-century family farm as the setting for her novel, Smiley is able
to explore the contours of patriarchy without straying too far from a contemporary U.S. setting.\footnote{For a thorough discussion of the patriarchal family and the difference between it and the “modern” family with its male breadwinner/female homemaker structure or other contemporary or “post-modern” forms of family, see Linda Gordon and Allen Hunter’s article “Not All Male Dominance is Patriarchal.” Gordon and Hunter see male dominance in the U.S. as “endlessly redesigning itself,” but find that power over women and girls is no longer located in the father (83). Indeed, they point out, “\textit{father} is often today a gentler real and symbolic presence than other male forces,” such as the “\textit{warfare state}” (77).}

Larry fits the more narrow or sociological definition of a patriarch. He has the final say on every aspect of family life from when to begin the harvest to what sorts of after-school activities his daughters are allowed to participate in. His presence is so continuously overbearing that Ginny, at age 36, finds that when he moves out after the storm, the "the strangest thing" is that for the first time in her life she doesn't "know where Daddy actually is" (302). Under patriarchy, women and children are not only under constant surveillance but are systematically denied agency and are treated more like objects than like subjects. As Rose tells Ginny, "We were just [Daddy's], to do with as he pleased, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops" (191). Not surprisingly, Rose who is more in touch with her anger about the gender oppression she has experienced than Ginny is, thinks of Daddy's absence after the storm as "freedom" (302).

One could argue that it is, in fact, the absence of Ginny's mother, who dies when Ginny is still a young teenager—long before the action recounted in \textit{A Thousand Acres} takes place—which causes Larry to loom so large in both his children’s lives and in the narrative Ginny tells. Ginny herself wistfully looks towards her mother as a thwarted savior, lamenting the fact that her "mother died before she could present [Daddy] as only a man . . . before she could diminish him in our eyes enough for us to understand him" (20). Ginny's recollections of her mother, however, make it clear that the Cook family dynamics were not substantially different when her mother
was alive. Ginny recounts, for example, a time when she was being punished by her father for having lost her shoe at a school party. As the eleven-year-old Ginny retreats in terror from her enraged father and wedges herself into a hiding place, her mother cries out

"Larry! Larry! This is crazy!" He turned to her and said, "You on her side?"
Mommy said, "No, but—"
"Then you tell her to come out from behind there. There’s only one side here, and you’d better be on it. . . ."
She said, "Virginia, come out from behind there. . . ."
I did what she said. . . . he . . . leaned me up against [the doorway] and strapped me with his belt until I fell down." (182-83)

Smiley makes it clear that what goes on behind closed doors in the Cook family follows the script of a larger, socially sanctioned system of patriarchy: "[my mother] raised us the same way that the neighbors were raising their children," Ginny tells us, "which meant that she promoted my father's authority and was not especially affectionate or curious about our feelings" (223). As the punishment scene recounted above seems to indicate, promoting the father's authority plays a role in diminishing the mother's ability to be intimate with her children, perhaps because she has been discouraged from taking the children's "side" and thus seeing things from their point of view.

As a grown woman, Ginny continues to follow her mother’s example, bolstering her father’s “side” at the expense of her own perceptions, feelings, and voice. Even as Larry becomes senile, she finds herself unable “to confront the monolith that he seemed to be” (115). Silently serving her father breakfast one morning soon after the transfer of the farm, Ginny thinks, “My job remained what it had always been—to give [Daddy] what he asked of me, and if he showed discontent, to try to find out what would please him” (115).

The pressure to identify first and foremost with the family’s needs, as laid out by its male leader or leaders, is a key characteristic of patriarchal societies where loyalty to the group—
family, clan, or tribe—takes precedent over the individual. Subjectivity and personal freedom, considered hallmarks of modern capitalistic societies, are foreign to patriarchal ones. Ginny reflects this patriarchal mindset early in the novel when she thinks of freedom as a “lovely” word, “a word that always startled and refreshed me when I heard it. I didn’t think of it as having much to do with my life, or the life of anyone I knew” (109).

Towards the end of the novel, Ginny takes the advice a neighbor's parrot gave her when she was just a teenager—"Sit up! Reach for it!"—and reaches for personal freedom by leaving the farm and her marriage to take a job as a waitress in St. Paul (136). When Ty shows up at her work place a few years later with divorce papers, he maintains that things in their marriage and on the farm went “wrong” because Ginny and her sister Rose became “selfish” and wanted too much. Ginny explodes:

I can remember when I saw it all your way! The proud progress from Grandpa Davis to Grandpa Cook to Daddy. When ‘we’ bought the first tractor in the county, when ‘we’ built the big house, when ‘we’ had the crops sprayed from the air . . . , when ‘we’ got a hundred and seventy-two bushels an acre. I can remember all of that . . . like being married. . . . It’s good to remember and repeat. You feel good to be a part of that. But then I saw what my part really was. Rose showed me. . . . She showed me, but I knew what she showed me was true before she even finished showing me. You see this grand history, but I see blows. I see taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did. I see getting others to pay the price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was. Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own? . . . No. I think he had lessons. (342)

The linguistic sign of Ginny's divorce from the patriarchal system runs throughout this speech, from the scare quotes around the word "we" indicating her rejection of the family story as being synonymous with her own story to the assertion of Ginny's individual voice signaled by her frequent use of the pronoun "I." She underlines that she has actively put together her

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48 See Linda Gordon and Allen Hunter's “Not All Male Dominance Is Patriarchal.”
independent point of view by repeating phrases like "I see" and "I think" as she expresses her ideas.

Again, as Ginny's speech to Ty makes clear, Larry's incest and the beatings he gave her and Rose were not specific to her family but part and parcel of the system. The collapse of the female into the male "we," so that the male story covers over or even completely erases the female story, is a main manifestation of that larger system. Ginny notes that even the history of her body has been excised: "One thing Daddy took from me when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my body" (280).

During the Monopoly nights Ginny begins to recover some of the stories that Daddy has taken from her. As she begins to separate from her father and the community that supports him and to consider whether she herself might be able to have some individual agency in the world, she revisits the "satisfying story" that her father has told her about how the Cook family came to have one of the biggest farms in Zebulon County (132). Sifting through Larry's narrative, she notes that there were "details to mull over but not to speak about" (132). These details, she begins to realize, mark the places where other narratives, the ones submerged beneath Daddy's "proud progress" story, lie buried.

One set of "details" that Ginny exhumes and mulls over are the stories of the women who have come before her. The official family line on Ginny's grandmother Edith, for example, was that she was "a silent woman." Pondering this detail, Ginny begins to wonder what Edith actually thought of her husband: "if her reputed silence wasn't due to temperament at all, but due to fear. She was surrounded by men she had known all her life, by the great plate of land they cherished. She didn't drive a car. Possibly she had no money of her own. That detail went unrevealed by the stories" (132-33).
Edith's husband, John Cook, had helped Edith's father drain the land and had lived either in Edith's house or just next door for her entire childhood. Edith's marriage to John Cook was a foregone conclusion, motivated, essentially, by business considerations: "It was pretty clear that John Cook had gained, through dint of sweat equity, a share in the Davis Farm, and when Edith turned sixteen, John, thirty-three by then, married her" (15). Such a marriage seems straight out of the feudal period where marriages were used to consolidate property and cement relationships between families.

Ginny notes that twice land acquisition coincided with women's deaths—once when her grandmother Edith died in 1938 and two parcels of land were bought and once again when Ginny's mother died in 1957. Add to this the fact that both women die young as does Jess' mother and Ginny's sister Rose and the novel begins to lay a case for a metaphorical equivalence between the destruction of women's lives and the growth of the farm.

The isolation Edith experienced, "surrounded by men," dovetails with the more recent generations of farm women in her family who continue to experience themselves as cut off from society. Women's workplace on a farm—the house and the yard—is in itself less communal than what goes on in the fields where men work in small groups, pooling their labor and even, during busy times, hiring additional hands. This "detail," like the reasons for Edith's silence, generally goes without saying which is why Ginny's minister, Henry Dodge, can glow about the goodness of families "working together" absolutely oblivious to the fact that women are absent from the bucolic hay-making scene he describes taking part in with his uncles. In a contrasting view of women's work on the farm, Ginny remembers her mother feeling unable to relax in her workplace—her own home—because she always had to "get things done" (46). Worse, her mother's identity seems to merge with the house: "We were given to know that the house
belonged in every particular to her. . . [and] that damaging it was equal to damaging her" (223). As an adult, Ginny will find in housework a way to suspend interaction with both herself and the outside world. Shampooing the rug in her farmhouse, she tells us that "the whirring sound of the machine was like a den I could curl up in, safe from my father's vagaries. . . . I . . . worked myself into a rather floating state of mind, abuzz with white noise" (121).  

The social and emotional difficulties farm women experience did not escape Ginny's mother, who worried about her daughters as she was dying: "[S]he wanted you to have more choices," a neighbor woman tells Ginny. "I know she wanted you to go to college. She never wanted you to marry so young before seeing some other places and trying some other things. She used to say, 'The Twin Cities aren't such a big deal. The Twin Cities aren't the New Jerusalem!' " (91).  

After their mother dies, Rose spends years fantasizing that their mother, instead of dying, had actually "escaped" and was living under an assumed name in a distant city where she waitressed, lived in a "Hollywood-style apartment," and would "someday . . . be back for us" (187). Long before Ginny, at novel's end, decides to "[take] our own advice" by driving to the Twin Cities and becoming a waitress, the novel is thick with casual references to women who have left farm and family to work in the cities (220). At the signing over of the farm, for example, Larry's lawyer Ken LaSalle is gloomy, ostensibly because, like Kent in King Lear, he has strong reservations about Larry transferring the farm. But, Ginny also tells us, "Ken's wife had left him at Christmas, gone off to get a job in the Twin Cities" (39). Loren, Jess' younger brother, has been unable to even find a wife: "Girls don't want to move out to the farm," he tells Jess. "They'll date you and they'll come pick things out of the garden, but that's all." The "cute" girl he dated in high school has moved to Chicago and become a "weatherlady for some TV

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49 Amy Levin has noted that "Ginny's absorption in small chores anesthetizes her" (27).
station" (72). Historian Jack Kirby argues that Loren's love life difficulties are quite representative, noting that the *Farm Journal*, which established a singles directory during the 1980s, had 4,300 entries by 1995 of which 77 percent were men (597).

The most important example of a woman leaving the farm in Smiley's novel, of course, is Caroline whose escape—Ginny and Rose actually refer to her as "the one who got away"—was carefully planned by her two older sisters who raised her, after their mother died, from the age of six (99). Though only teenagers themselves, they protected her from Larry's incestuous urges and encouraged her to develop herself and to become independent of her father. Perhaps because of this, Caroline is, by the time the action of the novel opens, Larry's favorite. She is also, in Ginny's eyes, "[t]he most successful" of the daughters (125). 50 A case can be made that Larry's decision to turn the farm over to his three daughters and their husbands is partly an attempt to lure Caroline, a lawyer living in Des Moines and on the verge of marrying another lawyer, back to the farm. Though Caroline only says "I don't know" when Larry proposes the transfer, Ginny remarks that "Caroline would have said, if she'd dared, that she didn't want to live on the farm... [S]he would have seen my father's plan as a trapdoor plunging her into a chute that would deposit her right back on the farm" (20-21).

Caroline is, indeed, the one who got away: what she has escaped is not just the farm, however, but patriarchy itself. As a result, the gulf between Caroline and her two older sisters, who are still under the sway of patriarchal rule, is extreme. When Caroline expresses her doubts about the farm transfer, Ginny realizes "in a flash" that Caroline "had spoken [to Larry] as a woman rather than as a daughter. . . . something . . . that Rose and I were pretty careful never to do" (21). Ginny sees Daddy as a huge figure who dwarfs the surrounding landscape, but Caroline

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50 David Brauner in his article "'Speak Again': The Politics of Rewriting in *A Thousand Acres*" points out that Larry deliberately fosters sibling rivalry: "by encouraging his daughters to compete for his love, Larry preserves his authority and ensures that his side remains the only one" (663).
begins with the premise of Larry's everyday humanity believing he is, like everybody, "basically good, and sorry to make mistakes, and ready to make amends" (362). Instead of towering over everything like a giant, Larry appears normal-sized to Caroline; he is "as familiar as a father should look, no more, no less" (362). She marvels out loud at the fact that Ginny and Rose never wanted to leave the farm, assuming that it was merely their choice to make. When Ginny exclaims in exasperation after Caroline files a suit to help Larry win the farm back, "We saved you from Daddy! We made a space for you that we never had for ourselves," Caroline shoots back angrily, "Did I have to be saved from. . . . my own father?" (245) In the end, Ginny decides not to tell Caroline about Larry's incest. "There are just some things you have to ask for," she decides; Caroline has made it clear she doesn't want to hear the "terrible" things about Daddy that Ginny has to tell because she doesn't believe Ginny's version of events (362-64). In Caroline's mind, Ginny is so filled with "greed or something" that she is "evil" (363). The gulf between these women, whose assumptions about their father and perhaps about fatherhood itself are so different, has become unbridgeable.

Historians and ethnographers have paid little attention to the actual lives of farm women; further, what information has been gathered has been from those women who remain on the farms, not from those who escape to cities or suburbs, thus biasing the research in favor of what Jack Kirby calls "persistors," women who, like Ginny's grandmother and mother, tend to suffer the abuses of patriarchal rule with grim stoicism (591). Anthropologist Deborah Fink, who returned in the 1980s to her native Nebraska and began interviewing rural women about their experiences, has gone a long way to break the silence. Fink's interviews detail the brutal oppression rural women have experienced in patriarchal families including a pervasive pattern of sexual abuse carried out by fathers and husbands against both women and children and the
isolation of rural women who have little, if any, supportive community to call upon in their troubles.  

Fink's research also shows that some farmwomen began, especially after the price of commodities collapsed in the 1920s, to encourage their children, both male and female, to leave the farm in favor of life elsewhere. Ginny's mother, with her fervent hope that her daughters might "[see] some other places and [try] some other things" is certainly representative of this trend as are Ginny and Rose who unconsciously fulfill their mother's hopes by giving Caroline the tools to escape farm life. Later they will do the same for Rose's two children, Linda and Pam. In fact, Rose's dying wish is that her daughters not inherit the farm: "I don't want it to come to them," she tells Ginny. "I want all of this to stop with our generation" (353). After her death, Linda and Pam join Ginny in the city where they attend college and begin to train for non-farm careers.

During the decades of the 1980s and 90s there was a raging debate in the United States about the health and fate of the traditional family. While the Reagan and Bush administrations and conservative groups like the Moral Majority painted idyllic portraits of family life, there were plenty of indications that the traditional family they lauded—defined as two heterosexual parents and their children—was in decline. By 1990, Newsweek, in an article entitled "What Happened to the Family," is able to admit that "the traditional family is something of an anomaly" (qtd in Levin 22). Amy Levin notes that as concerns about the fate of the traditional family mounted during the 1980s, farms were portrayed in popular culture "as a refuge from the

51 For a short story that depicts the unhappiness and desperation of an isolated farmwife, see Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers," written in 1917. See also Deborah Fink's two books on the subject, Open Country, Iowa and Agrarian Women, especially pages 1-10, 86-88, and 122-23 in the latter book.

52 For more on this question of mothers encouraging their children to leave the farm, see Fink's Agrarian Women pages 155-88. See also Gilbert C. Fite's 1959 article, "Flight from the Farm."
forces pulling families apart. . . . [F]arms took on metaphorical associations with a prelapsarian America, where families enjoyed prosperity, togetherness, and a certain moral certitude" (22). At the same time, since small farms were also beginning to falter, their vitality—or lack thereof—was widely "perceived as a reflection of the condition of the American family" (Levin 23). This elision in the popular mind between the failure of small farms and the decline of the traditional family created fertile ground for another debate making its rounds during the last decades of the twentieth century, the question of who or what is to blame for the demise of family farming and, by extension, for the breakup of the family.

As we have already seen, Harold's answer is quick and unequivocal: for him, it's girls and women who are threatening to sink the family farm. "Girls," he tells Ginny, "always got minds of their own" and "don't understand" that a farm is "more than one person. . . . If you'd have been sons, you'd understand that" (203-04). Ty, also, places the farm above any one individual's needs. After debt forces him to sell his half, Ty emphasizes his neutrality in the family dispute that has led to its fracturing, asserting, “I was on the side of the farm, that was all”(341). Ty attributes the loss of the farm to Rose and Ginny getting "selfish" by demanding that attention be paid to their own needs as well as to the interpersonal dynamics of the family (342). After Caroline and Daddy file the lawsuit to win back the farm, Ty tells Ginny “I was so excited about the hog operation. . . . and then you women just wrecked it” (261).

The male characters who are the most successful farmers and who are also most aligned with the status quo—Larry, Ty, and Harold—all subscribe to an essentialist view of gender. To them, women are configured by biology to be a distinctly separate, though uniform, group. Ty's tendency to refer to Ginny and Rose as "you women" is a symptom of this sort of mindset: “You women don’t understand your father at all” (103), he tells Ginny, or "[Larry] always threw you
women into a panic" (343). When she calmly agrees to a divorce, Ty is surprised by her lack of emotion: “The thing I don’t understand about women is how cut and dried they are,” he says, lumping her with his memory of his mother’s way of dealing with disappointment. Harold and Larry echo Ty's language, referring to Ginny and Rose as "you girls," particularly when either of the two women do or express things which the men dislike or disagree with.53

When economic problems arise, then, it is no surprise that these same male characters are quick to lay the blame for them at the feet of the women. There is, of course, a grain of truth in doing so. A family farm cannot survive without the work women do: Ginny, for example, cooks, cleans, keeps the farm's accounting books, raises and preserves much of the food she and Ty eat, and helps out with the farm work when an extra hand is needed, including doing such things as castrating the baby pigs and driving truckloads of corn to the elevators during the harvest. In addition, women produce and raise the next generation of farmers. But like women across the farm belt, Caroline and Ginny decide to vote with their feet, moving to the cities as a way to reject the patriarchal rural lifestyle: their combined desertion does, in fact, play a role in helping to sink the Cook farm.

There are a number of other factors contributing to the "dramatic decline" of the farming population in the United States over the course of the twentieth century, including "agribusiness's purported efficiencies of scale, poor commodity prices, and excessive farm debt" (Kirby 591). But as Kirby and others point out, the most "insoluble" crisis of them all may well be the "discontent within families, especially among females, within a quintessentially patriarchal institution" (590).54 Looking closely at the period of the 1980s, Amy Levin finds that early in the

53 See page 174-76, for examples of Larry talking to Ginny in this way and page 203 for an instance of Harold employing the same sort of language with Ginny.
decade the family farm was idealized in the popular imagination, but that as the decade wore on and the economic troubles of many family farms became more apparent, "farmers in the public press blamed many of their problems on external forces [while] the government accused farmers of fiscal irresponsibility," chiefly for taking out loans that they couldn't pay back (25). Far less visible to the public were the kinds of internal family tensions that scholars like Deborah Fink were quietly beginning to uncover and that Smiley's novel, written at the end of the decade, lays out for us so carefully.

The theme of keeping the family together no matter how individual members are treated is sounded early in the novel when Harold Clark throws a huge party to celebrate his son Jess' homecoming after 13 years in exile. But the romantic feelings sparked in Ginny by Jess turn out to be just as illusory as the images of idyllic farm and family life that the public has been fed during the early years of the 1980s: Jess abruptly abandons Ginny in favor of Rose, a choice that destabilizes Rose's husband Pete and leads directly to his death. The secrets that have been papered over for the sake of family unity—incest, the drinking water poisoned by farm chemicals, the callous treatment of both family members and neighbors—gradually surface as the novel progresses and all help illuminate for Ginny and for us the internal tensions that are tearing the Cook family apart.

The main male characters in Smiley's novel remain outside this loop of understanding. Their gender bias blinds them in two distinct ways. First, they are unable to see how their actions and their allegiance to a patriarchal family structure have hurt women. The fact that Larry never

54 Kirby shows that small family farms that have made the right economic choices—not going into debt, for example—have been able to survive and even flourish, a fact that indicates that their demise is not inevitable and not merely due to their inability to compete with agribusiness. For more on the oppression of women and its relationship to the destabilization of the family farm, see John Mack Faragher's "The Historical Imagination of A Thousand Acres."

55 I am indebted to Amy Levin for this insight linking Ginny's disillusionment with Jess to her disillusionment about family and farm life (28).
acknowledges nor makes any amends for the emotional and physical abuse he has inflicted on Ginny and Rose is directly related to this blindness. His escape, as Rose thinks of it, into senility spares him from coming to terms with the terrible sins he has committed (235). Second, men, as we have seen above, are so busy blaming women for the family and the farm's demise, that they miss altogether the way actual economic conditions are affecting their lives and their relationships. In particular, blaming women allows them to escape from coming to terms with what is perhaps the biggest taboo subject of them all—the sins of the capitalist economic system in which they are all so embroiled.

Because Zebulon County is male-dominated, the mentality described above, of ignoring and blaming women while at the same time clinging with religious fervor to a Horatio Alger-type version of the American Dream, has infiltrated the consciousness of the community as a whole. Rose painfully outlines this fact when she tells Ginny as she is dying: "I was as much of a nothing as Mommy or Grandma Edith. I didn't even get Daddy to know what he had done, or what it meant. People around town talk about how I wrecked it all. Three generations on the same farm, great land, Daddy a marvelous farmer and a saint to boot" (355).

Still, despite the resistance of men and of the male-dominated community, the stories and secrets about family life that have, up until now, been successfully repressed come to the surface in the course of Ginny's narrative. The ability of her narrative to "break through the surface of everything that hadn't been said" is so startling, given the context of repression, that it begs the question why now (7)? What is different about this historical period that allows the "togetherness" of family to be superseded by individual needs, particularly the individual needs of women? And what makes Ginny and Rose and even Caroline all insist on speaking up and having their own voices heard when previous generations of women chose to keep silent? It is
not that conditions for rural women have suddenly gotten worse, since it is clear that Ginny's mother and grandmother were subjected to some of the same patriarchal abuses that Ginny documents in her own life.\textsuperscript{56} Rather, it is that conditions in the world beyond the farm have actually gotten better for women. Women can begin to think and speak critically about farm life because they now have the option of leaving it for jobs in the cities.

At the center of these changes is the switch to a postindustrial economy with its preponderance of service and professional jobs and the rise of the corporate work place where, though women are often initially relegated to the lower rungs of the hierarchical work force, they are nevertheless welcomed into it. And because, as David Leverenz argues, it is ultimately in the interest of corporations to promote the best individuals to positions of leadership and responsibility, women along with members of other traditionally disadvantaged groups can nurture and sometimes realize the dream of advancing within the company.\textsuperscript{57} With an independent source of income and the possibility of promotion, women no longer have to depend on fathers or husbands for economic survival, nor must they stay locked in abusive or even just unhappy family situations. In short, as capitalism develops it begins to exert a liberating force on women's lives by offering women economic opportunities that, in the end, undermine patriarchy.

One is reminded of an earlier group of women, the daughters of New England's farmers who, at the beginning of the industrial revolution, made their way to the new factory mills in Lowell, Massachusetts and elsewhere beginning in the 1820s. Living in barracks and working

\textsuperscript{56} Ginny's grandmother, forced at 16 to marry a man over twice her age who had lived in her house or next door since she was born, also has had a experience akin to incest, for example.

\textsuperscript{57} David Leverenz argues in \textit{Paternalism Incorporated} that corporate capitalism needs, for its own reasons, to foster a society in which there is equality and tolerance amongst individuals from different groups. The reasons he lists for corporate capitalism needing to undermine the old hierarchies include the fact that "the mental and decision-making skills demanded by managerial or professional work don't require the categories of gender, race and class," that "the greatest profits should come from employing the most talented managers and experts in every group," and finally that "the logic of corporate expansion mandates marketing products and services to increasingly diverse customers" (12).
long grueling hours, these single women seemed to accept the hardships of factory life as an equitable tradeoff for the chance to escape isolated family life and experience new ideas and social arrangements.\textsuperscript{58} It is no accident that the first wave of the women's rights movement in the U.S. arose at this time, just as the second wave of feminism can be tied, in part, to the massive move of women into the postindustrial workforce during the second half of the twentieth century.

Smiley's novel chronicles the history of the contemporary generation of women who make the move away from the patriarchal family set-up, often trading father domination for the anonymity and alienation of urban, corporate life. It is a liberatory move in some respects, but, as with the situation of the women factory workers nearly a century and a half earlier, the liberation is tempered by a new set of problems and oppressions. After she leaves the farm, Ginny enters a state of numbness. She calls this period her "afterlife," and, forgetting that she is "still alive," she clings to the way the uniform she puts on to work at her place of employment—a restaurant in the Perkins chain—gives "every workday a sameness that felt like perpetuity" (334-36). While Ginny shuts down emotionally in an attempt to deal with the trauma of her recent past, her state of mind is also reflective of the alienated sorts of relationships people living in urban centers, especially ones under the sway of corporate capitalism, tend to develop with each other and with the physical environment.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{58} For more on the history of New England women factory workers see Thomas Dublin's \textit{Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860}. Dublin has also compiled a collection of letters written by women factory workers entitled \textit{Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860}.

\textsuperscript{59} Ginny contrasts the "sameness" and the "blur . . . of the urban routine" in her new life to the "sense of distinct events that is so inescapable on a farm, where every rainstorm is thick with odor and color, and usefulness and timing" (334-6). Another instance of alienation connected with her new life is that while she is acutely aware of what happens to waste and garbage on the farm, in the city Ginny is forced to rely "on the sewage treatment plant that I had never seen" (367).
Some years into her city life, she forms a new female-only family when Rose's two daughters come to live with her after their mother's death. In this reformed family, there is no dominating head of household to lay down the law. Instead, there is a low-key, communal feel to its governance: the girls "don't have a great deal of faith in my guardianship," Ginny tells us, but "they like me, and we get along smoothly" (369). Perhaps precisely because she is not authoritarian, Ginny seems to be shepherding her two nieces successfully into adulthood and the workforce. They have inherited no money from Rose, who told them as she lay dying that they might have to sign up with the military to get money for college. Ginny, however, has figured out a way to send them both to college without joining the service. One daughter majors in music education and the other is in pre-business. The latter "is especially interested in vertical food conglomerates, and may go to work for General Foods," which, of course, allows the economic trajectory the book traces to come to its logical conclusion: small producers/owners pushed off the land by corporations and financial institutions eventually go to work as wage laborers in some of those same corporations (369). As a future very different from that of their mother and aunt unfolds, these young women are not depicted as feeling particularly liberated; instead, Ginny describes her nieces as having "some confidence," but as also being "cautious" and "more protective of one another than they ever were as children" (369).

_A Thousand Acres_ sheds light on the concern about "fatherlessness" which increasingly makes its appearance in social and political circles in the U.S. during the postwar years. This worry surfaces in regard to Black families in the 1960s, when the "pathological" effect that the absence of Black men has allegedly had on the Black family is brought forcefully to the public's attention by a report authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965, now known as the Moynihan
By the 1980s, concern about fatherlessness has been extended to the population at large with rightwing groups blaming feminists for putting their own careers ahead of their families' needs and urging men to act responsibly by remaining in their families and reasserting themselves as the head of their household. Feminists, meanwhile, raise questions about the "naturalness" of the modern family that conservatives wish to reinstate and explore and expose its hidden costs to individual members, particularly to women. Feminists also seek to validate the diversity of family forms springing up to take the modern family's hegemonic place.

Smiley's novel, published in 1991, can be seen as taking part in this debate about the demise of the modern family and the rise of fatherless families by showing that the transition away from father-dominated families has to do with both the abusive treatment of women and children that occurs in such families and with the changing material conditions which not only provide women with new avenues of escape from oppressive family dynamics but also force changes in men's economic status. Men's worsening economic status from the 1970s on is, in fact, another factor forcing the family as a whole to undergo changes.

In the early nineteenth century, the yeoman farmers of New England were too independent to submit to the stultifying regimen of factory work which is why many of the first U.S. factory workers were farmers' daughters and other young, unmarried women. We see a

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60 To read Moynihan's original report, which was entitled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) as well as a number of other articles on the controversy his report sparked, see Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey's *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*. For more on the special economic conditions imposed upon the Black family in the U.S. from slavery on, see my Chapter One.

61 The "modern family," which arose with industrialization in the United States, is defined as containing a male breadwinner, a female homemaker and the couple's children. See Judith Stacey's article "The Family Is Dead, Long Live Our Families" for more about the origin and demise of the modern family in the United States and in the West in general. Stacey, writing in 1994, asserts that only "a minority of U.S. households still contain married couples with children" and that "[m]ore children live with single mothers than in modern families containing a breadwinner dad and a full-time homemaker mom" ("Family" 95).

62 See David McNally's *Another World is Possible*, especially chapter three, for a discussion of the resistance of peasant farmers in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to becoming wage workers. McNally
similar sort of resistance to joining the proletariat in the men of Ginny's generation, who experience joining the corporate workforce as largely negative. After losing the farm, Ty visits Ginny in the Twin Cities before moving to Texas where he hopes to take a job in one of the "big corporate hog operations down there" (339). They meet during her lunch hour and as she gets ready to return to work, he makes a gesture that takes in Ginny, the street, the restaurants, and the parking lot and says, "I don't understand living like this, this ugly way. But I guess I'm gonna be getting used to it" (343-44). Earlier in the novel, the site supervisor for the hog confinement buildings that Ty had built on the Cook farm looks out across the fields and says "This looks like paradise to me" (178). This man is a step ahead of Ty: his father has a farm in Colorado, but this man has gone to work for an agricultural construction company. The mixture of envy and nostalgia with which he views the Cook farm speaks volumes about how much more difficult the move off the land and into wage labor is for men, who feel they have more to lose and far less to gain than women fleeing patriarchy do.63

Patriarchy itself is dealt a blow over the course of capitalist development as more and more men find themselves unable to own their own small businesses or farms and are forced instead to work for wages. Men employed outside the home, can no longer function as the

writes that "[o]nly when they were thoroughly dispossessed of . . . land . . . did large numbers of the English poor turn to waged work and submit to the disciplines of the labour market" (91).

Thomas Dublin points out in Women at Work that in nineteenth century New England women's wages as well as their status in terms of which jobs they could do in the mills were much lower than men's because "mills had to attract men away from competing occupations" which was "not the case in the hiring of women" who had relatively few economic options outside of the work they did in families (65). Dublin notes in Farm to Factory that the establishment of a hierarchical order of workers continued with the arrival of immigrant women, whose numbers gradually increased in the factories from the 1840s on: segregated from the native women workers both in the mills and in the boarding houses, they were often paid a lower wage than the "Yankee" women got (212).

63 Smiley depicts some men who also find liberation in moving to the cities. Mel Scott, who is not a native farmer and is failing at running his farm, signs his land over to Larry Cook and his father in the 1930s. Smiley has Ginny use language reminiscent of F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby to describe Mel's state of mind: Mel "is ecstatic with . . . the high pressure that hums over the whole defenseless breast of the continent . . . with . . . plans for a trip, a new life, city time" (134). In an ironic twist, Ginny notes that Mel or some of his relatives—"who'd long ago moved to Chicago"—may actually be part of the corporation which ends up buying the Cook farm (368).
supreme head of the household in the classic patriarchal sense because home and work are no longer integrated. Men also experience a lowering of status and a loss of autonomy in the workplace itself as they take their place under a boss or upon the rungs of a hierarchy.

Under classic patriarchy women and men strike what Judith Stacey calls a patriarchal bargain in which "women accept overt subordination in exchange for protection and secure social status" ("Family" 91). In the modern family system that patriarchal bargain continues but the terms are modified: wrapped in an ideology of romantic love and separate spheres, women agree to assume responsibility for the home while men assume responsibility for the breadwinning. But, as Stacey points out, "instability was written into the genetic code of the modern family system (on the "Y" chromosome), because its sustenance depended upon the wide availability of stable, livable-wage jobs for men" ("Family" 93). In the 1950s and 1960s the majority of male industrial workers in the U.S. were in fact able to earn enough to support a full-time housewife, but beginning in the 1970s, job availability and earnings for men began to decline due to de-industrialization and postindustrialization. "As that strand of the [patriarchal] bargain began to unravel during the 1970s and 1980s, the fragility of the entire gender and family order moved into full view, provoking widespread consternation over 'family crisis' " ("Family" 93). 64

* A Thousand Acres * chronicles this unraveling of the patriarchal bargain as men's wages fall and women are forced to enter the labor force in massive numbers. Ginny leaves a patriarchal family, but her exodus and her subsequent establishment of herself as both a wage worker and a single parent in a new "fatherless" family has much in common with the kinds of changes modern families are undergoing during these same years. In either case, men's ability to

64 For more on the patriarchal bargain, see Deniz Kandiyoti's article "Bargaining with Patriarchy."
provide for and protect women diminishes to such an extent that women begin to reevaluate the patriarchal bargain as they consider whether general subordination to men and the acceptance of a gendered division of labor within the family still serves their interests. If the demise of the modern family system during the second half of the twentieth century can be taken as their response, the answer is a resounding "no!"

Ginny begins life with an acceptance of the patriarchal bargain that several generations of women and men in her family have lived by. She describes being afraid of her father as a child: "If I had to speak to him, I addressed his overalls. . . . If he lifted me near his face, I shrank away from him." At the same time, she finds his "fearsomeness . . . reassuring when I thought about things like robbers or monsters." In addition to protecting Ginny from immediate physical harm, Ginny also feels a satisfied glow about Larry's ability to provide economically for the family, fusing this ability with his role as a father: "in my youthful estimation, Laurence Cook defined both [the] categories" of farmer and father. By first grade the calculus of capitalist competition and its implications for fatherhood has taken such deep root in Ginny's thinking that she views her classmates' fathers, who have not amassed the wealth that Larry has, as "impostors, as farmers and as fathers, too" (19).

But as Ginny comes to understand the harm her father has caused her, her family, her community, and the land which sustains them all, her evaluation of her father/farmer changes. Viewed through a different lens, she sees he has neither physically protected her nor has he looked out for her financial well-being. He has not taken care to pass the farm on to his daughters, for example. He uses the transfer as a way to satisfy his own competitive and self-centered urges, looking over his shoulder at Harold or at Caroline rather than taking the steps necessary to establish a solid inheritance for the children and grandchildren who are dependent
upon him and the farm for their livelihood. In addition to the physical and sexual abuse Ginny has suffered at her father's hands, she discovers he has also allowed the capitalist impetus to innovate to trump the health of his family as farm chemicals accumulate in the well water. Ty also violates the patriarchal promise to take care of Ginny and their future as a family: after the transfer, he casts caution to the winds by saddling the farm with a huge debt—the largest, Marv Carson makes clear, in the bank's portfolio; he doesn't seek to lessen the tensions and divisions amongst family members, a fact which exacerbates the family's financial troubles; he doesn't attempt to discover the reasons for Ginny's many miscarriages and, when Ginny discovers that the well water is the reason for her infertility, he doesn't want to listen. He also doesn't want to hear about Larry's incest and, when Larry denounces her publically in hateful, hurtful, sexually-charged language, he doesn't say a word in her defense either in front of the others or later when he and Ginny are alone.

Early in the novel, Ty, Jess, and Ginny discuss a brutal murder that has occurred locally: a young woman is slain by her ex-boyfriend. The boyfriend tries to break into her family's house at which point the woman's father and brother chase him off. They leave the "heavy" front door open, however, and later the boyfriend, after eluding the father and brother, circles back, enters the house and, when the girlfriend comes out of hiding to talk to him, he kills her. Ty sees the scene from the father's point of view: "Anyone could be that father" he says. "I keep rewriting it in my head. Remembering to lock the door behind you, for one." Jess responds, "In a city, the door would have locked behind them automatically." Ginny, trying to see things from the

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65 Jack Temple Kirby points out in his article "Rural Culture in the American Middle West: Jefferson to Jane Smiley" that not all family farms go under in the face of competition from corporate agriculture. Those that survive take a different approach to production strategies than did the Cook family. In particular, Kirby finds that the family farms that persist place care of the land and succession within families above risky expansions and large profits. They remain, as Kirby puts it, "in the market system, but not of it" (590)

66 Though he never said a word, it is hard to believe that Larry, an avid reader of farm magazines, was not aware of the link between these chemicals and Ginny's inability to carry a pregnancy to term.
woman's point of view, wonders "what she thought she was doing, going out to meet him" to which Jess responds, "I'm sure she thought he couldn't really want to hurt her" (75).

The story of this murder encapsulates some of the major themes of novel. The door that locks automatically is a reminder that in cities there is more independence for women who no longer have to rely upon husbands or fathers for protection. The story also points to the fact that men, even with the best of intentions, are not always able to protect "their" women. Finally, as Ginny and Jess' interchange makes clear, it may be worse than that men aren't able to protect women: women embedded in a patriarchal family system don't always see that the men they have put their trust in may nevertheless hurt them.

Towards the end of the novel, Ginny finds her mind coming back to this murder story. She is sitting in the courtroom as the fate of the farm is being argued out. Her mind is ranging widely but comes gradually to focus on Jess, who sits in the back and watches the proceedings. At this point Pete is dead and Jess and Rose have started a relationship, making him an interested party possibly in line for a share of the Cook farm. He doesn't realize he is being observed and as such his face is more readable than Ginny has ever found it. She sees how he looks "canny, almost calculating" and that at the same time his feelings aren't "evident in any way," that his face is "cool, without animation or warmth" (322). She feels an "instinctive female reaction of caution" and suddenly remembers the trusting young woman who had been killed by her boyfriend.

What Ginny seems to finally see, as she looks at Jess, is that he, like the other men in her life, can no longer be trusted to protect and provide for her; he does not have her best interests at heart. Jess' face is emotionless and calculating, the very attributes she comes to recognize in Ty as he waits for Larry to bestow the farm on him. The hard-heartedness she reads in Jess' face is
of a piece with the hard-heartedness Ginny has uncovered in her father and the other men of Zebulon County who are wrapped up in the dream of being or becoming successful capitalists. Up until now Ginny has more or less accepted the outlines and strictures of the patriarchal bargain. But in this moment she moves beyond it. Her "instinctive female reaction of caution" tells her it is more dangerous to stay than to go.

A few hours later she has left Ty and is driving towards the Twin Cities where she will trade in the version of the patriarchal bargain she has stuck by all her life for a waitressing job, a small apartment and, eventually, the role of a single mom. Ginny's escape from the patriarchal family is not experienced by her or by her readers as a triumphant strike for freedom. Rather, it comes across as a painful but necessary step on the journey towards a new kind of life.

What that new life will look like is not clear. She lives, at novel's end, in a sort of holding pattern. The developments of late capitalism have allowed Ginny to extricate herself from the clutches of a patriarchal father, but, as the novel has shown us, patriarchy is only one of the oppressive forces against which Ginny has had to struggle. Though she has left the farm, she still lives in a capitalist society and must deal with the effects that that system has upon people, families, and, in fact, all social relations. Moreover, as the novel shows us, male domination, even if it is not of the patriarchal variety, and capitalism are deeply intertwined. What kinds of changes fathers who are not patriarchal but may still be steeped in many of its precepts can make as long as capitalism continues to be the dominant economic system is not at all clear.

The view of a family in which men and especially fathers play either a positive role or at least a less dominating one lies beyond the pages of this novel, but Smiley has given us through her negative depiction of fatherhood in the patriarchal and, more generally, the bourgeois modern family, a clear sense of what sort of attributes must be left behind. It will be up to other
novels and novelists to chronicle the sorts of families that can and are made out of the shards of the economic and psychological past Smiley has so carefully unearthed and pieced together for us in this novel.
CHAPTER FOUR

OF MASKS AND MASCULINITY

FATHERS, SONS, AND THE CASTING OF IDENTITY
IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S DROWN

Our fathers had by circumstances become nearly impossible to love. . . Theirs was
the steely love of men who view the world from the angle of one who toils
with his muscles. . . They commanded absolute obedience, and were generals,
each with his little army—the family. . . When we struggled against them,
we were, in the most basic ways, struggling against the state of the world.
—Brent Staples

When Abuelo was around (and awake) he talked to me about the good old days,
when a man could still make a living from his finca [farm], when the United States
wasn't something folks planned on.
—Drown

In the morning he [THE BOY] pulls on his mask and grinds his fist into his palm.
He goes to the guanábana tree and does his pull-ups . . . He's unbeatable. . . Then he hears
his family stirring. Hurry up, he says to himself. . . then he says FLIGHT
and jumps up and his shadow knifes over the tops of the trees.
—Drown

The suspicion will always remain: he must be hiding something.
And, in fact, I'm hiding something. You can't talk about yourself
without hiding something else. So, I always feel that this is a tension
which is inherent in reading and writing.
—Junot Díaz

I: INTRODUCTION

Junot Díaz's brilliant first novel Drown (1996) is a slim volume of ten connected short
stories, set variously in the Dominican Republic and in the urban/industrial neighborhoods of
northern New Jersey and New York City in the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s.¹ The novel narrates the

¹ John Riofrio reports that at the 2003 Future of Minority Studies Conference at the University of Wisconsin-
Madison there was a "lively debate" about whether Drown can be considered a novel (23). Although our reasoning
differs somewhat, Riofrio argues, as do I, that the book is, in fact, a novel. My conclusion rests on the fact that of
the ten stories presented in Drown, five are directly about the narrator Yunior and his family and two are about
story of America’s underclass of immigrants who labor in sweatshop conditions and struggle to keep together families literally and figuratively torn apart by the conundrum of being simultaneously at home in two countries and nowhere. But while, as I noted in Chapter Two, immigration is an important theme in *Drown*, the novel does not follow the typical narrative arc of U.S. immigrant novels. Instead of a story where there is a reconciliation of the tension between old and new which includes a celebration of the life eventually able to be carved out in the United States, many of *Drown*’s characters by novel's end are in a dispirited emotional state, stuck on the lower rungs of the economic and social ladder. A core group of stories traces the progress—or lack thereof—of the de las Casas family as first the father immigrates to the U.S. and then, five years later, after establishing an economic foothold, brings his wife and two sons over. The story of this absent/present father and his relationship to both his family and the larger world is also a tale about the role U.S. capitalism plays in shaping immigrant and working-class fathers and fatherhood.

Larry Cook, the father in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and the subject of my previous chapter, erects a wall around his inner self, a wall that keeps others from seeing his vulnerability and, ultimately, his humanity. His hard exterior works to enlarge his power in the public world (at least for a while), but drastically diminishes his ability to know and be known in the personal realm. Ramón, the father in *Drown* and the subject of this chapter, holds on to some of the power characters whom Yunior references in the other five stories that he tells. Thus in seven stories the characters know each other and share the same fictional world. The five stories narrated by Yunior which tell the story of his family as it immigrates from the Dominican Republic to the U.S. are "Ysrael," "Fiesta, 1980," "Aguantando," "Drown," and "Negocios." A sixth story, "Aurora," is told by a neighborhood crack dealer named Lucero whom Yunior refers to in "Drown" (93). The seventh story, "No Face," using a close third person narration, takes us inside the life of Ysrael, who is an important character in Yunior's story "Ysrael." The remaining three stories of the novel—"Boyfriend," "Edison, New Jersey," and "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie"—all might be narrated by Yunior even though the narrator is never clearly identified. In each story a young Latino man without much money and living in the vicinity of NYC is working out his relationship to women, race, and class.

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2 For more, see my discussion of U.S. immigrant novels in Chapter Two.
that silence about one’s inner state bestows, but the personal firewall that he constructs is not as impervious as the one that Larry Cook erects. We still view Ramón from the outside—like Larry, he doesn't speak in the first person—but there are chinks and gaps in his armor that provide us with a glimpse of his inner workings. Partly this reflects the fact that Larry's position as head of a successful family business gives him a great deal of autonomy while Ramón, working in low-level jobs, has to know how to fit in and follow orders as well as how to land on his feet when a job doesn't work out.

In addition to class standpoint, the fact that Smiley's novel is narrated by a daughter while Diaz's novel is narrated by a son also has an effect on the way Larry and Ramon's stories are told. Jane Smiley's tyrannical patriarch Larry Cook, for example, never seems to question his position at the apex of power nor to miss a beat in his drive to subjugate everything and everyone around him. As such he is too fused with the status quo of Zebulon County to create a critical portrait of himself and his world. Instead, his daughter Ginny, positioned at a distance from the center of power her father has achieved, offers readers a counter narrative to the official story her father tells about his family and world, one which sheds a great deal of light on how Larry has come to be the way he is. Ginny is able to tell this story partly because, as a woman, she is less invested in perpetuating the male-dominated society that gives her father his exalted status. Despite Ginny's attempts to dig beneath Larry's hard surface and find a softer, more vulnerable human being, Larry's ability to stonewall her attempts along with his apparent lack of awareness of either the harm he has caused to others or the plight of those less fortunate than he makes him appear, in the end, more monster than man.

Ramón also comes across as a monster, at least initially: at home he is a violent patriarch who demeans and physically abuses, without any apparent remorse, both his wife and his
children. But Ramón, a working-class Dominican immigrant who has very little economic power or social standing in the world beyond his home, has another side to him as well: the treatment he suffers as a result of his ethnicity and class as well as the experience of being both an immigrant and a neocolonial subject of the U.S. in his home country, makes it impossible for him to ignore or completely lose touch with his own vulnerability and, in the process, with his own and others' humanity. Torn between being an oppressor at home and being the victim of oppression in the world beyond the home, the contradictions of life under capitalism lie very close to the surface in Ramón. Narrated from the point of view of his son Yunior, Ramón is depicted in the stories where Yunior is still a child, as a remote, tyrannical figure. In contrast to the object position occupied by Larry in *A Thousand Acres*, however, there are also moments when we experience Ramón more from the position of his own subjectivity than we do Larry, especially in a long final section entitled "Negocios" in which Yunior, now a young man, pieces together a narrative of what Ramón must have gone through in the years when, leaving his wife and kids behind, he first comes to the United States and struggles to keep body and soul together. This look backwards at the very end of the novel to a more vulnerable Ramon than the one we have come to know in all Yunior's other stories forces a re-evaluation of our initial impression of Ramón as an unredeemable tyrant. Suddenly we see him in a more forgiving light, one that shows him as more human, less monstrous. These two views of Ramón—the monstrous side and the more vulnerable and, at times, even compassionate side—exist side by side, there in our minds because we have read about them, but, at the same time, not integrated together because they occur in distinctly separate sections of the text.

The sense that Ramón is a liminal figure pervades the novel. He is first of all positioned between two cultures and languages and he is also balanced between being illegal and legal for
the first few years he is in the States. In addition, he is suspended somewhere between his
dreams and the reality of his everyday existence which seems always to be less than satisfying.
Ramón comes to the U.S. with modest expectations of accruing for himself and his family "a
good life" (164), but finds himself instead in a “freezing hell of a country” living a “blinkered existence” as he works nineteen to twenty hour days struggling to gain enough money to bring
his wife and children over (179).

Perhaps the most obvious expression of Ramón's position on the brink between two
worlds is his on again off again relationship to his family. He leaves his wife Virta and his sons
Rafa and Yunior in the Dominican Republic for five years when he decides to emigrate to the
U.S. Shortly after arriving in the U.S. he marries Nilda. The marriage helps Ramón become a
legal citizen, but there is substance to it as well: Ramón and Nilda have a child which they name
Ramón, despite the fact that this is also Yunior's given name. Even as he sets up this parallel
"American" family, Ramón never completely renounces his "Dominican" family: he remains in
sporadic touch with Virta and occasionally sends her money. Eventually he abandons Nilda and
“returns” to Virta and his first two sons. I place the word "return" in scare quotes here because
Ramón continues to have long-term extra-marital relationships with women even after he brings
Virta to the U.S. and they resume living together again as husband and wife. The last glimpse we
have of Ramón, he has left Virta and is living with a woman in Florida. Even so, he continues to
try and keep things going with Virta: "He swears that if she moves down there he'll leave the
woman he's living with" (101).

While Ramón is often physically absent from his family, even when he is with them, he
is, in the main, emotionally unavailable. He adopts a secretive stance, hiding his more vulnerable
feelings behind a heart coated, as one of Díaz’s male characters puts it, in “heart leather like
walruses got blubber” (112). Layers of anger and fear, rise to the surface of Ramón's interactions, clounding his perceptions and making Ramón, like Larry, difficult to either understand or love.

Ramón's emotional and physical absences affect the entire family but in this chapter I will focus on the relationship Ramón has with his son Yunior. In this, I follow the lead of Diaz himself who has made their relationship his central focus. Smiley's novel contained only daughters. In *Drown* and in John Updike's Rabbit series, which is the subject of my next chapter, there are both daughters and sons, but the daughters in these male-authored texts, are either minimally drawn or they are physically absent. Yunior's sister Madai, for example, only appears in the story "Fiesta, 1980" where, still a toddler, she is given only a few lines of description. Yunior in *Drown* and Nelson in the Rabbit series, however, are depicted as active participants in the everyday operations of the household and they play a major role in each work.

These sons loom large in each father’s consciousness as well, often because their presence serves to confront the father with a thick knot of problems and feelings, a knot that both father and son find it difficult to pull apart and understand. At the heart of Díaz's novel, nearly obscured by this mass of tangled feelings and reactions, is the story of two separate but related traumas: that of the son who suffers as a result of the emotional and physical absence of his father, and that of the father who suffers as a result of the trauma of being forced to be a foot soldier in a violent world, first as a colonial subject in the Dominican Republic where he serves in the Guardia and then as a poverty-stricken immigrant in the U.S. trying to make ends meet in the cold heart of the empire.

The chief problem Díaz must solve in telling the story of Ramón and Yunior's relationship and the two traumas which undergird it is how to convey in a satisfying-enough

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3 Rabbit's first daughter dies in infancy, and though he suspects her existence he never knows for sure about his second daughter, a love child from an extramarital affair.
amount of detail the inner lives of male characters who have been trained to keep their feelings hidden. In the next section I explore the subtle literary techniques Díaz uses to show us what lies beneath the masculine mask while still allowing these male characters to retain their silence. Since the view we have of Ramón and the questions about masculinity and fatherhood that his story raises are also tempered—and complicated—by the gender of his creator, I also touch upon the way Díaz’s "insider" status as a man affects the story he tells.

**II: SEAMLESS ABSENCES: TELLING THE FATHER'S STORY**

_Drown_ consists of ten short stories. Four of them—“Ysrael,” “Fiesta, 1980,” “Aguantando,” and “Negocios”—tell the story of Ramón, his wife Virta, their two sons Rafa and Junior, and their much younger daughter, Madai. The stories are out of chronological order and alternate between events in the Dominican Republic and in the United States giving the work a disjointed, uprooted feel…a tone mirrored by the book’s epigraph, a poem by Gustavo Pérez Firmat:

The fact that I
am writing to you
in English
already falsifies what I
wanted to tell you.
My subject:
how to explain to you that I don’t belong to English
though I belong nowhere else.

The four stories concerning Ramón and his family cluster around moments of arrival and departure. “Ysrael” is set in the Dominican countryside where Yunior and his older brother Rafa have been sent to stay with relatives for the summer while their mother continues to work in the capital city. Torn between the rhythms of rural life and their urban home, the boys are also, at
ages twelve and nine, beginning to make forays into the realm of manhood. It is just months before their father, who has been in America for the last five years, will carry them to the United States. The next story “Fiesta, 1980” fast forwards to explore the family dynamics after three years of living in New Jersey with their father. The fiesta (or party) is held to welcome Virta’s sister and brother-in-law who have just immigrated to the U.S. “Aguantando” moves back again in time to Virta, Rafa, and Yunit’s life in Santo Domingo and traces the troubling impact of Ramón’s letter, announcing that he is at last planning to bring them to the United States. All four stories are narrated by the younger son, Yunit, who writes from a future vantage point, but discloses almost nothing about his grownup life. “Negocios,” the final story in the four-story sequence, is Yunit’s attempt to assemble from the available scraps of information, a plausible narration of his father Ramón’s five-years’ absence from the family beginning with his departure from the Dominican Republic when Yunit was four and ending with the morning he leaves his second ("American") family and heads back to the island to pick up Virta, Rafa, and Yunit. Another story in the collection, “Drown,” seems to depict the life of Virta and Yunit, now a young man, after Ramón has left the family for good, but the connection between this story and the other four is smudged and uncertain: none of the characters are named and there is no reference to any of Yunit’s siblings. Still, there are details within the story that suggest that this is, indeed, another piece of the family saga. A sixth story, “No Face,” focuses on Ysrael, an important character in the first story in the family sequence, but in this story which is set back in the Dominican Republic, there is no reference to Yunit’s family and the story itself is the only one in the book that is told in third person narration. The four remaining stories in the book are set in the United States and all concern young, single, male narrators who struggle with drugs,
women, and money problems. In only one case—“Aurora”—can we be sure that the narrator is not, in fact, Yunior.4

*Drown*’s form creates an initial feeling in the reader of being at sea. One has to mull over the stories and thumb back and forth from one to another looking for the clues that will help locate each new part of the narrative in time and space and will help sort out which characters share a fictional world and which do not. Like archaeologists trying to reconstruct a pot out of shards, we are asked to extrapolate a larger shape from the few pieces we have been given. This kind of reading experience also applies to the information we are given about Ramón. He is at the center of his son's consciousness but there is only one story—“Fiesta, 1980”—in which Ramón interacts directly with Yunior and is part of the ongoing action. In every other story Yunior gives us a sense of his father by poking around almost off-handedly amongst the memories and artifacts his father has left behind. This choice on Díaz’s part highlights Ramón’s absent presence as well as the difficulty of getting a clear view on the father.

While Ramón is mostly positioned as a figure who hovers on the edges of the narrative, when he is present we discover that he operates in another way to prevent understanding: he actively disrupts other characters’ ability to make sense. “Fiesta, 1980,” for example, begins with Ramón arriving home from “work” (actually from an assignation with his Puerto Rican mistress). Yunior reports, “He didn’t say nothing to nobody, not even my moms. He just pushed past her, held up his hand when she tried to talk to him and headed right into the shower.” (23) Rafa and Yunior know about the affair and recognize that their father is taking evasive action in order to “wash off the evidence quick” (23). Ramón’s aggressive use of silence continues when

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4 The narrator of "Aurora" is Lucero, a detail that becomes clear when Aurora says she would have named her baby after the narrator in a section entitled "Lucero" (59). Later in "Drown" the narrator mentions that there is a crack dealer in the neighborhood named Lucero. The narrator of "Aurora" is a crack dealer.
he emerges from the shower and marches into the living room with “a surly closed-mouth expression, like maybe he’d scalded his tongue or something” (25).

After withholding information about himself, Ramón goes on the attack, opening his mouth to interrogate the family. They are getting ready to drive to a party and at issue is whether Yunior, who gets carsick, has disobeyed his father’s orders and eaten dinner: it turns out he has. Ramón lays into Yunior verbally and physically. The effect of Ramón’s angry, aggressive behavior is to shut down the rest of the family, disrupting and distorting their relationships to each other and, it is implied, to the world. The baby Madai was “too scared to open her eyes,” Yunior tells us, adding “[b]eing around Papi all her life had turned her into a major-league wus” (26). Rafa edges away from Yunior and acts like he doesn’t know him. Yunior himself doesn’t dare glance at Rafa because “Papi was old-fashioned; he expected your undivided attention when you were getting your ass whupped” (26). Yunior is afraid to relate to anyone else when his father is disciplining him, but he has also been trained to avoid relating to his father: “You couldn’t look [father] in the eye either—that wasn’t allowed. Better to stare at his belly button, which was perfectly round and immaculate” (26). Later in the car when his mother asks Yunior how he feels, Yunior is afraid to look at her for fear that even a fleeting connection with her would bring another unpleasant transaction with his father: “I’m OK, I said, keeping my eyes straight ahead. I definitely didn’t want to trade glances with Papi” (27-8).

Yunior does throw up on the way to the party. Once there his father, thinking of the ride home, harshly forbids him to eat. One of the other kids, picking up on the tension, asks curiously “What’s wrong with your dad?” When Yunior replies “[h]e’s a dick,” Yunior’s older brother Rafa takes over the repressive role: “Don’t say that shit in front of people” he tells Yunior. Yunior presses down his feelings, turning to stare at the tv where “Bruce Lee beat Chuck Norris
into the floor of the Colosseum” and pretending “that there was no food anywhere in the house.”

Later when his Aunt questions Yunior about the degree of fighting that goes on at home, Yunior takes Rafa’s advice and doesn’t “say that shit” though he is not sure why he does not tell her: “something told me to keep my mouth shut. Maybe it was family loyalty, maybe I just wanted to protect Mami or I was afraid that Papi would find out—it could have been anything really” (39).

Yunior’s lack of knowledge about his own motivations grows out of the constant pressure Ramón puts on everyone in the family to suppress both their feelings and their relationships with each other. It is also linked to the confusing spectacle of his father’s silence about his own feelings. Driving to the party, for example, Yunior notices that Ramón is beginning to get in a better mood, but he can only speculate as to the reason: “Maybe he was thinking about that Puerto Rican woman or maybe he was just happy that we were all together. I could never tell” (28). Uncertainty—"I could never tell"—seems at times to be Yunior’s only assertion, his only solid possession. Though he watches his parents throughout the party, he doesn’t gain any more insight into their relationship. Driving home he notices once again how much he doesn’t understand: “In the darkness… Papi had a hand on Mami’s knee and that the two of them were quiet and still…. [T]hey were both wide awake, bolted into their seats. I couldn’t see either of their faces and no matter how hard I tried I could not imagine their expressions” (43).

As long as Yunior lives with his father he seems unable to evolve more than a surface understanding of things. In “Fiesta, 1980” he tells us that the fights between his father and him “didn’t bother me too much. I still wanted him to love me, something that never seemed strange or contradictory until years later, when he was out of our lives” (27). Clearly Yunior’s retrospective narration of these highly fragmented stories from his childhood is an act of
recovery, an attempt to reach back into the past and pull at least something of what was “strange and contradictory” about his relationship with his father up to the surface in the hopes that he will from the vantage point of adulthood, be able to make better sense of it.

It is not an easy project: the narrator has been formed by the very repression he seeks now to circumvent. He must work against his own resistance and, because he cannot, in fact, re-locate and exhume many of the feelings and experiences he pushed down under his father’s tutelage, the narration takes on its own murky, slightly detached tone. Thus, at the opening of the story entitled “Aguantando” he tells us that his father “left for Nueva York when I was four but since I couldn’t remember a single moment with him I excused him from all nine years of my life. On the days I had to imagine him—not often, since Mami didn’t much speak of him anymore—he was the soldier in the photo” (70). The hurt, anger, and powerlessness Yunior must have felt when his father left has been replaced here with emotions that give Yunior a comforting edge: he turns the tables on his father’s rejection ("I excused him") and figures himself as being in resistance to external coercion (On the days I "had" to imagine him). Rather than searching for these repressed memories and feelings, the narrator seems, in the next sentence, to luxuriate in the poetic “not knowing” that his father has produced in him: “He was a cloud of cigar smoke, the traces of which could still be found on the uniforms he’d left behind. He was pieces of my friends’ fathers, of the domino players on the corner, pieces of Mami and Abuelo” (70). Two years after he left, Ramón writes to say that he is coming to take the family to the US. He never shows up. The trauma for six-year-old Yunior is evidently extreme: “I threw myself about like I was on fire. And I screamed…I was inconsolable. I learned to tear my clothes…” (83). But tellingly, the narrator remembers none of this firsthand. “I am told,” he says, smudging his (and our) connection to the information with this use of the passive voice,
“that I wanted to see [my father’s] picture almost every day. It’s hard for me to imagine myself this way, crazy about Papi” (83).

If what has been repressed between fathers and sons cannot always be recovered, the nature of repression itself can at least be explored and in large part that is what Yunior, and through him Díaz, do in this book. Indeed, what begins to emerge in Drown is the important role that repression itself plays in the creation and reproduction of male identity. Yunior receives a vivid lesson on this point in the very first story in the book, “Ysrael.” In this story, Yunior and his brother Rafa decide to go and “check out” what is under the mask a deformed boy wears to cover the damage done years before when a pig pinned him down and ate part of his face. The boys have to travel by bus for several miles to get to the town where Ysrael lives and while Rafa is busy hustling their fares, nine-year-old Yunior sits next to a man who begins to sexually molest him. Yunior does his best to defend himself verbally and physically and goes to stand near his brother. Minutes later the two brothers beat the fare by bolting from the bus and hiding in a field until the bus driver gives up on them and drives away. At this point Yunior begins to cry. Rafa assumes he is crying about cheating the bus driver out of a fare: “If you can’t stop crying,” he says disgustedly, “I’ll leave you….Are you always going to be a pussy?…You have to get tougher. Crying all the time. Do you think our papi’s crying? Do you think that’s what he’s been doing [in New York] the last six years?” (13-14) Whether it’s Rafa’s scorn for his tears, or Yunior’s own fear that he might indeed be a “pussy” because a man has played with him sexually, Yunior falls silent, never telling Rafa about the sexual abuse. Invoking the name of the father, Rafa who in many ways is like his father and certainly takes on some of Ramón's authority in his absence, reinforces the idea that becoming a man involves being able to keep one's feelings under wraps.
In *Drown*’s final story, “Negocios,” Yunior returns to Rafa’s rhetorical question about how Ramón spent his first years in America and particularly how he dealt with his pain. Yunior imagines that during his father’s first lonely months “he’d lie down on his mattress, stretching out his limbs to fill it as much as he could. He abstained from thoughts of home, from thoughts of his two bellicose sons and the wife he had nicknamed Melao. He told himself, Think only of today and tomorrow” (173).

Yunior sometimes attributes his knowledge about this period in his father’s life to bits of information he has picked up from his mother, his father, or from Nilda (Ramón’s “American” wife); at other times he signals, by a copious sprinkling of “maybes” and “perhapses,” that he is gluing an especially uncertain part of the narrative together with his own guesses. In much of the story, however, as in the section about the mattress quoted above, Yunior simply describes Ramón’s actions and thoughts without telling us how he knows about them. Against the other sections of "Negocios" where Yunior is careful to reveal his uncertain grasp of the material, this more assertive section raises subtle concern about its veracity. We are always vaguely aware that Yunior hasn’t earned the suspension of our disbelief and this nagging awareness contributes to our overall feeling that Yunior’s father, even in this final and most intimate portrayal of him, is still something of an unknown quantity.

But whether Ramón dealt with his pain by lying on his mattress in this way or not, Yunior has certainly captured the larger truth: Ramón deals with difficult emotions by not thinking about them. Yunior recounts his own firsthand experience with this male mode of dealing with pain and fear in “Fiesta, 1980.” He learns of his father’s affair when Ramón unexpectedly takes him to his mistress' house. Yunior is told to watch TV while the “two of them went upstairs…I just sat there, ashamed, expecting something big and fiery to crash down on our
heads. I watched a whole hour of the news before Papi came downstairs and said, Let’s go” (36). Yunior’s initial emotional reaction is strong, but gradually his feelings, under the silent tutelage of his father, go underground: “Me and Rafa, we didn’t talk much about the Puerto Rican woman. When we ate dinner at her house…we still acted like nothing was out of the ordinary. Pass the ketchup, man. No sweat, bro. The affair was like a hole in our living room floor, one we’d gotten so used to circumnavigating that we sometimes forgot it was there” (39-40).

Shoving feelings under the rug, or, in this case, into a hole, is normalized. It becomes an everyday, ordinary part of masculine life. But the terror is never really erased; instead it lives on at the bottom of these sites of repression and sometimes it surfaces and has to be shoved back down again. Such is the case in “No Face” where Ysrael, the boy whose face was partly destroyed by a pig, has recurring nightmares. “He turns his head to save one side of his face; in some dreams he saves his right side and in some his left but in the worst ones he cannot turn his head, its mouth is like a pothole and nothing can escape it” (157-58). The terror here is a pothole swallowing up Ysrael’s identity as it sucks away the expressive outer layers of his face. Ysrael awakes screaming with a swollen tongue where he has bitten it and blood running down his neck. “[H]e cannot sleep again until he tells himself to be a man,” that is, until he has got the feelings that are surging up and overflowing his mouth tamped back down into silence (158). Here, once again, is the association between masculinity and the repression of feelings.

Ysrael’s mother and younger brother as well as Padre Lou, the town priest who serves as a surrogate father to the boy, are not bothered by seeing Ysrael without his mask on. Tellingly, only Ysrael’s father will not look at his son’s wounds: he forces Ysrael to wear a mask, to sleep in the smokehouse, and to stay away from home whenever the father is present. The father’s
inability to look at his son’s deformed face keeps them from having a relationship, a terrible wound in itself which Díaz, mirroring the lack of male affect, draws attention to in the quietest way possible by simply making Ysrael's father the only member of the family never shown interacting with Ysrael. Yunior's uncle, speculating on what Ysrael's face might look like underneath the mask, demonstrates yet again the masculine tendency to downplay the enormity of the emotional trauma going on: "it [isn't] bad," pronounces the uncle, "but the father [is] very sensitive about anyone taunting his oldest son, which [explains] the mask" (9).

Yunior is torn between two contradictory impulses. On the one hand, he wants the hole in his living room floor to be seen and acknowledged publicly. On the night of the party, for example, he waits expectantly for things in the adult world to come to a head, for a “blowup, something between Papi and Mami. This was how I always figured Papi would be exposed, out in public, where everybody would know. You’re a cheater!” (40) On the other hand, Yunior is afraid of what exposing his father might bring, afraid that his mother might be left alone or that his father would suspect that he had told and be angry at him. Twice in "Fiesta, 1980," once with his aunt and once with his mother, he passes up the opportunity to tell them about his father’s affair. Later he feels conflicted about not having spoken up: "maybe if I had told her, she would have confronted him, would have done something, but who can know these things?” (43). When he is still in the Dominican Republic, Yunior has a fantasy that his father’s return from the United States will be both public and positive: he imagines Ramón walking up the street in broad daylight and the “whole barrio…[coming] out to greet him.” Then, in front of everyone, Yunior imagines, Ramón will gently say his name and, using his thumb, trace "a circle on my cheek” (87-88).
Yunior finally does break with the code of silence and expose his father in public by telling the stories that make up *Drown*. There is a wary, close-mouthed quality to the way he narrates, however, which stems not only from his ambivalence about the act of father exposure he is performing, but also from his many years of training as a man, to keep tight control over his thoughts and feelings.

In an interview Díaz takes up the question of how much a writer or anyone, for that matter, is able to reveal about themselves and asserts that there is a fundamental "unknowability" built into the very act of reading and writing:

> It’s like Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, the idea that you can’t observe anything directly….No matter how much I tell people who I am, that only increases the tension of unknowability. The suspicion will always remain: he must be hiding something. And, in fact, I’m hiding something. You can’t talk about yourself without hiding something else. So, I always feel that this is a tension which is inherent in reading and writing. (Céspedes 906)

The dancing wariness which characterizes Yunior’s narrations is present throughout all the stories in *Drown*. It is difficult to say whether Díaz uses this style to reflect the ambivalence his male characters feel about expressing themselves or whether the author himself also feels most comfortable, for philosophical reasons such as those stated above or for other less easily accessed reasons such as his own masculinity training, with a style that chooses to circle around its subject rather than point directly at it.

A further complication is the fact that Yunior is closely modeled on Díaz's own life. Díaz also had a "military father," for example, who left Díaz at an early age to work in the States (Céspedes 894). While he was away, Diaz's mother worked, like Virta, in a chocolate factory and the family lived in a house with no plumbing. At age seven Díaz immigrated to the U.S. along with his mother and four siblings to reunite with his father who settled the family in a low-income apartment complex called London Terrace in Parlin, New Jersey, about a mile from an
enormous landfill. Díaz maintains that Yunior’s story is separate from his own, yet there are times when Díaz seems to conflate the two, even needing to be reminded at one point in an interview that his own life’s history is not Yunior’s (Céspedes 895). The fact that the subject matter in *Drown* so closely parallels Díaz’s real life adds an additional layer of tension to the narrative style as Díaz makes use of his own experiences and, at the same time, must keep his life separate from the fictional world he is creating.

Whatever the background reason or reasons for the wariness of *Drown*’s narrators, their sparse presentation style contributes to one of the most important themes in the novel: the difficulty, particularly for sons, of understanding the absent/present father. One of the problems that Díaz must wrestle with in tackling this theme is how to convey what it is like to view things from a masculine point of view as each of the stories with their male narrators does, and at the same time to go beyond these narrators’ own limitations and hesitations to reveal things that the masculine mode in general seeks to repress and conceal.

Díaz solves this problem in a number of ways. One method he uses is that of subtle juxtapositions. He seeds disparate stories with corresponding images and information so that a more complete picture is embedded in the text but can only emerge once the pieces of the puzzle are put together by the reader. A correlation, for example, between, on the one hand, Yunior and Ysrael, the boy whose face was partially eaten by a pig, and, on the other hand, between Ramón and the pig emerges in one such chain of images. The circle Yunior fantasizes that Ramón traces on his cheek at the end of “Aguantando,” links to the place on Yunior’s cheek where Ramón three years later, in “Fiesta, 1980” brutally jabs his finger as a punishment for Yunior throwing up in the car. In the same story, Ramón pulls Yunior to his feet by his ear. These injuries to

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5 Ramón also settles his family in a complex called the London Terrace Apartments which is located in suburban New Jersey quite close to a dump. For an interview with Diaz which delves into these and other biographical details, see David Stanton's "Junot Díaz on Home Ground."
Yunior’s ear and cheek link back to the pig’s mutilation of Ysrael in an earlier story. Ysrael’s left ear, we are told, “was a nub and you could see the thick veined slab of his tongue through a hole in his cheek. He had no lips.” (18). The fact that Ysrael has an odd voice “full of spit” and no lips points to Yunior’s inability, under Ramón’s forbidding rule, to speak without distorting himself.

In “Ysrael” Yunior explores his relationship to his older brother who, as we have seen, stands in as an authority figure for Yunior during their father's absence. Severed from their life in the capital and their relationships with their mother and their friends, they are thrown together during the summer months at their relatives’ house in the countryside. Yunior wants to spend every minute with his brother, but Rafa, interested in visiting the local girls, often brushes him off: “I would yell his name and he’d hurry on, the ferns and branches and flower pods trembling in his wake” (6). After the bus ride where Yunior is molested by a stranger and Rafa, not knowing what has happened, chastises Yunior harshly for crying, Yunior watches his older brother walk away again: “He turned from me. His feet were crackling through the weeds, breaking stems” (14). Whereas before the plants seemed to tremble in admiration—almost in worship—of Rafa, here Rafa seems to have become an enemy to the plants who themselves now appear, since they are "weeds," to be worth less. Yunior never directly discusses how this day changes his relationship with Rafa; he keeps silent about his feelings and the conclusions he draws. Instead we read them indirectly through his changing perceptions about the objects, in this case the plants, which surround Rafa.

In "Ysrael" Rafa, who wants to see Ysrael's face, knocks the boy out and strips him of his mask. After looking at his damaged face, Yunior and Rafa begin to head for home which is some distance away. They walk along a road for an hour or two until a bus appears. Throughout this
time they are silent. Once on the bus “Rafa crossed his arms and watched the fields and roadside shacks scroll past . . . Ysrael will be OK, I said” (19). It is never clear what Yunior is thinking when he breaks the silence between them to say this. It may simply be that he is trying to probe his big brother to discover what Rafa thinks about Ysrael’s claim that a team of “American doctors” are going to fix him. Possibly he wants to reassure and comfort Rafa because he senses pain or fear behind his older brother’s withdrawal. Then again, perhaps he is hoping to get Rafa to comfort him. It's also possible that, sensing Rafa's pessimism, Yunior wants to counter it with a more optimistic view. Or it may be that Yunior really believes that the North American doctors will make Ysrael whole again.

What Yunior is thinking remains hidden. When Rafa responds with his usual cynicism, saying that the doctors “aren’t going to do shit” for Ysrael, Yunior kicks angrily at the chair in front of him (19). This gives us a hint about Yunior's state of mind. Still, we are never sure what Yunior’s kicking actually means. Is he angry that no one will help Ysrael? Is he angry at Rafa for his world-weary negativity? Is he upset because Rafa will not accept Yunior’s offer of emotional comfort? Diaz leaves us at sea here. The lack of information, while frustrating, is instructive: we experience firsthand how almost impossible it is for the brothers to speak openly to each other about the issues and feelings boiling just beneath the surface. In addition, the open-ended nature of the narrative as it draws to a close in this story causes us to also experience some of the tremendous uncertainty that the boys themselves feel about both Ysrael’s and their own futures. Whether in this moment they are conscious of it or not, Ysrael's situation, his hope that he can receive help from doctors in North America that, being poor, he cannot get in the Dominican Republic must trigger the whole range of feelings that the boys are barely able to
keep repressed about their own father in the U.S. and whether he is ever going to make them and their family whole again.

Díaz has said that he is writing first and foremost not to a “white audience” but to his “own people” (Céspedes 900). He makes a number of linguistic choices which push the “white” or non-Dominican audience, which is never far from Díaz’s mind, to both enter the Dominican world of his text and at the same time to have the experience of not understanding that world. For example, asserting that in the United States “Spanish is not a minority language” and that authors of English-language texts should not “other ”or “denormalize it,” Díaz allows the Spanish in *Drown* “to exist . . . without the benefit of italics or quotation marks” (Céspedes 904).6 Part of his motivation is to speed up the process of adopting Spanish words into English: “I don’t need 100 years for the *Oxford English Dictionary* to tell me that it’s o.k. to adopt this or that word as part of our normal vocabulary. . . . We should be pushing the dates on words. It’s like being a saint. You have to wait something like 500 years to be canonized. I am saying, let’s not wait. Let’s get there now” (Céspedes 904).

But if part of his motivation is to speed the way towards English speakers knowing and embracing Spanish, there is also an edge to the way that Díaz uses Spanish in the text: some of the Spanish words are local or “slang” in character and therefore not to be found in a standard Spanish-language dictionary. Don’t think it is so easy to cross cultural barriers, Díaz seems to be saying: you must work to understand me and even with work, you will not be able to understand everything.

The text overall has a push-pull character as it simultaneously says things and refrains from saying them. It is compact, even close-mouthed and yet it seems at the same time to explode with language and meaning. There are a number of ways Díaz creates this effect. One

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6 I’ve followed Díaz’s lead and not italicized Spanish words when I quote passages from *Drown*. 
is through his use of *double entendres*. “Aguantando,” the title of the story that describes the family in the Dominican Republic after five years of Ramón’s absence, much of it without him being in contact with them at all about his plans, has two different meanings in Spanish: one is “enduring” and the other is “resisting.” The family exhibits both in their dealings with Ramón and sometimes it is hard to tell where enduring leaves off and resisting begins as the feelings themselves blur and blend. One section of the story begins, “The year Papi came for us, the year I was nine, we expected nothing” (77). On one level the sentence simply refers to the fact that Papi surprised them by suddenly saying he was coming for them, but it also points to a deeper realm of feelings—the family had had great expectations when he had first gone to America, but those had diminished over the years as he kept letting them down to the point where they no longer expect anything. Elsewhere in the same story Yunior learns from his grandfather about the years before the U.S. invaded his island: “he talked to me about the good old days, when a man could still make a living from his finca [farm], when the United States wasn’t something folks planned on” (72-3). In part three of this chapter I explore the economic relationship between the U.S. and the Dominican Republic and how it plays itself out in the lives of Diaz’s characters, but here I want to point out the use, once again, of a phrase which can be read in several ways at once. Folks didn’t “plan on” the US invasion in the sense that they didn’t foresee it, but also in the sense that they were, prior to that invasion, independent and so didn’t have to organize their economic lives around the U.S. Now the implication is that folks not only must plan their lives around the U.S. but actually have to make their plans “on it.”

In the above two cases, the anger and resistance that Yunior feels towards his father and his actions or that Abuelo feels towards the U.S. and its plans are expressed but in a covert way.
They tell the truth, but, to borrow a metaphor from Emily Dickinson, they tell it "slant." 7 The complicated maneuvering doesn't end there, however: the double entendres are not just a mechanism by which the oppressed can safely express their negative feelings about the people or circumstances dominating them. The double meanings also express Yunior and Abuelo's own ambivalent state of mind as they identify with and even feel desire for those to whom they are subservient.

Another stylistic maneuver Diaz uses to hedge the narrator’s bets and keep him from aligning too closely with anything while at the same time giving us an indication of the force of his feelings is the use of negative descriptions. Thus in “Fiesta, 1980” when Ramón takes a paper plate out of Yunior’s hands and tells him he can’t have anything to eat at the party, Yunior reports “[h]is fingers weren’t gentle” (37). Saying this in this way doesn’t directly attack his father even as it draws our attention to his brutality. In “Negocios” Ramón’s early experiences in America when he works in sweatshop-like conditions are also described in the language of negation thereby making us think of its opposite: “he wasn’t having fun” (179). Yunior makes a different kind of evasive move when he evacuates all mention of his mother’s sadness by commenting only on his Aunt’s happiness: he tells us that his Tía (Aunt) “looked a ton like Mami…Tía smiled a lot and that was what set them apart the most” (39).

Yunior writes that his father’s “absence was a seamless thing to me” (199). It is hard to pull open and examine something that has no seams. Because the narrator engages in so little overt processing of events, much of what happens in the text has a similar feeling of being seamless, of being both there and, in its inaccessibility, not there. One cannot pull anything out and say for sure that this is a metaphor for that. Yet the text is alive with resonances. When

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7 Dickinson's Poem begins with the suggestion "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—/Success in Circuit lies" and ends with pronouncement "The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind—" (506-507).
Ramón sends a letter saying he is ready to come for the family, Virta weighs whether or not to reunite with him. The children are excluded from her deliberations but around the time she makes up her mind she decides to have a family day and takes the children to the Malecón where she and Ramón met. She tells them a few details of that first meeting, but when Yunior asks if it happened right where they are standing she replies vaguely, “Oh, no . . . [t]hat part of the city isn’t here anymore” (87). In the same way that the story of Virta and Ramón's first meeting remains vague and full of unknowns, the story of the children and what will happen to them is only touched upon indirectly in this scene: they visit the Malecón the day after a hurricane has passed and “some children had been lost, swept out to sea” (85). Soon Yunior and Rafa, though they don’t know it yet, will themselves be taken from the island out to sea on their way to America. The text does not draw attention to these things; rather, it circles seamlessly around the absences of fathers and children as if these things cannot be talked about directly or saddled with too much specificity. The last time that Ramón said he was coming and then failed to show up, Virta spent "a lot of time . . . down by the Malecón, where she could watch the waves shred themselves against the rocks" (83). The pain and violence implied in the coming together and the splitting apart of the family is captured not in what Virta and Rafa and Yunior directly say to each other or think to themselves but in that telling description of the waves.

Ernest Hemingway, a writer associated with the portrayal of masculine life and especially with the phenomenon of male reserve, based a good deal of his writing on the principle that “you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted . . . and make people feel something more than they understood” (qtd. in Schwenger 104). Peter Schwenger, analyzing the "masculine mode" in literature, observes that the "sparseness" with which narrators like Hemingway's Jake Barnes in
*The Sun Also Rises* describe their feelings "has its own power . . . in that it encourages the reader to flesh out the emotions" using small clues in the text as a guide (104).

Díaz's omissions have a similar effect. In one short story, for example, a character named Beto gives the narrator a book, but the narrator, in the clutch of strong and confusing feelings about his friend’s departure for college, throws the book away without ever reading the inscription. As readers, we are left to wonder and perhaps fill in with our own imagination what Beto had written. In another story, Ysrael’s mother tells Ysrael to leave before his father comes out of the house. “He knows what happens when his father comes out” we are told, but it is again left to us to imagine what happens when the father emerges and encounters his son still there (160).

Díaz uses many of the techniques discussed in this section of the chapter to highlight a world in which men's relationships and emotions are so muted that it is hard to tell much about them at all. Unlike Hemmingway, however, who essentializes this mode of male behavior as natural and who celebrates in his fiction the man who is able to detach himself from his emotions, Díaz's fiction is a sustained critique of this form of masculinity. In *Drown*, when readers are confronted with scenarios where a great deal has been omitted, Díaz lays enough information into the text elsewhere for readers to be able to start piecing together a much fuller picture of what men are experiencing and reacting to. What happens, as a result of these connections being made, is that the father's absence, whether physical or emotional or both, begins to lose its "seamless" quality and take on a much more defined look. What had seemed as if it was naturalized background now becomes easier to pull apart and make sense of as a discreet phenomenon. What emerges is the insight that the evasive behavior that men in general and fathers in particular are so prone to is related to the specific environment in which Díaz's
male characters find themselves. In the next and final section of this chapter I take a close look at the relationship Díaz poses in Drown between patterns of masculinity and of fatherhood and the socio-economic world.

### III: Fathering Identity: The Work/Home Interface

#### Contradictions

Towards the end of the story "Drown" Yunior, now a young man, describes a particular state of mind: "I wasn't asleep or awake, but caught somewhere in between, rocked slowly back and forth the way surf holds junk against the shore, rolling it over and over" (105). Yunior, who thinks of himself as straight, has just allowed Beto one of his best friends from high school to give him a blow job when he falls into this "in between" state. Beto is leaving for college in three weeks and is feeling ecstatic; Yunior, though he is plenty smart, is failing high school and seems to be going nowhere. Two years later, at the point when he narrates this story, Yunior, still living with his mom, has become a small time drug dealer "trooping up and down the same dead-end street" (106). In contrast, Beto, whom Yunior hears is home on break though the two don't connect, is going somewhere: he is "heading towards the turnpike" and back to college "in his father's bottomed-out Cadillac" (106).

The feeling of being neither asleep nor awake is a familiar one for many of the characters in Drown, but most especially for Yunior and his father, both of whom, like the "junk" that gets trapped between sea and land, find themselves awash in contradictory forces and, because they are hemmed in by the confusion and trauma that accompany these forces, trapped in repetitive cycles.
Shortly after the publication of *Drown* Diaz told an interviewer from Callaloo:

I have an agenda to write politics without letting the reader think it is political. That’s my game plan for every story. . . . Imagine that you have your personal life running across one spectrum, then you suddenly see where history interrupts it or maybe you see a confluence of the two. . . . They form narratives which we deploy. . . and they deploy us also. (Céspedes 901-905)

Creating fiction about personal life that is "political" challenges the dominant notion in the U.S. and in capitalist societies in general that these two realms are separate. By bringing them together in such a way that the reader doesn't "think it is political," Diaz pushes his readers to lower their resistance to thinking outside the dominant mindset. To use the metaphor of being junk trapped against the shore, without intervention, readers are in danger of rolling the same thoughts "over and over" again in their minds.

Díaz has a tendency, in general, to bring into dialectical relationship states that are treated by the dominant society as either unrelated or as connected, but in such a way that the hierarchical nature of the connection is accepted rather than contested. This problem of unequal power relationships is never far from Diaz's consciousness. It shapes his sense of audience:

I’m not . . . a native informer. I don’t explain cultural things, with italics . . . or with side bars or asides. . . . [S]o many Latinos and black writers . . . are writing to white audiences. . . . If you are not writing to your own people, I’m disturbed because of what that says about your relationship to the community you are in one way or another indebted to. You are only there to loot them of ideas, and words, and images so that you can coon them to the dominant group. (Céspedes 900)

At the same time, even as he is writing to his "own people," he is also explicitly writing to white, middle-class America. In fact, he seems to be intent on bringing the two disparate audiences together in much the same way that he works to bring the personal and political together. He is in dialogue with mainstream America, for example, when he doesn't translate the Spanish words he uses in his text, even though some of those words are local or slang words that would be hard for non-Spanish speakers to figure out on their own. "When I learned English in
the States," he explains, "this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I've tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English." (Céspedes 904)

As the above quotes indicate, Díaz sees himself as using his writing to address inequality between colonized populations and the neo-colonial U.S. He doesn't stop there, however. He is also interested in addressing the dynamics imperialism has set in motion within the Dominican community itself: "We are trained to abuse our own. I think that's the colonial mindset. . . . but I'm . . . passionate about having a critical dialogue with my communities. Exposing white racism and white arrogance is important, but, if I don't criticize myself and my peoples, how are we ever going to get better?" (Céspedes 901).

R. W. Connell has written that the “the modern gender order,” which has evolved over the past four centuries, is rooted in “the unprecedented growth of European and North American power, the creation of global empires and a global capitalist economy, and the unequal encounter of gender orders in the colonized world” and he argues that “[w]e cannot understand the connection of masculinity and violence at a personal level without understanding that it is also a global connection. European/American masculinities were deeply implicated in the world-wide violence through which European/American culture became dominant” (245).

Clearly a study of fatherhood must include a study of masculinity. But when that masculinity is, as Connell suggests, inextricably bound up with the global capitalist economy and its history of imperialistic violence, it complicates the picture. How can fatherhood, with its positive connotations of love, nurturance, and protection of the family be reconciled with the dominant socio-economic mode of organizing global society which projects masculinity as, in the main, a violent, destructive, and aggressive force? And how does this contradiction change
when the father is a colonial subject like Ramón who has internalized aspects of the colonial mindset?

One has the sense in *Drown* that the de las Casas family is ridden with volatile, underground currents that might, at any second, destroy one of its members or even the family as a whole. The feeling that there is a bomb buried beneath the everyday surface of family life finds its expression in the fact that Ramón settles his family, when he finally brings them to the United States, in a housing complex that is rumored to have been built over a toxic dump site. Years later, when Yunior finally meets Nilda, Ramón's "American" wife, and they talk about Ramón, Yunior tells us it was like "two strangers reliving an event—a whirlwind, a comet, a war—we'd both seen but from different faraway angles" (207). The experience Nilda and Yunior each have of Ramón is cataclysmic and oddly impersonal—he is not so much a human being as an unpredictable, uncontrollable "event" that stirs things up and has the ability to inflict great harm before inexplicably moving on.

In many ways, Ramón does embody the forces of violence and volatility. His actions are viewed by other members of the family as greatly contributing to, if not actually being the source of their problems. But it is also possible to see Ramón not as the originator of the violence the family experiences but as a kind of conductor transporting turbulence in from the world beyond. In his role as the family's chief breadwinner, he can't help but bring news of the capitalist world home from work with him. One bit of news Ramón brings is a reminder that the family is not an autonomous unit, not free from the constraints of economic necessity, and, in particular, not untouched or untainted by the violent, volatile, and dehumanizing character of the economic system in which it is embedded.
In order to navigate between the ethos of the capitalist work world and the more intimate and supportive ethos of family life, Ramón adopts the stance of what is known in the Dominican Republic as a tiguere or tiger. According to Christian Krohn-Hansen, a tiguere is "the essence of any successful pragmatism: he is a type [of man] who acts according to the situation, is cunning, and has a gift for improvisation" (109); in essence he is a trickster who knows how to "survive in his particular environment and 'to emerge well'" (120).

I will return to the concept of the tiguere later in the chapter when I look more closely at the relationships Ramón forges with other men. For now it is enough to point out that a Dominican man who is a tiguere comes across as strong and masculine even though he eschews a fixed identity. Instead of maintaining a steadfast set of principles, it becomes acceptable for such a man to put on, like an actor, whatever identity or set of actions will most help him succeed in his present situation.

In most of the stories in Drown, Ramón appears through his son’s eyes as a violent and greedy man who seems to look out only for himself and his needs. But in the final story, entitled "Negocios," Yunior, who is older now, presents a more exculpatory view of his father, one which brings us back in touch with Ramón’s humanity as it retells, with empathy and even some degree of admiration, the story of Ramón's difficult survival during the years when he first came to the United States. In this last section of the novel we take in, for the first time, that Ramón is not only a victimizer but also a victim and, that perhaps, like Shakespeare's King Lear, he might even be "more sinned against than sinning."

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8 For a thorough discussion about the concept of the tiguere and its implications for both masculinity and politics, see Christian Krohn-Hansen's "Masculinity and the Political among Dominicans: 'The Dominican Tiger.'" Not only does the concept of this trickster figure have a long history in the Dominican Republic, but it was also a quite important part of the national consciousness during the years when Díaz was writing Drown: according to Krohn-Hansen, the Dominican journalist Lipe Collado observed in 1992 that tiguere "may, at present, be one of the most frequently employed words in the country" (109).
In "Negocios" Ramón appears as the quintessential tíguere who "emerges well.” He takes on various roles and personas, in order to achieve his goals no matter what toll these deceptions take on others. Seeking to secure a legal foothold in the U.S., for example, he enters into “the oldest of the postwar maromas [tightrope walks]. Find a citizen, get married, wait, and then divorce her” (178). First Ramón adopts a rather straightforward approach: he hires a woman who will pose as his wife for the INS. But she turns out to be a trickster herself who takes his hard-earned money and disappears. Ramón, now broke, decides that he must assume the role of dissembler: he convinces Nilda, who doesn’t know she is part of a deception, to marry him. When his new wife discovers that Ramón has another family in the Dominican Republic, he has “to deliver some of his most polished performances to convince her” that he no longer cares about his first family (187). When, years later, he is ready to send for Virta and the kids, he leaves Nilda and their infant son Ramón piecemeal. There is something comical about the way that he packs up, as if his role as Nilda's husband is a costume that can be packed away now that the performance is over: “He started taking a shirt or two to work, which he then sent to the [new] apartment. Sometimes he’d cram socks in his pockets or put on two pairs of underwear. He was smuggling himself out of Nilda’s life” (205).

The conflicting views we receive of Ramón in "Negocios" align with the common Dominican conception of the tíguere as a morally ambiguous character. His goal is to "emerge well" from the difficult situations he faces, but while his actions are sometimes helpful to others, it is just as possible that what he does will benefit only himself and may even harm others. Thus the very attributes that are applauded—the tíguere's fluid relationship to rules, mores, and the establishment of a unified identity—also give him leave to act in hardhearted or anti-social ways. Taking on the role of Nilda’s husband in order to obtain American citizenship and bring his first
family to the U.S., Ramón is shown to be extremely skillful and creative in his manipulations of the system. Along the way, there are moments when he exhibits great altruism such as when he sends so much money home to Virta and his sons that he himself is reduced to poverty. But he is also greedy and gross, sometimes stopping these payments or seeming to forget entirely about his impoverished family in the Dominican Republic. In New York, he callously leaves behind, apparently without remorse or even a second thought, Nilda who later says of Ramón’s departure, “I thought that I would never stop hurting” (207).

The notion of being a tiguere allows men like Ramón to feel good about themselves and their masculinity by giving them some semblance of mastery over rapidly changing and often chaotic situations in which, because they are poor and without social clout, the odds are stacked against them. By adopting the persona of a shape shifter who can inhabit a series of temporary identities, the tiguere, paradoxically, can feel like he "owns" himself more fully: the superficial identity or identities he puts on in order to "emerge well" can be thought of as separate from his "true" identity which is safely tucked away from view. The contradiction inherent in this need to adopt a false identity in order to preserve one's true identity is heightened by the ideology of the American Dream where, even though it is not an accurate portrayal of the relationship under advanced capitalism between individuals and society, men are conceived of as autonomous agents able, as long as they are smart and strong enough, to make their own good fortune and in doing so "make" themselves.

In theory, if all goes well, the man who succeeds in "making it" will have enough socio-economic power in the end to finally be free to openly "be himself." Until the arrival of that future when the mask can be taken off and the real man revealed, however, a man must walk a tightrope, balancing the need to get along with the need to get out from under the oppressing
weight of those positioned above him. As we saw in the last chapter, by the time Larry, the father in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, reaches the apex of his power and is extolled by the community as the model of a "self-made man," much of his thoughts and feelings are buried so deeply inside himself that they are no longer accessible. In fact, built into the American Dream with its goal of rising up the socio-economic ladder is the assumption that one must be prepared to refashion or even jettison parts of oneself as one crosses class boundaries. In addition, keeping quiet about whatever one feels vulnerable about, as Larry has learned to do over the span of his lifetime, is a large part of the way he maintains power over others. In Díaz's novel, such keeping quiet on the part of men takes on a more contradictory character. On the one hand, keeping his identity elusive and his weaknesses hidden enables Ramón, like Larry, to best opponents and achieve a measure of power over others. On the other hand, dissembling is an important and time-honored tool of the oppressed; it is a way to make a bit more space for the subaltern who, lacking authority and social standing, cannot speak openly or freely about his identity.

If Ramón elicits both positive and negative feelings in other characters and in readers, it is because he himself is awash in contradictions. Ramón dissembles and deceives others, including his own kin. He moves freely about without consulting others, even deciding on his own to pull up stakes and move on if he thinks the situation requires it. At the same time, he feels drawn to an opposite sort of world where love, family, nature, community, and, as a corollary to all these, a stable identity might flourish. In essence, Ramón is a man torn in two, caught in the contradiction of being a worker in a violent world who must look out for "number one" and learn to disregard the feelings and needs of others if he is to succeed materially, and of being a human being who wants to cultivate love and community and who becomes disoriented and depressed when he feels compelled by socio-economic circumstances beyond his control to block such
feelings and tamp down his desires. In short, Ramón feels compelled to adopt a persona or set of personas not of his own choosing in order to navigate a world not of his own making.

**Deformed or Detained Elsewhere: Masks, Masculinity, and Fatherhood**

From the beginning of his arrival in the U.S., Ramón cultivates hardness. When the cabdriver who picks him up at the airport, recognizes him as a new immigrant and asks protectively if he has any family or an address in the U.S., Ramón replies, “I got two hands and a heart as strong as a rock” (168). Ramón’s reply holds a double meaning: his heart is strong enough for physical labor; he is also hard-hearted enough to ignore any feelings that might distract him from his goal. The following morning we see him working on the physical part of this equation as he “[pushes] himself through the sit-ups and push-ups that kept him kicking ass until his forties.” This will “make work a lot easier,” he boasts to the skeptical Latina cleaning woman watching him (169). Ramón also works on steeling his heart against distracting thoughts and emotions. Aware that “the slightest turn of fortune could dash him,” Ramón trains himself to avoid looking back or having second thoughts and to keep his guard high (168). “Think only of today and tomorrow,” he tells himself. He buys a map at a gas station and “[w]henever he felt weak, he’d take . . . the road map . . . and trace his fingers up the coast ” (173).

Steeped in the colonial mentality, Ramón conjures up an image from the conquistador era to help him cope with his current situation: arriving in the U.S., “[h]e didn’t dream about his familia and wouldn’t for many years. He dreamed instead of gold coins, like the ones that had been salvaged from the many wrecks about our island, stacked high as sugar cane” (169).

But while Ramón represses his desire for human relations, filling his mind instead with thoughts of gold coins, the sentence in which mention of the coins appears does not do the same. Rather, it circles back and points to the human history involved in the accumulation of material
wealth, subtly lifting that part of the story within reach of the reader’s, if not Ramón’s, consciousness. On the surface, the sentence declares merely that Ramón dreams about coins stacked high as sugar cane, but the material between the commas opens towards a second meaning—"wrecks" which are stacked high as sugar cane.

This bifurcation of meaning points to a contradiction inherent in the coins: as the mention of sugar cane should remind us, the accumulation of wealth from the Dominican Republic was accomplished at a steep human price including the destruction of the indigenous inhabitants, the enslavement of millions of Africans, and the death of a large number of European sailors either from shipwreck as they transported slaves, goods, and gold, or from the wars waged to defend these cargos. The wreckage from this period continues to affect the present-day lives and dreams of Dominicans, not least because neo-colonialist economic policies continue to impoverish inhabitants pushing them off the land either into jobs in foreign-owned factories in the island’s urban centers, such as the chocolate factory where Virta works, or off shore altogether towards places like Neuva York, which Ramón thinks of as the “city of jobs” (167).

The contradictions compressed into Ramón’s dream of the gold coins or into his view of his heart hover around the edges of his consciousness, much as the northern coast of the Dominican Republic is "visible on the bottom right-hand corner of the map" he studies (173). In fact, it is Yunior, as the story's narrator, who draws attention to the existence of the Dominican Republic on the map. Ramón, either because he is preoccupied with the problem of going north or because he has willed it out of his consciousness, doesn’t seem to notice it. In much the same way, Ramón places at the center of his thoughts only positive connotations: he visualizes gold, he is physically strong. Despite the foreboding conveyed by words like “wreck” and “sugar
cane” or the negative connotations attached to the notion of a rock-hard heart, Ramón is able for the first few years in the States to look away from the contradictory nature of his project.

But though he seeks to repress his doubts as well as his personal and national history, Ramón’s feelings about Virta and the two children he left behind on the island have—as Yunior discovers about his own feelings when he goes years later to interview Nilda—“a way of returning” (206). In part Ramón cannot “bury the memory” of his first family because Virta’s letters find him “wherever” he goes: ”as regular as the months themselves, [they] were corrosive slaps in the face” (191). Virta makes diligent efforts to communicate and connect, but the letters which slap Ramón awake, “regular as the months,” intimate the weight of larger natural forces, as well—time, for example, or the female cycle. Against these inexorable rhythms, Ramón finds it impossible to keep the family he left behind permanently repressed.

Things come to a head when Nilda becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son. Suddenly the family Ramón sought to repress in the Dominican Republic springs up in New York City. The baby, named Ramón, becomes conflated in the father’s mind with his second son with Virta whom we know as Yunior but whose given name is also Ramón. To Nilda’s horror, Ramón makes the mistake of referring to the new child as “Yunior.” Even when he doesn’t call their child by the wrong name out loud, Ramón is “never certain how many times [he’s] called the third Ramón with the second son Ramón in mind” (204).

Just as he has cultivated an ability to look away from troubling or painful thoughts, Ramón eschews the difficult aspects of parenting. He plays with the baby, but the minute “the third Ramón [starts] to fuss, playtime [is] over. Nilda, come and tend to this, he'd say” (204). Try as he does to keep the child at bay, the birth of this new son precipitates a crisis in the father. Like the sorcerer’s apprentice who, left alone in the workshop, begins to play with his master’s
tools and gets things started that he cannot stop, Ramón’s attempt to treat Nilda and now the third Ramón as objects that can be used and then tossed away when one grows tired of them, circles back around to undermine his own sense of worth and identity. Where Ramón once stood alone, defined only by his own movement through space, he is now one of several copies, a “first” Ramón in a set in which there is also a “second” and a “third.” Triangulated by two sons, his sense of identity as the “first” Ramon has become contingent on the blurry fact of their existence.

This sense of being caught up in a web of relationships that he neither controls nor understands is quite different from the mindset Ramón brought with him to the United States. As a new immigrant, he defined himself solely as a producer of money. His dream was to have a negocio or business of his own. Now, however, Ramón’s sense of direction, which had once seemed so straight and clear as he traced a single line up the coast, wavers. He suddenly finds it difficult to chart a path from work to home: “[He] was lost. He would take long perilous night walks home from his jobs, sometimes arriving with his knuckles scuffed and his clothes disheveled” (192).

Under the tutelage of his friend Jo-Jo, who spouts “a hard line on loyalty to familia,” Ramón begins for the first time to have “difficulty separating the two threads of…negocios and familia, and in the end the two [become] impossibly intertwined” (191). Jo-Jo asks Ramón to drive him to the airport to pick up relatives he has sponsored to come to the States. On these occasions, Jo-Jo introduces Ramón “as a brother and Ramón would be dragged into the circle of crying people” (193). These improvisatory exercises begin to have an effect on Ramón who suddenly finds it “a simple matter . . . to rearrange the faces of the arrivals and see his wife and his children there” (193).
As Ramón opens himself to the emotional pull of his "Dominican" family, Nilda begins to sense “that a part of him [is] detained elsewhere” (192). Difficulties and tensions mount between Nilda and Ramón, as well as at his job at the Reynolds Aluminum factory to which he commutes two hours each way. Hearing about a superintendent job at a new housing development just outside Perth Amboy, Ramón is excited by the opportunity to bring the two strands of his life together, settling Virta and the kids into the apartment complex where he will also work. The whole deal seems “better than a dream” (195). Ramón’s first family begins to appear “as his saviors, as a regenerative force that could redeem his fortunes” (204-05).

But Ramón’s illusions about his family or about the ease with which he will be able to combine family and work don’t last long. When we meet Ramón three years later in “Fiesta, 1980” he has succeeded in bringing Virta and the kids over and is working nearby, but we find him still psychologically remote, still “detained elsewhere,” a condition flagged by his obsessive affair with the “Puerto Rican woman” (35-36). Eventually Ramón and Virta split up. The last we hear of him, he is living in Florida, still unhappy and restless. He has become “a sad guy who calls [Virta] and begs for money.” Continuing to live with one foot out the door, he swears “that if [Virta] moves down [to Florida] he’ll leave the woman he’s living with” (101).

In order to succeed in his breadwinning role, Ramón represses, often times without even noticing it, the small voices of desire and alternative selves and identities that lie within. Sometimes these voices break through into consciousness, as happens when Ramón’s playing with the “third Ramón” triggers thoughts about the family he left behind. Often, though, these

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9 This final information about Ramón is gleaned from “Drown.” None of the family characters in this short story are identified by name, but their basic characteristics and the setting itself strongly suggests that they are, in fact, Yunior, Virta and Ramón.
voices emerge in more exaggerated forms as when Ramón suddenly refigures the family he has ignored and distained for years as “saviors” who will help him make his fortune.

This move into superlatives and away from the proportions of everyday life begins early for characters in *Drown*: in the Dominican Republic, impoverished male children like Ysrael, the boy whose face was eaten by a pig, make up stories about powerful fathers in the North, while Yunior and his friend Wilfredo, wearing “disintegrating . . . sandals” and sailing boats made out of scrap paper along the street gutters, armor themselves with “Northamerican names” like Sinbad and Muhammad Ali (78). As we have seen, Ramón, as a recent immigrant to the United States, blocks out his pain along with his sixteen-hour workdays, by dreaming about gold coins linked to the conquistadors. Later, when he hurts himself working at the aluminum factory, the idea of a lawsuit brings “fantastic dreams of gold rings and a spacious house with caged tropical birds in its rooms, a house awash with sea winds” (202).

Ramón's expectations for himself in the U.S., despite his daydreams of conquistadors and gold, begin on a fairly low level and his expectations diminish as he goes along. Thus, dreaming of a “negocio of his own,” Ramón initially shuns his friend Jo-Jo’s offer of a hot dog cart. He "balked at starting at the bottom” wanting, rather, to “jump right into the lowest branches of the American establishment. That leap was what he envisioned for himself, not some slow upward crawl through the mud. What it would be and when it would come, he did not know. `I’m looking for the right investment,’ he told Jo-Jo” (190-91). After slaving away for years at menial jobs, often working two shifts a day, Ramón lands a union job at an aluminum plant and then becomes a superintendent in a New Jersey housing complex. He never does get a *negocio* of his own, but having achieved some measure of stability, at least during his middle years, he appears content to simply try and hold on to what he has achieved so far. In the end, however, it turns
out that his grip on his achievements is not strong enough: when last we catch a glimpse of him in the story "Drown," he has lost his superintendent job and is calling Virta, who is separated from him and now works as a cleaning woman, to ask for money.

Ramón's understanding of what has happened to his dream of climbing up the "branches" of the American economic system is limited by his lack of consciousness about the workings of capitalism. When Ramón injures himself at work, for example, and seeks to get compensation, his bosses punish him for asserting his rights by denying him a pay raise and relegating him to the very worst shift schedule. His fellow workers, some of whom are racists and the rest of whom are terrified that they will lose whatever perks they have or even their jobs if they take Ramón’s side, refuse to testify on his behalf. Having hit a brick wall, “[i]nstead of taking his licks [at work], he blamed it on Nilda. Puta, [whore] was what he took to calling her” (204). It is not long after this that Ramón plans his escape from Nilda and begins to envision his first family as his “saviors.”

Ramón's displacement of the troubles he experiences at work onto family life in general and onto women in particular who suddenly appear to him as either whores or saviors is an example of what Marxists call "false consciousness." Blaming Nilda or looking towards Virta and the kids as his saviors gives Ramón a way to feel, since he has some degree of say-so in the home sphere, that he is more in control of his life than he really is. In shifting focus away from the exploitation he experiences at work, Ramón is tapping into the dominant U.S. mindset which keeps knowledge of the socio-economic effects that capitalism has on individuals and families at bay.

Ramón's turn to the domestic as a way to feel better about himself against the humiliations he suffers in the work world partakes of the same impetus as the ideology which
sprang up in the nineteenth century when, in the midst of industrialization, the home came more and more to be seen as a haven against the dehumanizing ethos of the world beyond. This tendency to take shelter inside the domestic sphere continues once Ramón has left Nilda and brought his "saviors"—Virta and the kids—to the U.S. Shortly after their arrival, he begins an affair with the "Puerto Rican woman" who seems to offer a new way for Ramón to divert his attention from the disappointments and frustrations he experiences elsewhere in his life. In "Fiesta, 1980" the story which centers on Yunior's discovery and reaction to this affair, the conflation of women with work continues as Ramón claims to be at work when he is really seeing his new mistress. Upon questioning, Yunior evasively tells Virta's sister Yrma, who suspects the affair, that "Papi's at work too much" and takes special note of her response: "Work, Tía said, like it was somebody's name she didn't like" (39).

The natural world is another place people often turn towards to find solace and strength when the human world with its violence and exploitation becomes too much. In Drown, however, nature itself is figured as a site of trauma and exploitation. The rape of nature by human beings which Leslie Fiedler detects as a covert theme in much of American fiction, haunts Díaz's work as well, though the role that nature is allowed to play in Drown is greatly diminished from its role in novels like Moby Dick, Huckleberry Finn, or The Grapes of Wrath. In these works, nature sounds a vast and awe-filled counterpoint to the troubled sphere of human society. In contrast, nature in Díaz’s work appears as a minor character, pushed to the very margins of the text, much as just a little bit of the Dominican Republic appears at the far edge of Ramón's map.

10 Leslie Fiedler found earlier American male protagonists haunted by two things: the “rape of nature” and the “exploitation of dark-skinned people” For more on Fiedler, see my discussion of him in Chapter Two.
Ramón himself displays absolutely no interest in nature. His lack of relation to the natural world is so extreme, in fact, that it signals a site of repression: it is plausible that Ramón has cut himself off from nature because what has happened to the Dominican Republic's land and resources as a result of the development thrust upon it by U.S. imperialism is too traumatic to face.

It is Rafa, Ramón’s oldest son and the one who seems to be following most closely in his father’s footsteps, who makes the rejection of nature explicit. Every summer when he and Yunior are out of school they are sent to live in the campo [the countryside] with his aunt and uncle while Virta remains in the city working long hours in a factory. In the campo Rafa is bored:

There was nothing to do, no one to see. You didn’t get television or electricity and Rafa…woke up every morning pissy and dissatisfied. He stood out on the patio in his shorts and looked out over the mountains, at the mists that gathered like water, at the brucal trees that blazed like fires on the mountain. This, he said, is shit. (4)

When he returns to the city, Rafa “forgets” these summers (5). His blocking out of the countryside is linked to Virta’s own denunciations of rural life:

The only way we could have been poorer [than the way we lived in the city] was to have lived in the campo or to have been Haitian immigrants, and Mami regularly offered these to us as brutal consolation.
At least you’re not in the campo. You’d eat rocks then. (70)

Though Virta grew up in the countryside and only came to the city when she was a young woman “burning to be married,” the text is silent about her childhood on the small farm her father owned in Azua (84). It is as if the economic trauma the campo suffered as a result of the neo-colonial relationship with the U.S. has pushed all her other stories about rural life underground. We know only that Abuelo—Virta’s father—has “cane-cutter hands,” that he once owned a produce truck, and that he had at least two employees (79). By the 1970s,
Abuelo’s farm has become “dust” and he has been forced to join the great migration to the cities where, unable to find work, he moves in with Virta and the boys (165).11

In “No Face,” which is set in the late 1970s, the countryside around Ocoa is depicted as barren, no longer able to support human life or even much of an animal community: "The road to Ocoa is empty and the fincas [farms] are dry and many of the farmsteads have been abandoned. On a bluff [Ysrael] sees a single black horse. It’s eating a shrub and a garza is perched on its back” (158). In “Ysrael,” Rafa and Yunior, on their way to view Ysrael’s face, half-eaten by a hungry pig, pass through a disfigured landscape ravaged by human activity: "We went slow, grabbing saplings and fence posts to keep from tumbling down the rough brambled slope. Smoke was rising from the fields that had been burned the night before, and the trees that had not exploded or collapsed stood in the black ash like spears” (9).

The aboriginal inhabitants of the island, the Taínos, used slash and burn agricultural techniques in order to clear forest land for planting, but they did it sparingly compared to their Dominican successors. In addition, Taínos practiced raised mound agriculture on sloped terrain in order to limit the erosion of fertile topsoil (Ferbel 18). Neglect of Dominican land by the Trujillo and Balaguer governments, by large agribusinesses which both regimes supported, and by small farmers driven to adopt environmentally damaging practices in an attempt to survive, have led, by the final decades of the twentieth century, to deforestation, soil erosion, and the massive exodus of small farmers off the land and into the cities.12

11 In 1970 the rural population was 70% of the total population of the Dominican Republic; by 2002 the figure had dropped to under 40% (Lizardo 9-10).

12 See Pons, especially pages 364-365 and 379 for a description of the consolidation of traditional peasant land into large agricultural businesses under Rafael Trujillo’s reign. Lizardo comments as well on the negative impact of both Trujillo and the succeeding governments on land use problems (18). She also describes the problems of
The trees Rafa and Yunior pass, denuded of branches or leveled altogether, recall Ysrael’s missing lips, his nub of an ear, and a conversation the two brothers have about what parts of the boy’s face the pig would have gone for first: “his nose. Anything that sticks out,” they conclude (9). What actually lies beneath Ysrael’s mask is a matter of mystery and communal conjecture. Everyone has a “different opinion on the damage.” Tío thinks it “wasn’t bad” but that Ysrael’s father makes Ysrael wear a mask to keep people from teasing him. Tía, on the other hand, imagines something catastrophic underneath—“if we were to look on his face we would be sad for the rest of our lives” (9).

Like Tía’s and Tío’s response to Ysrael’s face, characters in Drown keep what lies beneath the historical surface at arm’s length, either minimalizing it or, realizing the magnitude of the trauma, attempting to block it out altogether. Underneath Rafa’s and Virta’s closed-mouth dismissal and erasure of the countryside, for example, is a story of environmental destruction and the callous uprooting of the poor by the rich. The years when Virta and Ramón meet and begin their family are times of enormous political and economic strife in the Dominican Republic, but, like our view of the countryside, the terror and trauma of these years come to us in a muted, understated way as if Díaz himself writes to us through a mask. We get a sense of the contours of the underlying story of political power and class oppression, of people divided from each other and from the land, but the actual story is not clear; instead, Díaz presents us with the repressed responses of his characters as they scramble their way down brambled slopes and past fields of exploded trees and black ash.

deforestation and erosion related to agricultural practices over the past four decades (14-16). Ferbel makes the claim that Dominicans “suffer from one of the worst records of topsoil depletion in the Caribbean” (18).
As we have seen, Diaz has said that he doesn’t want to be “a native informer,” writing to educate non-Dominican audiences, but in order to go beyond Tía’s and Tío’s understanding of what lies beneath the mask, readers need to know about the larger political world out of which Díaz’s characters operate (Céspedes 900). One place to begin is the assassination of long-time dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1961. It is an event that opens the door, for the first time in decades, to new political ideas and formulations. Ordinary people become actively involved in politics and aspirations lift when Juan Bosch, a progressive who has the support of the working class, peasantry, and the poor as well as the backing of some of the bourgeoisie rises to power, winning the presidency in democratic elections in1962. In 1963, Bosch oversees the writing of a constitution that mandates the breakup of large landholdings and the distribution of these properties to the landless peasantry. This constitution also restricts foreign ownership of both industry and land. Not long after promulgating this prescription for economic democracy and national sovereignty, Bosch is overthrown in a coup. Two years of turmoil follow. In 1965 a popular uprising, on the verge of reinstating Bosch to the presidency, is halted by the United States, which intervenes militarily. By the time U.S. troops leave, a year later, a member of the Trujillista faction, Joaquin Balaguer, has been “elected” President and, much to the relief of private economic interests, a new constitution abolishing the promise of land reform and all restrictions on foreign ownership in the Dominican Republic rapidly follows.\footnote{For a description of the two constitutions see Goff, pages 3-4. For general information about the invasion of the Dominican Republic and the subsequent economic and political climate of dependency upon the United States see Goff and the “Introduction” to NACLA’s Latin America & Empire Report (April 1974). See Pons for a political history of the Island. See Stephanie Black’s film Life and Debt for a description of the devastating effects of the United States’ neo-colonial economic policies on the people of Jamaica. In particular, Black’s film details the collapse of small farms and explores the blows to national pride and independence felt by ordinary people as the country loses the ability to grow its own food.}

\footnote{Pons describes the “elections” which placed Balaguer in power in 1966:}
Through its military and economic might, the United States has spent the better part of the twentieth century suppressing Dominican attempts to work out their own national path and identity. The invasion of 1965 reiterates to a new generation of Dominicans the lesson of subjugation taught to their parents and grandparents in the early part of the century by an eight-year U.S. military occupation.\(^{14}\) Political terror becomes widespread in the years after this second U.S. occupation and more than 3,000 Dominicans lose their lives between 1966 and 1974. The majority of those assassinated are leftists and members of progressive political parties targeted by a right-wing paramilitary group organized by Balaguer himself.\(^{15}\) Meanwhile, U.S. economic policies, including the influx of subsidized American foodstuffs, force small farmers, unable to sell their produce at such cut-rate prices, off the land at an increasing rate. The rural population sweeps into cities where they form pools of cheap labor for the foreign investors now allowed to set up factories in free trade zones. It is in such a factory that Virta works “ten-, twelve-hour shifts for almost no money at all” after Ramón leaves for the U.S. (71). The foreign investors are given exemptions from tax and import duties as well as the right to repatriate their capital and their profits; the workers, on the other hand, have neither rights nor any guarantees of security.

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[Balaguer] won the elections with the support of Trujilloist army officers, who sponsored a terrorist campaign against Bosch’s [party] in which more than 350 of its political activists were killed between January and May 1966. Bosch himself was not allowed to go out of his house to campaign and had to address his constituency in daily speeches broadcasted through the radio. The military made it publicly known that if Bosch ventured out of his house he would be confronted with military force and probably killed. (390)

During Balaguer’s second “election,” the scene was equally terrifying:

the army troops took out to the streets shouting political slogans for the president…and waving the Reformista red flags on their bayonets….The repression turned so violent that political activists from the opposition parties did not dare to go out fearing they would be killed or arrested. (395)

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\(^{14}\) See Pons, 402. Also Howard 71-73.

\(^{15}\) See Pons, 392.
Yunior remembers a time, for example, when “Dominican chocolate [the product Virta’s factory makes] was not especially in demand . . . the Puerto Rican owners laid off the majority of the employees for a couple of months. Good for the owners, un desastre [a disaster] for us” (77).16

The effects of this history of economic and political subjugation mark and motivate every character in Drown. Virta carries the literal scars of the 1965 U.S. invasion on her body. Rather like the wounds on Ysrael’s face, none of the scars from the rocket attack show when Virta wears clothes, but Yunior can feel them under his hands when he hugs her and he knows that the attack caused her to lose the baby she was carrying, or as he puts it, "my first never-born brother" (69-72). As economic conditions in the cities worsen for the poor, Ramón’s emigration to the United States becomes a logical next step. Once there he becomes part of the “remittance economy”—the flow of money from migrants back to the people left behind. By the 1980s more hard currency flows into the Dominican Republic this way than through the sugar industry, prompting the feeling that “the country’s second city is not Santiago but New York” (Howard 46). Along with blurring the boundaries of national identity, the remittance economy results in a diminished sense of autonomy on the island as irregular payments from abroad, while offering

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16 See Goff and “Introduction” for descriptions of the conditions of the “free trade zones.” Goff quotes one investment analyst’s report on Caribbean Leisurewear from just a few years after the U.S. invasion of 1965 that includes the following:

Company management estimates that the resulting total effective Dominican labor cost of , say, $0.50-$0.70 per hour, is still in the range of one-half to one-third of that in Puerto Rico. What is more, with 4-5 applicants for every available Company job in the Dominican, the Company has the opportunity to expand rapidly within a framework of labor peace and dedication to work. (9)

Free trade zones and their abominable conditions continue throughout the twentieth century and obtain even today. Howard has a thumbnail description of a typical day for a worker in a “Dominican” clothing factory in the year 2000, which includes eleven hours a day of noise, toxic smells, and dust “all for the weekly wage of $20” (43).
temporary relief to individual families, have the overall effect of further undermining social and economic structures in the Dominican Republic.\textsuperscript{17}

While the effects of neo-colonization on the Dominican population are widespread, they land with special force on men whose sense of self is most closely aligned both with the nation’s identity, claiming in a personal way its successes and failures, and with their own economic successes and failures as breadwinners. The trajectory that many Dominican men travel during these years from relative economic independence to proletarianization is represented by Ramón using the last bit of money Virta’s father has salvaged from the Azua farm to propel himself north in order to scrounge a living as an illegal immigrant in New York City. That farm, Abuelo explains to Yunior, was part of the “good old days, when a man could still make a living from his finca [farm], when the United States wasn’t something folks planned on” (72-3).

Losing connection to the land and, in particular, to the independent livelihood that a small farm allowed is linked to losing identity and purpose. But, in addition to altering or even deforming one's sense of self, being alienated from nature and the land also seems to open the way to the exploitation and objectification of others, who, as communities break apart, seem less worthy of human consideration. In \textit{Drown}, for example, the large dams built by Balaguer in the countryside as part of a massive public works program become sites of human as well as natural exploitation. Undertaken in order to bolster Balaguer’s popularity through an ostentatious use of public money as well as to provide running water for the burgeoning cities and the physical infrastructure demanded by foreign investors, the environmental effect of these dams on the surrounding countryside and its population is problematic at best: regional watershed systems are altered and a mismanaged system favoring large-scale irrigation projects leads to further

\textsuperscript{17} See Howard, 46-47.
problems for small farmers as well as soil erosion and pollution when agricultural chemicals make their way into the runoff.¹⁸ Not coincidentally, the drying up of the countryside and its population described in *Drown* occurs simultaneously with the building of these dams.

The construction projects are so monumental that they become a way for residents to mark historical time: “I’d seen Ysrael my first time the year before, right after the dams were finished,” Yunior tells us (7). For Rafa the dams become sites of sexual conquest and exploitation, places where nameless girls can be used and tossed aside, places where the consequences apply only to others, never to himself:

He’d take the campo girls down to the dams to swim and if he was lucky they let him put it in their mouths or in their asses. He’d done La Muda that way for almost a month before her parents heard about it and barred her from leaving the house forever….There was a girl he’d gone to see, half-Haitian, but he ended up with her sister. Another who believed she wouldn’t get pregnant if she drank a Coca-Cola afterwards. And one who was pregnant and didn’t give a damn about anything. (5-6)

Yunior, perhaps because he is three years younger and not as indoctrinated into the brand of masculinity that Rafa has begun to adopt, has less guarded reactions to people and to nature. Rather than blocking out the beauty of the countryside or turning it into a place to exploit local girls as Rafa does, Yunior finds positive reasons for being in the country: “I didn’t mind these summers, wouldn’t forget them the way Rafa would. . . . In the Capital Rafa and I fought. . . . In

¹⁸ See Goff (4) and Howard (34) and Pons (399-400) for a brief description of the public works projects undertaken by Balaguer. See Lizardo for more on the environmental and agricultural problems spawned by mismanagement of water resources. Murray describes the general problems associated with the building of large-scale dams:

Dams often flood out thousands of local residents and completely destroy regional watershed systems, but they continue to get political support because they supply electricity to power-hungry urban areas and facilitate large-scale irrigation projects supporting corporate agriculture. (36)
the campo we were friends” (5). Yunior’s desire for intimacy and his dialectical vision—his ability to see his and Rafa's behavior as a function of the larger environment instead of solely a function of their individual personalities— is of a piece with the persona he has been given as narrator: his desire to understand his life and to place both it and the other members of his family in a larger context gives readers a vantage point from which to do the same.

But while Yunior has an appreciation for the difference between rural and urban life, it is Ysrael, born and bred in the countryside, who has the deepest access to nature and the land. Significantly, Ysrael can only experience this connection when he feels safe enough to be able to put aside the mask of tough masculinity that his father insists he wear. In “No Face,” the only story in the novel to use third rather than first person narration, Ysrael’s first act after waking in the smokehouse, where he sleeps away from the rest of the family, is to pull on his mask.\(^{19}\) Then he “grinds his fist into his palm” and does exercises until he feels “unbeatable.” Not yet having interacted with anyone, Ysrael is still able to enjoy the land: “He knows that he should go but the morning fog covers everything and he listens to the roosters for a while.” As soon as he hears his family stirring, however, he pulls himself back into his invulnerable, masked persona: “Hurry up, he says to himself….He runs past the water hose and the pasture, and then he says FLIGHT and jumps up and his shadow knifes over the tops of the trees” (153).

Towards the end of “No Face,” we again encounter Ysrael waking up on the family farm. This time, however, rather than immediately pulling on his mask, he spends time chatting and playing with his little brother Pesao who obviously loves and admires him. The closeness between the two boys is intermixed with Ysrael’s love of the land: “He watches the sun burn the mists from the fields and despite the heat the beans are thick and green and flexible in the

\(^{19}\) “No Face” uses a close third person narration. All the other stories in the novel are in first person with most told by Yunior or by an anonymous young man who could be Yunior.
breeze.” Fertile, flexible, gentle, a source of pleasure—“the way the land curves away to hide itself reminds him of the way Lou hides his dominos when they play” (160). Ysrael’s unguarded relationship to the land is linked to the one nurturing father figure in *Drown*: Padre Lou the local priest who protects Ysrael from the violence and taunting of others, gives him food, teaches him to read and write, and is trying to arrange for the surgery Ysrael will need if he is ever to live without a mask. In contrast to Ysrael’s biological father, Padre Lou is not afraid to see Ysrael’s actual face. By recognizing and accepting all of Ysrael, including the sensitive areas that lie beneath his mask, Lou offers Ysrael a different sense of what it means to be a man and a different model of fatherhood. Through Lou, Ysrael can begin to envision himself as someone who is already whole, as someone who needn’t hide his vulnerabilities or throw away or otherwise cripple parts of himself or exaggerate others in order to fit in, feel safe or find love.

Ysrael’s revery of Lou and the land comes abruptly to an end when Ysrael’s mother fetches his mask and orders him “Go. . . Before your father comes out.” As soon as Ysrael puts on the mask, his agency collapses as does his ability to interact with other family members: he becomes an invisible spectator, “blending into the weeds,” able only to watch from a hiding place while his mother tenderly washes his brother’s head. (160) The mask Ysrael’s father imposes upon him helps him fit into society and makes him feel and perhaps look invincible, but wearing it truncates him as it cuts him off from interacting in loving and nurturing ways with others and from enjoying and opening himself up to nature. Ultimately the armor Ysrael wears in order to defend himself against other men, his father chief among them, alters his identity, suppressing his own personality and turning him instead into a cartoon or superhero that no one can see: “He has his power of INVISIBILITY and no one can touch him. Even his tío [uncle], the one who guards the dams, strolls past and says nothing” (155).
Like Edgar Allen Poe’s story “The Pit and the Pendulum” in which the contents of the terrifying pit are left to each reader’s imagination, fathers or other adult male relatives in *Drown* embody threats of unspecified violence. We are told that Ysrael “knows what happens when his father comes out” but what his father does or has done to Ysrael remains beyond the realm of the text (160). We learn that the dams are patrolled by guards like Ysrael’s *tío*, but, again, the force used to establish and maintain a hold on the region’s water resources is never explained or depicted. Up until the day he leaves for the United States, Ramón works as a *Guardia*, a policeman; there is no accounting of the things Ramón has done in that capacity, but Rafa’s fears about his father’s job become evident when he tells Ysrael to be careful in his quest for reconstructive surgery because “[t]hose doctors will kill you faster than the Guardia” (17).  

The terror and repressive force that the fathers in *Drown* evoke remain vague partly because these feelings attach not really to the fathers but to the larger society into which these men have had to fit themselves. Through their work, Ramón and Ysrael’s adult male relatives bring a shadowy template of the oppression and subjugation of the public sphere into the home, inducing other members of the family to experience the same powerful feelings of stifling fear. Ramón’s method of dealing with the rape of nature either in the Dominican Republic or in the United States is to either ignore or keep silent about it. Because Ramón displaces or represses his own analysis and feelings about the surrounding world, family members are offered little to go on and their gaze tends to stop at the father since it is difficult to see past him to the political and social origins of the terror and repression that has shaped him.

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20 See Pons, page 386, for the repressive role the Guardia performed in quelling protests and arresting political and union leaders in the years leading up to the 1965 invasion.
Ramón flees the terrors unfolding in the Dominican Republic with a violent urgency: the dream that prompts him to take the last of the farm money and go north “[blows] him out of bed like a gunshot” (164). But, like Leslie Fiedler’s Europeans fleeing the terrors of Europe only to discover new ones in the Americas, Ramón’s economic trajectory finds its sticking point in a suburban development built atop a toxic dump.21 Though he has heard the rumors that the New Jersey housing complex has been built over industrial waste, Ramón, in typical repressive mode, never responds to this information. Instead, he continues doggedly on with the plan to settle his family there. In Drown only Beto, determined to break out of the stultifying life represented by the housing complex, is able to openly talk about the dump, expressing his negative feelings about both it and the status quo: “[Beto] hated everything about the neighborhood, the break-apart buildings, the little strips of grass, the piles of garbage around the cans, and the dump, especially the dump” (91).

Rafa's behavior in the countryside, both his treatment of the local girls and the brutal attack he perpetrates on Ysrael, is prompted partly by the feelings of abandonment and rage his father's absence engenders in him. Ramón has been gone for five years when Rafa decides he wants to hunt down and unmask Ysrael. There is no sense at this point that Ramón will ever return, even for a visit. Significantly, when Rafa chastises Yunior for crying as they look for Ysrael, he adds another full year to the time Ramón has been gone: "Do you think [our Papi's been crying] the last six years?" (14). It is understandable that to a boy of twelve it would seem like Ramon has been gone for longer than five years.

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21For more, see Leslie Fiedler's Love and Death in the American Novel. See also, my discussion of Fiedler in Chapter Two.
It is not only the abandonment of their father that plagues Rafa and Yunior. As a result of Ramón's absence the family has been plunged into abject poverty and this has caused their mother to be much less available to them as well. During the summer she "shipped" them off to the country because after working "long hours at the chocolate factory [she] didn't have the time or the energy to look after us during the months school was out" (3). But even during the school year when the boys are back in the capital with her, she has very little energy for them: "We could never get Mami to do anything after work, even cook dinner, if she didn't first sit awhile . . . She didn't want to hear nothing about our problems, the scratches we'd put into our knees, who said what" (73).

When the factory lays Virta off temporarily, as happens periodically, and money becomes really scarce, she has no choice but to send the boys off to live with relatives and friends. All of this moving about not only separates the boys from their mother but also interrupts their schooling: at nine years old, Yunior doesn't know how to write his own name. Surprised when twelve-year-old Rafa claims to have read a letter their father sent, Yunior blurts out "I didn't know you could read" and Rafa replies quietly, "Yeah . . . Something I picked up" (82). The fact that Yunior is illiterate and that Rafa has had to "pick up" reading from here and there rather than from school or from his parents underlines just how much these boys are being neglected by the adult world.

Rafa and Yunior are part of what John Riofrio has called a "generation of fatherless boys" who must "construct their own vision of masculinity based, not only on the island's remaining men, but also the hollow remains of what the fathers have left behind" (26). Amongst the "remaining men" in Rafa and Yunior's life is Abuelo, Virta's father, who, having lost his farm, lives with Virta and spends his time helping the neighbors kill rats. "Abuelo was supposed to
watch us while Mami was at work," Yunior reports, "but usually he was visiting with his friends or out with his trap." Tió Miguel, the uncle in Ocoa where the boys spend their summers, is similarly uninvolved in the boys' lives and seems, like Abuelo, to have very little of productive value to do with his time: he spends his days chatting and drinking with his friends and preparing his roosters for local cock fights. After completing the few chores Tió Miguel sets for them each day, Rafa and Yunior are left, like the adult men around them, without much purpose or direction: with "the rest of the day punching us in the face," Yunior tells us, "[w]e [had to work] hard at keeping busy" (4).

What emerges from their de-facto orphanhood, Riofrío argues, is a kind of "hyper-masculinity" (27). Without fathers or positive male role models, the boys turn to each other to develop their idea of what it means to be a man. The masculinity code that emerges is, as Riofrío points out, "hopelessly disconnected to reality and selfish in the way that only adolescent machismo allows" (27). For Rafa, his "overt, boastful sexuality is the only tangible cure for the humiliation of poverty and the only means of establishing the virility he craves both...for himself, and externally in the desire for his absent father" (Riofrío 27). Locating the immediate cause of Rafa's rageful behavior in the absence of his parents, Richard Perez, like Riofrío, places their absence in the larger socio-economic context: noting that Mami remains behind in the city in order to "make sweets for other children," Perez sees Rafa's rage as "precipitated by the aftereffects of a Caribbean economy brutalized by postcolonial relations wherein life's sweets are unevenly distributed to others" (106).

Unable to directly express his rage at his father let alone at the socio-economic system that has robbed him of his parents and left him in poverty, Rafa directs his anger towards those upon whom his rage can have some effect: his younger brother, boys like Ysrael who either
don't fit in or appear to be competitors, and, of course, all the nameless girls good for sex and nothing else. Looking out at the countryside and pronouncing it to be shit, he comes up with a recourse: "[w]hen I get home, I'm going to go crazy—chinga [fuck] all my girls and then chinga everyone else's" (4). As Perez points out, Rafa's manic response "suggests a hostile energy, an unspoken and unspeakable aggression masked as masculinity" (106).

At first glance Rafa, in his talk and dealings with girls, seems to be following in the footsteps of his father, who, as we have seen, is himself a macho, driven to invest himself in extra-marital affairs while at the same time ridiculing and dismissing women's thoughts and feelings. But Rafa is learning to repress parts of himself, including repressing anything that might make him appear to be feminine, not because he is modeling himself on his father, who, after all, has been absent since he was seven, but because he and the other fatherless boys are figuring out as best they can, how they might "emerge well" in a world that cares so little about them. Like their fathers before them who had to figure out a way to live with a sense of dignity and achievement in a world not of their own making, a world of corruption where the rules are stacked against them, Rafa and his peers are beginning to try on the persona of the tíguere.23

22 When Ramón decides to cure Yunior's car sickness by taking him for rides and Virta expresses doubt about this method, for example, Ramón "told her to shut up, what did she know about anything anyway?" (35).

23 For more discussion on the concept of the tíguere in Díaz's work see Daniel Bautista's excellent article "Junot Diaz and the Lucha Libre." Bautista proposes a "cultural and political reading of Ysrael's unmasking" that looks at the rules and conventions of Latin American wrestling where masks are used and where "morally coded wrestlers or teams of wrestlers. . . do battle to a usually predetermined conclusion" (42). The wrestlers' masks "effectively make the wrestlers comic book heroes come to life" and wrestlers "do their utmost to keep their real faces concealed both inside and outside of the ring" (43). The removal of a mask during a fight, therefore, is considered extremely humiliating and is done only under highly prescribed circumstances. There are the "good wrestlers" called técnicos "who play fair and follow the rules as much as possible" and the bad wrestlers or rudos "who cheat and bend the rules whenever they can" (43). Bautista argues that "in the context of Latin American politics, where dishonest governments have sometimes made the notion of following the rules and fair play a hollow façade at best, the lucha libre may . . . reflect . . . the basic corruption of the system" (45). Bautista concludes that "[a]lthough Trujillo was long dead by the time of the incidents represented in [Díaz's story "Ysrael"], his legacy of violence and corruption is reflected in the questionable ethics of the different characters and especially in Rafa's behavior," who plays the role of a rudo in his unmasking of Ysrael (45).
Riofrio points out that for the fatherless boys in Díaz's work, "crafting a masculine identity is profoundly connected to the daily struggle to keep the feminine at arms length" (29). The reason the feminine must be kept at bay, he argues, is because throughout the novel it is associated with the ability to empathize; thus femininity "becomes a marker for weakness and a dangerous vulnerability" (29). In "No Face," the second story in Díaz's novel that directly concerns Ysrael, a pack of boys hunt Ysrael down, sit on his chest and threaten to "make [him] a girl" (156). The threat to rape Ysrael is not only an attempt to punish a boy who is different. It is also, as Riofrio points out, a warning to the other boys in the pack that masculinity is not simply conferred by anatomy but is, rather, always provisional. There is always the danger that it can be taken away, that one can become a girl, if one does not conform closely enough to the strictures of the masculinity code, chief amongst them to never show weakness.

Empathy must be avoided because it makes one too aware of the world of feelings—both one's own and other people's—and this, in turn, makes it harder to participate in the domination or victimization of others. Empathy also interferes with the development of an exaggerated sense of one's own individual ability and worth, a development which is crucial if one is to place one's own needs or progress ahead of one's community or the physical resources, such as the natural environment, which sustains that community. In short, becoming a man in the context that Díaz's characters find themselves in entails a great deal of self-mutilation: one must cut off or repress the vulnerable parts of oneself and, at the same time, severe or severely restrict ties of intimacy to others.

Rafa's urgent desire "to pay [Ysrael] a visit" arises partly from his need to subject another to the pain and humiliation he himself feels but cannot express directly (3). It stems as well from his unconscious sense that he and Ysrael share a bond, that Rafa also wears a mask beneath
which lie horrendous deformities. In Ysrael's naked face, he seeks to see what he himself is in the process of becoming as a result of living without adult protection in a world of inequality and ruthless competition. Rafa has psychological scars that match Ysrael's physical ones: as Perez points out, Ysrael is missing a part of his ear, his lips and a section of his cheek through which saliva continually drools while Rafa's "senses have been dulled" (109).

When the boys find Ysrael, he tells them that he, too, has a father in "Neuva York" (16). The discovery excites Yunior and draws him closer to Ysrael with whom he begins an animated conversation. Rafa, however, frowns as the negative comparison between Ysrael's father and Ramón sinks in: Ysrael's father sends gifts like the beautiful kite he is flying when the boys find him and Ysrael is wearing nice sandals and clothes that are "Northamerican," while Rafa and Yunior's father "only sent us letters and an occasional shirt or pair of jeans at Christmas" (15-16). The sense that Ysrael's father is more attentive to his son and more financially successful than Ramón is no doubt contributes to the cold-blooded rage with which Rafa attacks Ysrael from behind, smashing a bottle on top of his head and knocking him unconscious. We later learn that Ysrael, apparently operating under the same masculine imperative to hide his vulnerabilities as the other boys, has actually made up the story about his father being in New York. Though we don't know much about Ysrael's real father, the tiny glimpse we get of him implies that he is cruel, even monstrous towards his son. Just as Ysrael's disfigurement can be read as a metaphor for the deformation a "fatherless boy" undergoes, Ysrael's rejecting father serves as a metaphor for the dehumanization of the absent/present father.

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24 I am indebted to Richard Perez and his article "Racial Spills and Disfigured Faces in Piri Thomas’s Down These Mean Streets and Junot Díaz's 'Ysrael' " for this insight.
In search of powerful models to help them negotiate the violence surrounding them, Dominican boys turn to the world of super heroes. Just as Yunior and Alfredo call each other Sinbad and Muhammad Ali, Ysrael emulates the comic book hero Kaliman "who takes no shit and wears a turban" (155). Besting Ysrael, who stands a foot taller than Rafa, and succeeding in taking off his mask, which has been the goal of so many of the local boys, allows Rafa to feel like a super hero, at least momentarily. The aggressive, even sadistic energy that prompts him to carry out his attack on Ysrael is of apiece with his superpower boast that he will *chinga* all his girls and everyone else's too.

To see the masculinity code that the boys who have been left behind develop as an aberration that occurs only because their fathers are absent assumes that if the fathers were physically present, the boys' masculinity would develop in a more realistic and less self-centered way. That that is not the case quickly becomes apparent in "Fiesta 1980," the story that immediately follows "Ysrael." Here, though the family has been reunited with Ramón, the problem of a brutalizing father and his damaged sons continues unabated. At the party, Ramón seems like a cartoon character himself with his argumentative voice "louder than most adults" (34) and his treatment of Yunior which is so aggressive that it causes one of the kids to ask, "What's wrong with your Dad?" (38). Ysrael, who lives with his father and yet still suffers extreme psychic damage, is another example which shows that simply having the father physically present is not enough.

Discussing the social construction of masculinity, Riofrio points out that "[m]asculinity, like race, disability or sexuality, is . . . a component of identity which reveals profound insights about the world we live in as well as the ideologies which shape that world" (24). The masculinity adopted and displayed by both boys and grown men in *Drown* is a reaction to the
larger society which, as they rightly perceive, is essentially hostile to them. A macho stance is one way a man can defend himself against a world in which, as Ysrael puts it, there are "so many [who] wish him to fall" (155). But the heart-hardened, physically aggressive style of masculinity which many of Díaz's characters feel it necessary to adopt works against them as well: it keeps them from knowing themselves and others more deeply and it blinds them to the ways in which they in fact collude with those that wish to oppress them. In addition, attempting to live up to or enforce the code of masculinity they have adopted becomes an impediment keeping them from seeing as clearly as they might, what the fundamental threats to their well-being actually are.

Yunior's reaction to his "homeboy" Beto going off to college in the story "Drown" is an example of the way concerns about his own masculinity get in the way of him accessing some deeper truths about himself and his society (99). Beto, who had been Yunior's best friend in high school, drops off the narrator’s radar screen once he goes to college. When Beto comes home from college on break two years later, the narrator, twenty-year-old Yunior is ambivalent about whether to see him, saying “He’s a pato [homosexual] now” (91). Yunior has support for his homophobic views in the crowd of young men he hangs out with since he dropped out of high school. After a night of drinking in New Brunswick where Yunior and his friends try and fail to pick up college girls, for example, they routinely drive by the "fag bar" on their way back home and hassle the gay men socializing outside in the parking lot (103). Yunior has reason to feel uncomfortable around Beto: just before Beto went off to college two years prior, he and Yunior had a few sexual encounters. Yunior, "terrified that [he] would end up abnormal, a fucking pato," has avoided Beto ever since (104). This past sexual history becomes the ostensible reason for Yunior's reluctance to see Beto when he is home on break.
Though Yunior, in his narration, focuses on Beto's gayness, Díaz lays into the story a second more potent reason for Yunior's avoidance of his best friend, a reason that is so troubling and painful to Yunior that it is difficult for him to admit it, even to himself: in contrast to Beto who is on the verge of going to business school, Yunior, as the title of the story indicates, is going under. He hasn't finished high school, he deals marijuana to the local high school kids, and he lives with his mother in a suburb that seems like little more than a warehouse for the poor. Beto's status as the one who got away, as the one who went to college, is a reminder to Yunior that he is going nowhere.

Beto's voice, Yunior tells us, "[makes] you think of uncles or grandfathers" (91). In lieu of a community of older male family members, which, as we have already seen, is missing in action, Beto, just a year older than Yunior, steps in to offer advice and provide a role model. During their last years in high school, Beto spends his time visiting other neighborhoods and becoming friends with kids who are different from him. Beto urges Yunior to do the same: "You need to learn how to walk the world . . . . There's a lot out there" (102). Perhaps because the kind of kids Beto describes meeting don't inspire confidence—"a messed-up black kid from Madison Park, two brothers who were into the N.Y. club scene, who spent money on platform shoes and leather backpacks"—Yunior cannot take Beto's advice; though he never explores the reasons why, he can't make himself walk the world in the way Beto does (102).

Jason Frydman has argued that Yunior's fraught relationship with achieving success in the world is due to the fact that he has no positive role models for becoming a monogamous heterosexual male. According to Frydman, Yunior "refuses the upwardly mobile models of his adulterous [father] and [his] homosexual [friend], but fails to achieve an alternative." Frydman
concludes that "it is [Yunior's] own crisis of masculinity that seem [sic] to produce the neurotic conditions that interrupt his upwardly mobile trajectory" (141).

It seems more likely, however, that the issues of sexuality and masculinity with which Yunior wrestles, while important to resolve, are not the ultimate reason for his inability to move beyond his comfort zone or rise out of his "lumpenproletariat" state (Frydman 141). One important difference between Beto and Yunior is not their sexual preferences but the fact that Beto's father, while emotionally absent, is not physically violent towards his son the way Ramón is. The legacy of living day in and out around the sort of violence Ramón doles out has taken its toll on Yunior, making him fearful of new situations. As Yunior observes about his sister, born since the move to the U.S. and so never having known a time when Ramón was absent, "Being around Papi all her life had turned her into a major-league wuss" (26). The hyper-vigilant state of mind inculcated from years of living with Ramón finds expression in Mami's obsessive worry about keeping the windows in the apartment locked; "Putting my hand on the latch is not enough," Yunior tells us, "she wants to hear it rattle" (96).

Upon closer examination, however, Beto's ability to "walk the world" and make it to college doesn't seem to depend upon his having had a significantly more supportive father than Yunior. Walking the world is a skill he invents on his own and it consists of the rather dubious tactic of cruising other neighborhoods after school in order to meet or possibly pick up other kids. While it is true that Beto's father was not physically violent the way Yunior's was, he seems to have been of very little positive help to Beto: his father doesn't intervene to stop him from shoplifting, for example, and the only time they seem to spend together is when they watch porn movies: "Beto used to tell me how his pop [who works nights] would watch them in the middle of the day, not caring a lick about his moms, who spent the time in the kitchen, taking
hours to cook a pot of rice and gandules. Beto would sit down with his pop and neither of them would say a word" (104).

A more likely reason for Yunior's inability to become upwardly mobile has to do with the deep and lasting effect that poverty has had on his life. Yunior uses the excuse of Beto being a *pato* as a way to look away from the deeper, more structural reasons that he is swimming in place, reasons that he has so little control over that it makes him feel powerless. If he thinks he has to be gay to "walk the world" and/or go to college and he is not gay then he can blame that for the reason he has not been able to cross social and class boundaries. More difficult for Yunior to acknowledge is the fact that he wasn't able to keep up in school. As he stands on line waiting to board the school bus each morning of his junior year, he gets to thinking about "how I was failing gym and screwing up math" and decides to play truant instead (101). From the preceding story—"Aguantando"—we know that at the age of nine Yunior wasn't even able to write his name and that there were times when Yunior had to stay home from grade school because his mother didn't have enough money for a pencil. Unable to afford books, Rafa and Yunior had to share with other kids who "wouldn't look at us [and] tried to hold their breath when we were close" (71). With this as background, Yunior probably entered high school already behind and in need of a great deal of extra help to catch up. Continuing the pattern of adult neglect that we saw first in the story about the summer the boys spent marooned in the country, however, such help is not forthcoming. Neither his parents nor his teachers seem to notice when he stops going to school in his junior year. Even the bus drivers who see him step off the bus line day after day take no notice: "Two of them didn't give a rat fuck and the third one . . . was too busy talking Bible to notice anything but the traffic in front of him" (102).
Like Rafa, rage at being left behind begins to dominate Yunior's life and his mindset becomes stained, just like Rafa's, with a globalized negativity: "I hated every single living teacher on the planet" (101). His fear that the adult world not only expect nothing from him but, in fact, may even wish him, in Ysrael's words, "to fall . . . wish him gone" (155) seems to be confirmed by one of his teachers, a man who comes from wealth:

[In high school our teachers loved to crowd us into their lounge every time a space shuttle took off from Florida. One teacher, whose family had two grammar schools named after it, compared us to the shuttles. A few of you are going to make it. Those are the orbiters. But the majority of you are just going to burn out. Going nowhere. He dropped his hand onto his desk. I could already see myself losing altitude, fading, the earth spread out beneath me, hard and bright. (106)]

Two years later the only man offering Yunior advice and a future, the only man calling him "Son" is a white army recruiter who "prowls around" the neighborhood in his government car. "I have a house, a car, a gun and a wife. Discipline. Loyalty. Can you say that you have those things?" he asks. Yunior tries to avoid the recruiter, literally jumping into bushes when he sees him, because he's afraid, in his desperation to find a way out, that he will give in and sign up: "These days my guts feel loose and cold and I want to be away from here" (100).

In a manner similar to the way that Yunior's thoughts tend to slide towards worries about gender and sexuality and away from issues of class and socio-economic status as he contemplates his relationship with Beto, the narrator's male friends in the story "Boyfriend" quickly blame racism for his girlfriend Loretta's decision to break up with him: "It was easy for them to say . . . Look how light you are—no doubt she was already shopping for the lightest" (115).25 His friends' contention that his girlfriend left him because she was looking for a boyfriend with a lighter skin color feels comforting to the narrator and he doesn't challenge their

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25 Although our interpretation of the meaning of these remarks by the narrator's friends differs somewhat, I am indebted to Jason Frydman for drawing attention to them and to the way they reveal a "complicated relationship between race and economics" (138-9).
assertion. But while the narrator relates several other instances where men and women are attracted to a sexual partner because of race, ethnicity, or skin color as if to support his friends' view on the breakup, Loretta seems to leave the narrator not so much because of the color of her new boyfriend's skin but because he works on Wall Street: describing her new lover to the narrator, she says, "I like him. He's a hard worker" (114). The remark strikes the narrator to his very core: "No amount of heart-leather could stop something like that from hurting" (114). The narrator's reaction makes it apparent that it is more painful for him to contemplate his lack of economic success—he is poor, does a lot of drinking and drugging, and doesn't seem to have a job—than it is to think and talk about the racism he experiences. He doesn't focus overtly on his inability to become "a hard worker" nor talk about it with his friends, but this problem informs all the details of the story he tells.

No doubt the narrator of "Boyfriend" keeps silent about his lack of success in the work world because, like Yunior in "Drown," he has accepted the idea, widespread in society, that his inability to rise up the class ladder is largely his own fault. He hears little to no discussion from either elders or peers that could help him place his own experience in a larger, more analytical context, one that would necessarily include the insight that the economic system he wishes to do well in is rigged against those on the bottom. As long as the inability to succeed in such a world is conceived of as a personal failure, the chief precept of the masculinity code—hiding one's weaknesses—goes into effect, keeping men silent and isolated from each other. Without others with whom to process the effects that larger socio-economic forces are having on his life, the narrator is left alone in a sea of painful feelings, unable to properly analyze their origins.
Another instance where a male character's macho talk about sex diverts attention away from economic issues occurs in "Fiesta, 1980" when at a party in the Bronx Tío Miguel offers Yunior, then twelve, an alcoholic drink:

Miguel, Mami said. He's young.
Young? Back in Santo Domingo, he'd be getting laid by now. (31)

The above scene is an example for Riofrio of what he calls the "compensatory machismo" of the Dominican male immigrant to the U.S., a mindset which emerges when nostalgia for the masculinity that "Dominican poverty [has] stripped him of" in taking away his ability to provide economically for his family combines with a general nostalgia for home:

Poverty and desperation drop out of the masculine memory and all that remains is a gloating sexual past which only serves to further confirm a masculine identity which sees sex and the bravado of sexual conquest as the most concrete and salient ways in which to attain and affirm manhood. (33-4)

Knowing as we do, from Mami and the boys' experience in the previous story "Ysrael," how dire and widespread the poverty in the Dominican Republic is serves as a silent counterpoint, at least for readers, to Tío Miguel's depiction of the island as a site of, in Riofrio's words, "virile hyper-sexuality" (34).

The feeling of being adrift without being able to see any clear way in which to proceed plagues the majority of the boys and young men depicted in Drown, who seem beaten down before they even have a chance to start. Frequently, as in the examples just discussed, these young men try to make sense of the world and their place in it by writing large the hierarchies of gender or sexual preference or race/ethnicity while at the same time shying away from or missing altogether the impact that class and economic inequality are having on their lives.
A closer look at the story "No Face," which is the penultimate story in the novel, provides some insight into the process by which those who are being oppressed not only learn to look away from their own oppression but also to align themselves with their oppressors. In such a process, men and boys take up the attributes of the oppressor or bully, especially his aggressive violence and lack of empathy. As men harden their hearts and lose touch with those parts of themselves that don't conform to the dominant social script, especially the parts of themselves that seek loving relationships with others, they put on a metaphorical mask, a face imbued with the false consciousness they have adopted. Underneath lies the parts of their identities that have been repressed as well as the scars from those aspects of self that have been dug out altogether and discarded. The subtle possibilities that go along with a less inhibited and deformed sense of self, one that is not afraid to make mistakes, seem weak, or reach out to others for help and companionship, are lost and men become stuck in place, unable to more closely analyze their surroundings or find a suitable way forward either for themselves or for their community.

Ysrael is a baby when a pig comes into the house and skins his face "like an orange" (7). He is too young to remember or understand the incident, but the community—the collective “they” of the first paragraph quoted below—steps in to imprint its version of the event on Ysrael. The second paragraph is Ysrael’s own sense of the experience, but it comes to him in a dream state and there is no telling how much of “his” version is a reiteration of the story the community has impressed upon him.

No one has ever hidden it from him. They tell him the story over and over again, as though afraid that he might forget.

On some nights he opens his eyes and the pig has come back. Always huge and pale. Its hooves peg his chest down and he can smell the curdled bananas on its breath. Blunt teeth rip a strip from under his eye and the muscle revealed is delicious, like lechosa [papaya]. (157)
The story of an animal tearing a human being apart might, at first glance, seem to reference primal memories of our species’ past in the natural world where being hunted and eaten was of constant concern. The story of Ysrael, however—both what happens to him and how the community interprets and makes use of his experience—offers characters and readers alike a counter-text about human-on-human violence which highlights the social construction of this phenomenon and shows how it is normalized and passed from one generation to the next.

The sense of urgency which the community feels about the incident—telling it “over and over again, as though afraid that [Ysrael] might forget”—is the first clue that this story contains a pressing message for contemporary life. This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that the description of the neighborhood boys’ ambush of Ysrael closely parallels the pig’s attack:

The fat boy with the single eyebrow sits on his chest and his breath flies out of him. The others stand over him and he’s scared.

We’re going to make you a girl, the fat one says and he can hear the words echoing through the meat of the fat boy’s body. He wants to breathe but his lungs are as tight as pockets. (156)

Like the pig, the fat boy pins Ysrael down by his chest. The words the boy speaks, words that threaten to alter Ysrael’s gender identity, are so close to Ysrael that he can hear them as they move through “the meat of the fat boy’s body” in much the same way that he can smell the curdled bananas rising on the pig’s breath just before it begins to strip his face of its identifying features.

The story that the community impresses upon Ysrael emphasizes his own vulnerability and the horror of the inexorable forces bearing down upon him. Left out is the role the community itself played (or didn’t play) in the incident. How was the pig able to come “into the house” and get Ysrael (19)? Who was in charge of watching him that day? The absence of this
information allows a feeling of inevitability about the incident, as if the over-running of our most intimate spaces cannot be prevented. By constructing a scenario in which the only two actors are a baby and a pig, the community absolves itself of responsibility for Ysrael’s disfigurement. Whether the pig represents any and all kinds of violent subjugation or more specifically references the takeover of the Dominican Republic by the “huge and pale” United States, there is no sense that the predatory activity can be stopped. Instead, the brutalization of the baby is naturalized—an unfortunate but somehow unavoidable feature of Dominican if not all human life. As Ysrael re-imagines the incident, he accepts that he has only himself to rely upon. The one protective thing he can do is turn his head to the side so that the pig will have access to only half his face. Thus he is able to preserve a part of his identity; the other part goes missing or, as Nilda puts it one time when she describes Ramón's absent/present demeanor, "is detained elsewhere" (192).

Stripped of the possibility of successful resistance to brutalization and oppression, characters in Drown tend to end up aligning with the powerful. Yunior remembers, without any apparent sense of empathy for Ysrael, how

[t]he summer before [Rafa and I went looking for Ysrael], I pegged Ysrael with a rock. . . . he arched in pain and one of the other boys nearly caught him but he recovered and took off. He’s faster than a mongoose, someone said. . . .We laughed and went back to our baseball games and forgot him until he came to town again and then we dropped what we were doing and chased him. (14-15)

Here the boys disassociate themselves from Ysrael by recasting him as a member of a different species, a mongoose. After Ysrael is brought down by Rafa the following summer and is lying helpless on his back, stunned and unmasked, Rafa examines him the way he might a clinical specimen: “using only two of his fingers, [Rafa turns] Ysrael’s head from side to side” (19). By not allowing Ysrael to keep at least one side of his face hidden, Rafa strips the boy of his last
defense. Though Yunior doesn't know ahead of time that Rafa is planning to physically attack Ysrael and expresses dismay when Rafa does, he nevertheless becomes complicit in the assault once it has begun: "Roll him on his back, my brother said and we did, pushing like crazy" (18).

Ysrael practices a similar emotional distancing, seeking escape from experiencing his own oppression by empathetically identifying with the predator. Thus, while he begins in his own perspective as he recalls his encounter with the pig, he switches, by the final sentence, to the viewpoint of the pig as it strips away Ysrael's flesh and finds the muscle under Ysrael's eye “delicious, like lechosa.” The experience of living life simultaneously from the perspective of his victimizers and as their victim forces Ysrael's sense of self off balance and he seeks to compensate for the disorientation by reinventing himself as a sure-footed super hero. When his little brother asks where he has been he responds, "I've been fighting evil" (160). When his mother tells him to get away from his house because his father is coming out, he pulls on his mask and "runs . . . never slipping or stumbling. Nobody's faster" (160).

A story that is told over and over again, as is the story of Ysrael and the pig, eventually achieves a predictive power, as after shaping and molding perceptions, it begins to dictate actions and outcomes. The sense that life inevitably entails the eating of other (human) life has been so thoroughly ingested by the members of Ysrael’s world that when the boy attempts to perform acts of kindness, members of the adult community, steeped in the perspective of the predator, can only see potential violence:

A viejo [old man] needs help pushing his cart. A cat needs to be brought across the street.
Hey No Face! A motor driver yells. What the hell are you doing? You haven’t started eating cats, have you?
He’ll be eating kids next, another joins in.
Leave that cat alone, it’s not yours.
[Ysrael] runs. (155-6)

Yunior tells us, “[e]ven on this side of Ocoa people had heard of [Ysrael]. . . . He was something to talk about” (7). In the community’s mouth Ysrael is recast as a monster threatening people with the rapaciousness that has actually been perpetrated upon him. The story serves to legitimize the predatory act and to shore up an atmosphere in which dominance and submission are naturalized. The official version becomes itself an act of violence as, by silencing Ysrael’s side of the story, the community colludes in the deformation of his identity; in this process, as the above excerpt indicates, the perspective of the one who is being victimized becomes marked as dangerous, something to fear and repress while the official story meets with approbation and, becoming "something to talk about," is widely disseminated.

In the end, the stripping away of Ysrael’s perspective deforms not only his own sense of what it is to be human and, even more particularly, what it means to be a man, but it also warps the community’s collective vision. The range of human interaction is compressed into a painful binary: either align with the predators or end up becoming prey. Such a choice blinds people to other societal possibilities and identities. A communal approach to life can scarcely be imagined let alone worked towards when the victim/victimizer dynamic takes up so much of society’s emotional, physical, and psychic energy.

Despite their surface differences, Ysrael, Yunior and Rafa have much in common. All three boys suffer from their fathers' abandonment. As we have seen, the adult community also essentially abdicates any responsibility for the boys since, with the notable exception of Padre Lou for Ysrael and, less substantially, Mami and her sister Yrma for Yunior, no adult intervenes to help them when they are suffering or in trouble. While Rafa and Yunior victimize Ysrael, all three boys, are also the victims of male bullying, first by their fathers who are physically and
emotionally abusive to them and then by random groups of boys in Ysrael's case and by a male pedophile in Yunior's. On their own against such violence, the boys learn or are coerced into hiding their feelings and any other hint of vulnerability under a tough exterior. Thus Ysrael's father insists he wear a mask to cover up his deformities and Ysrael "tells himself to be a man" when he wakes screaming from a nightmare about the pig while Rafa calls Yunior "a pussy" for crying and insists that he toughen up or Rafa will leave him to fend for himself even though they are in unfamiliar territory miles away from home (14).

When children are what educational psychologist Darcia Narváez calls "under-cared for" as Rafa and Yunior and Ysrael have been, a system of reasoning which she terms "self protective morality" often emerges along with a "one person psychology" where people who have been under-cared for as children become "unable to be present with the people they are with" both because they are overly preoccupied with themselves and because they have very poor interpersonal skills. Her description, in a recent interview, of the process by which people become so unavailable to themselves and others sounds remarkably like the process that Díaz traces in the father and son relationships described of *Drown*:

When a child is under-cared for they are likely to develop a very threat sensitive stress response. . . . We know that when a stress response kicks in . . . your brain will freeze or you'll run away emotionally . . . or you'll be gone from that relationship . . . physically. . . . and when that happens it affects your moral capacities because [if] you take a moral decision . . . from that mode, that mindset, you are going to do it in a way that's oriented to self protection, not to relating in a one-to-one, back-and-forth egalitarian way. You are either going to dominate [the other] person, push them away, blame them, bully them . . . or, if that doesn't work or you don't feel like it's going to work because they are bigger than you, then you are going to withdraw into this little submissive mode. . . . If you spend your life doing that, you're not reaching your human potential. You are in this cowardly withdrawal part or you're in this bully mode and in any case you are not able to imagine communally, you're not able to realize who you are because you've gone into this mode and you can't get out unless you really work at figuring out new ways to be.
In the same interview, psychologist Harriet Fraad points to the role that capitalism has played in creating the mindset Narváez describes. She notes, first of all, that individualism is more extreme in the U.S. than in any of the other Western developed countries, attributing this to the fact that the U.S. is the only one of these nations that has been built solely on the idea of capitalism. In contrast, the countries in Western Europe have, as part of their long history, the experience of feudalism with its more collective ethos. They also have, by virtue of their much greater range of political parties and movements, a clearer sense that capitalism is only one of a number of ways society might be organized. That sense is lacking in the U.S. where capitalism is presented not only as a given, but as unquestionably "good." Capitalism's basic premise, Fraad points out, is that "you never pay someone what they're worth [because] it doesn't pay to hire anyone unless you are making more from them than what you actually pay them." Because capitalism has exploitation and competition at its very base, it "inculcates a sense of selfishness and exploitation in [its] citizens." Lack of trust, which increases with every increase in inequality, along with violence, which is "a symptom of a society that can't trust each other" all follow. The end result is that people living in a society where capitalism is so unmitigated become deformed or, as Fraad puts it, they lose their mental agility as they find themselves compelled to identify with the dominant power and its moral reasoning instead of being able to develop a more authentic or centered sense of themselves and their relationship to others.

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26 Narváez and Fraad were interviewed together for a radio program entitled "How We Lost Our Humanity and How We Can Get It Back" which aired on WBAI on December 20th, 2014.

27 Fraad makes it clear that she is not including the "Native American peoples that started this country" in this part of her analysis.

28 Pointing out that the degree of inequality in U.S. society has been steadily rising since 1970, Fraad comments, "As our society gets less and less equal there's less and less trust and cooperation because those who are wealthy don't trust those who might take their wealth and those at the bottom have no idea what's happening to them as the American dream has died and are looking around and withdrawing and becoming quite psychologically, mentally, and socially isolated."
**Between Men**

The experience of life as a constant struggle where men are pitted against each other as they compete for scarce resources, and where allies one day might just as easily become enemies the next, colors Ramón’s relationship to other men, keeping him distant and anxious. In his dealings with others he learns to cast a jaundiced eye upon neighbors and fellow workers, looking for ways to use the other without being used himself. At the same time, Ramón knows it is sometimes possible to get help and support from other men and he cultivates these more beneficial relationships. This pattern of viewing others, particularly men, in an ambivalent, provisional, and ultimately opportunistic way spills over into Ramón's interaction with family members, and, as we shall see shortly, even into his relationship with his sons.

In the final story of the novel, "Negocios," we hear the story of Ramón's first years in the U.S. Narrated by Yunior who has grown up enough by this point to be able to step back and view his father with a wider lens, the story allows us to enter into Ramón's world and see things from his point of view. Part of what emerges as we learn about this mysterious, scarcely talked about period in Ramón's life—the five years he was away from Virta and the boys—is the story of the role work has played in shaping, or perhaps, more accurately, misshaping Ramón's relationship to himself and others.

Ramón's education in the ethics of this new land where, instead of class solidarity, it is every man for himself begins in Florida. He shares his first apartment with three Guatemalans—Tomás and Stefan Hernández and Eulalio. Ramón sleeps on the living room floor, but still his portion of the rent is too much for his meager wages. When he finds out that Eulalio, who has the largest room, is paying no rent at all, Ramón attempts to rally the two brothers. "[T]his isn’t
right,” he tells them indignantly, but Tomás and Stefan react with indifference. “What can you do?” one of them replies. “Life smacks everybody around.” (174)

Stefan and Tomás are object lessons in how not to “make it” in the United States. They have chosen the submissive role, passively accepting their place in life, even if it means they have, in the end, no place at all. Their tenuous grip on life is expressed in their reaction to the news that Eulalio is ripping them off: “[W]ho wants to start trouble here? We’ll all be moving on anyway” (174). Stefan and Tomás occupy only a few lines of text; we learn little about their past and even less about their future which seems destined to be as circumscribed as the lives they currently live. They hoard their money, staying home rather than going out after work to meet people and thereby increase their circle of contacts. In the same vein, they limit the size of their voices by making little attempt to learn English. Stefan’s body becomes a metaphor for the way he is being whittled down by life in the United States: Cataracts are “slowly obscuring his eyes” and his impaired vision costs him “half a finger and his last job.” His new job, which includes cleaning up vomit at the train station, is, he tells Ramón, “a lot safer. . . . Working at a fábrica [factory] will kill you long before any tiguere will” (170).

Earlier in the chapter I introduced the notion of the tiguere and explored how this concept, widespread in the Dominican Republic, can help men deal with the confusing array of contradictory roles they find themselves required to play in capitalist society by supplying them with a label under which the conflicting selves can all be subsumed. Despite all his shape shifting, a man who defines himself as a tiguere can feel he has a coherent and reputable identity. In this section, I return to the notion of the tiguere in order to examine how this concept helps to shape and illuminate the relationships between men in Drown.
The idea of the *tíguere* emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, shaped largely by working-class men in Santo Domingo as they faced the difficulties engendered both by the economic and political oppression of the Trujillo years and the increasing urbanization of the country which meant most city dwellers were confronted with an ever-changing set of circumstances and relationships (Krohn-Hansen 109-110,126). The man who could figure out how to successfully make his way through this tricky landscape emerged as an “everyday hero,” winning the admiration and approbation of his peers along with the tag of *tíguere* (Krohn-Hansen 109). The *tíguere* is

a man who is a fighter, doesn’t give in, and defends himself. . . . The *tíguere* is the man who ‘knows everything’ because ‘he is everywhere’; he is a man ‘who is seen’—in the streets and among his friends. He also uses seduction, and is a womanizer. The *tíguere*’s most effective tool for ‘emerging well’ from every situation is his ‘tongue’. . . . [He is] a gifted manipulator of verbal encounters. (Krohn-Hansen 120-121)\(^{29}\)

Although the meaning of the word is often positive, *tíguere* also carries with it a set of negative connotations. From this standpoint, the *tíguere* is a dangerous man, a delinquent or a criminal, a person outside the moral code whose bad behavior should be censured by the community. It is this meaning that Stefan employs when he uses the word.

The image of the *tíguere* in Dominican society reflects the paradoxical relationship that men have to each other and to the larger community as they make their way, often garnering success from another’s failure. The animal image captures the awkward position men are asked

\(^{29}\) Steven Gregory in *The Devil Behind the Mirror: Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic* defines the *tíguere* as "a versatile term typically used to refer to men whose behavior and disposition place them beyond the pale of respectability and, often, the law. Commonly, it was used to refer to hustlers and criminals or, more generally, to people engaged in behaviors that victimized others . . . the idea of the *tíguere* conveyed a sense of daring, rebelliousness, and above all, savvy: to be *tíguere* was to surmount obstacles, flaunt conventions, and skillfully, if not always ethically, manipulate the world to one's advantage. . . . For some, *tígueres* are as much admired as they are feared for their ability to manipulate, if not subvert, a social system stacked against the poor and the powerless" (qtd in Bautista, 48).
to assume as they simultaneously fight like animals for their material survival and try to fit into human society where more “civilized” principles of behavior are valorized. Krohn-Hansen observes,

[a]s the image literally suggests, the man who sees himself, and is seen by others, as a ‘tiger’ is dangerous, tough, flexible and irresistible; even so, this man, this ‘animal’, is not rejected by society—on the contrary, he often arouses others’ admiration. . . . [H]is bold movements, his cunning tricks and his pragmatic improvisations have shown themselves in practice to represent a social route worth traveling. Living with the day-to-day dilemmas of money, friends and women, a man should not only ‘hunt’ but also be ‘good’—and that in what can look like a social jungle. Small wonder, perhaps, that many say to each other that the man who manages has to be a hero—or a tiger. (123-24)

Ramón and Eulalio are tigueres in both the positive and negative senses of the word. They are practical and resilient: learning English is a high priority for both men as is meeting people and expanding their circle of friends. While Tomás and Stefan seem content to simply tread water, Eulalio and Ramón have big dreams and are willing to take risks to realize them. Neither man is willing to be passive in the face of abuse; at the same time, neither is above participating in the abuse of another if the conditions and the rewards for doing so are persuasive enough. Ramón’s reaction to Eulalio’s get-rich-quick rent scheme is a good example of the way these disparate tensions can be bundled together. As the narrator Yunior recounts,

[t]here are two stories about what happened next, one from Papi, one from Mami: either Papi left peacefully with a suitcase filled with Eulalio’s best clothes or he beat the man first, and then took a bus and the suitcase to Virginia. (174)

Papi’s solution to Eulalio becomes a family legend, a story both parents apparently deem important enough to pass on to their son. On one level, it is a classic tiguere story: Ramón

30 In the Bolivian Andes, the image for masculinity is also drawn from the animal world, but there “people shape the ambiguities of masculinity by using two important animal metaphors: a man can be symbolically represented as being both bull and condor” (Krohn-Hansen 132-33).
confronts his oppressor and “emerges well.” The money Eulalio steals from his three apartment mates has been converted into fancy clothes, so stealing them represents a strike for justice on Ramón’s part. But Ramón doesn’t share the liberated wealth with his apartment mates, nor does he seriously consider Stefan’s point that though Eulalio may not have paid rent, he did provide another valuable service—a ride to work every day in his car. Instead, feeling fleeced, Ramón decides to fleece Eulalio and keep the proceeds for himself.

And here the second meaning of tíguere, the less positive one, emerges. In this version of the Eulalio story, Ramón is a thief and opportunist. Stealing Eulalio’s outward presence—the clothes—becomes a way for Ramón to fashion for himself, both literally and figuratively, a richer, more lucrative self. When he arrives in New York, he can parlay this new, successful appearance into opportunities for advancement. Viewed from this perspective, stealing Eulalio’s clothes is a story about the role violence plays in helping Ramón accumulate enough capital to take his first step up the ladder of material success.

Because this second story gives off an unsavory, predatory odor, it shows itself in an equivocal way. Making Eulalio’s clothes a kind of quid pro quo for the unfair rent he charged the others is accepted in both versions of the story as if the morality of demanding one’s fair share is not in question. What is in question—as evidenced by the fact that the story of Ramón’s beating of Eulalio appears in only one of the parents’ versions—is the degree to which Ramón did or did not act violently both in ripping off Eulalio and, less overtly, in not giving Stefan and Tomás their fair share of the clothes/rent money. The story told to Yunior by his parents is ambiguous: he can neither affirm nor deny the existence of force in Ramón’s actions. Yunior passes this ambiguity on to us, calling attention to the problem of properly evaluating the question of violence by withholding from his readers which parent included the scene of Ramón beating up
Eulalio. Stripped of even the ability to evaluate the reliability of the narrator who gives us the
detail of the beating, readers are left with a degree of indeterminacy.

The difficulty of deciding whether Ramón acted well in this particular instance is a
reflection of the larger difficulty of passing moral judgment on men like Ramón. Are they quick-
witted risk-takers, worthy of our admiration for their ability to seize opportunities and
industriously turn bad situations into good ones? Or are they ruthlessly self-involved, willing to
use unscrupulous means to pull themselves up the economic ladder while abandoning or actively
pushing their fellows down? Though Ramón, at least when he first arrives in the United States,
does not seem to be as unscrupulous as Eulalio, the two are similar in that they both understand
that to flourish in the competitive capitalist landscape they must grow themselves and their
prospects, even if it means taking resources from others. Stefan illustrates the pitfalls of a
passive, live-and-let-live approach: while self starters like Ramón and Eulalio seem to be getting
bigger and more substantial as they accumulate resources, Stefan is getting smaller. It is almost
as if bits and pieces of him are being broken off—the finger he lost at the factory comes to
mind—and fed into some machine that is fueling the upward rise of others.

Ramón’s economic trajectory is not a steady path and the ups and downs of the ride have
an impact on his emotional life, gradually reducing him to a number, harsher individual even as
he ultimately makes some economic progress in the society. The upturn that occurs when Ramón
seizes the initiative away from Eulalio and dons the garb of a bigger, more successful man lasts
only a short while. In New York City, Ramón shells out hundreds of dollars to set up a
citizenship marriage with a woman named Flor de Oro, but Flor vanishes and Ramón loses both
his job and his apartment after he attacks the “friend” and fellow worker who set him up for the
bogus deal. Using the back of the receipt Flor gave him for his money, Ramón writes out the story of the swindle and leaves it on the wall of his apartment “as a warning to whatever fool came next to take his place. Ten cuidado [Be careful], he wrote. These people are worse than sharks” (181).

Ramón’s first inclination is to empathize with and to protect fellow immigrants. In Florida, he hoped his fellow apartment mates might band together and take action against Eulalio in order to rectify the injustice being perpetrated against them. In New York, he writes as one human being to another, using the note to affirm, even assert, his own humanity after being betrayed and objectified by a network of immigrant swindlers. Writing to the immigrant who will come after him, Ramón attempts to re-inscribe his home culture where, though there was poverty and exploitation and abuse, there was also an ethic of trust and solidarity amongst working-class men. What Ramón has not yet grasped about life in the United States is that solidarity amongst the oppressed of the lower classes has been shattered by the harshly competitive economic landscape.

When Ramón lands his best job yet, a union job at the Reynolds Aluminum plant, he again experiences worker alienation, complicated this time by racism and nativism. When he injures his back at work, Chuito, the only other immigrant in the plant, calls a cab for him, but no one “[takes] the time to help him walk out” (201). Ramón considers filing an injury lawsuit, but Nilda, who has been in the United States much longer than he and is more savvy about the way the system divides people, argues him out of it: “Have you even spoken to the man you were helping [when you were injured]? He’s probably going to be a witness for the company so that he won’t lose his job the same way you’re going to lose yours. That maricón [fairy] will

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31 Flor de Oro is the name of one of Rafael Trujillo's daughters. She was married for a time to Porfirio Rubirosa, an international playboy and one of Trujillo's closest supporters.
probably get a raise for it, too” (202). In the end, Ramón gives up on the lawsuit and goes resentfully back to a workplace where the bosses punish him for his brief bout of insubordination by voting down his next raise and demoting him to the worst shift.

By the time Ramón’s "Dominican" family comes to the United States, five years after his own arrival, the process of accumulating money, so tightly intertwined in Ramón’s experience with the ability to objectify others, appears to have ground down whatever soft edges Ramón once had. It is as if, having internalized the lesson that in the United States it is every man for himself, Ramón has jettisoned the parts of himself that once reached out and empathized with others. Yunior, getting to know him at age nine, experiences him as hard and self-involved; Ramón, who runs his family like a military boot camp, seems determined to cultivate the same tough exterior in his sons. In the end, the cautionary tale that Ramón passes on to Rafa and Yunior is similar to the one he learned early on from the Flor de Oro fiasco. Don’t trust anybody . . . Ten cuidado . . . These people are sharks. It is the same message that Larry, the father in A Thousand Acres, passes on to his daughters when he tells them, "don't tell your neighbors your business" (132).

While men, immersed in the culture of scarcity that capitalism creates, quickly learn to view each other as adversaries in the scramble for resources, there are also times when men collaborate with each in order to help one or more advance. Ramón, for example, receives help and forms close alliances with a number of men as he tries to better his economic status, though it bears noting that most of these men are either Latino immigrants or family members. It is, first of all, Virta’s father who gives Ramón the money he needs to come to the United States. In Florida, Eulalio, despite his dirty dealings around the rent, helps Ramón orient himself, getting him to work in his rusted-out car, going out to the bars with him several times a week and
pushing him to practice his English. In New York, Ramón has co-workers at every job cheering him on and giving him advice and encouragement. Chuito, the other immigrant worker at the aluminum plant, helps Ramón land his best job ever as a superintendent at a housing development. While Jo-Jo, a Puerto Rican neighborhood grocery storeowner and small businessman becomes Ramón’s “best friend” when he lives with Nilda (189). Jo-Jo sees Ramón as “another brother, a man from a luckless past needing a little direction” and takes him under his wing, giving him advice about everything from the familial to the economic (190). When Ramón decides to leave Nilda and bring Virta and his kids to the United States, it is Jo-Jo who lends him the money he needs for plane tickets and house furnishings.

In *Drown*, the ambiguous relationship men have with each other manifests itself in expressions that weld aggression and alliance into a single action. When Ramón and his brother-in-law meet at a party, for example, Yunior reports that they give each other “the sort of handshakes that would have turned my fingers into Wonder bread” (31). A baseball game in the apartment parking lot reveals the same ambivalent push-pull kind of relationship developing amongst Ramón’s sons and their friends. “[W]e could hear our friends, yelling, Hey, and, Cabrón [bastard], to one another,” Yunior tells us. “[W]e . . . liked playing with the local kids, thrashing them at anything they were doing.” (24) Yunior hears greetings and epithets as interchangeable; “playing” becomes synonymous with “thrashing.” Bonding and hurting are also indistinguishable in the story “Aurora” where drug dealers and their customers hang out on a street corner selling and buying. At one point the men express pleasure by play-acting violence: “[b]rothers are falling over with laughter and some grab onto their boys, pretend to smash their heads against the curb” (58).
Male bonding at the expense of another male’s pain and humiliation is the catalyst for this last incident: the “brothers” are laughing at some boys who are peeing on a former drug dealer who has been knocked unconscious in a fight. The treatment of Ysrael, pursued by packs of gleeful boys, is another example of how the exercise of brutality towards one male creates camaraderie amongst the others. In this respect, Rafa and Yunior seem to take a lesson from their father’s generation. On the night before Rafa and Yunior stalk Ysrael, they lie awake and listen to their uncle "yukking it up with his buddies. . . . One of Tio’s roosters had won big the day before and he was thinking of taking it to the Capital” (8). Just as Tío bonds with his male friends around the lucrative “sport” of pitting roosters against each other, the boys under his charge attempt to entertain themselves and draw closer to each other by mounting an adventure against Ysrael. When they finally track Ysrael down, Yunior notices that he “looked like he’d been fattened on that supergrain the farmers around Ocoa were giving their stock, a new product which kept my tío up at night, muttering jealously, Proxyl Feed 9, Proxyl Feed 9” (15). The parallel between Ysrael and Tío’s prize rooster is underlined when Ysrael, a wrestler, tells Yunior that he hopes one day to fight in the Capital.

The ambivalent relationship that men develop with each other in the public sphere can be found in Ramón and Yunior's relationship as well, only now the ambivalence is condensed so they are allies and enemies to each other at the same time. Such a compression of opposites would be an explosive combination in any setting, but because this relationship occurs in the close personal space of the family, it is especially synergistic.

Ramón seems in the main to be Yunior's adversary or enemy. He comes up with "imaginative" physical punishments and denies Yunior food (30). The physical and the emotional abuse are so pervasive that they almost seem to form one continuum as when Yunior
is afraid to even trade glances with Ramón because "[h]e had this one look, furious and sharp, that always left me feeling bruised" (28). When Beto and Yunior get into stealing from a local mall, his father's only response, when he sees Yunior's closet full of stolen merchandise, is to tell him, "You're going to get caught . . . . When you do I'll show them everything you've taken and then they'll throw your stupid ass away like a bad piece of meat" (98). Here, as in so many other cases, there is no sense of trying to guide the son into safer, more productive activities. Rather, the father seems almost gleeful at the thought of his son being taken away and locked up. Such a sentiment is reminiscent of Ysrael's father who seems intent on erasing his son's existence by insisting that his face be covered by a mask and that he spend his waking hours away from home, out of his father's sight.

But if Ramón often treats Yunior like an adversary or enemy, there are also times when he brings him into his circle as a sort of ally or confidant such as the times Ramón brings Yunior and Rafa to his mistress' house. Perhaps Ramón includes his sons merely in order to have an alibi in case Virta asks where he was, but there are other interpretations as well and they point to motivations on Ramón's part that are both positive and negative. On the positive side, Ramón is taking his sons in hand and teaching them how to widen their contacts or, in Beto's terminology, how to "walk the world." Standard operating procedure for the tígure, according to Krohn-Hansen, is the cultivation of several girlfriends at once, a balancing act which enables him to expand his resource base since he is able to draw upon each of the woman's circle of friends and family for help and support (115-16). On the negative side, Ramón is teaching his sons that they needn't be loyal to or honest with their spouse and that seeking a deeper intimacy with one's wife is not a priority. Further, in asserting that one can keep the two relationships—mistress and wife—separate, he is encouraging his sons to repress and compartmentalize their feelings.
Yunior is the second born son, but his given name is Ramón, a choice on the part of his parents that indicates expectations of closeness and identification between the two: he is a "Yunior," a Ramón-in-training. In fact, Yunior does have a special relationship with his father, perhaps because Ramón is able to see himself more clearly in Yunior than in Rafa who, as we have seen, is much angrier and more walled off. Yunior tells us

I was the one who was always in trouble with my dad. It was like my God-given duty to piss him off, to do everything the way he hated. Our fights didn't bother me too much. I still wanted him to love me, something that never seemed strange or contradictory until years later. (26-7)

Yunior takes the fights in stride, but as a child he is not able to understand his father's volatility or his bouts of meanness. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that he knows very little about his father's life outside of the family, particularly his work life. The conventional way of thinking—that home and work life are separate—keeps him foggy about how the two realms inform each other. Feelings of rage and betrayal which originate at work—as during Ramón's problems at the aluminum factory—make their way into the home without clear attribution. The way the father's feelings appear and disappear without apparent cause adds to the anxiety in the household and particularly in the father's relationship with his children by creating a feeling that their father's volatility is unaccountable.

The failure of Yunior, once he is a young man, to rise up the success ladder can easily be blamed on Ramón who, in one way or another, has functioned as a brake on his son's development: either he crippled Yunior emotionally by his absence or, when he was present, by his violence and neglect, or he didn't provide enough social capital, a proper work ethic, a good model of masculinity, or the right advice on how to manage difficulties when they arise. Being
an immigrant who doesn't himself really know how to maneuver well in American society, Ramón's ability to help his son becomes all the more tenuous.

The father, feeling inadequate and sensing the judgment of the son, might also attempt to ward off those judgments by preemptively blaming the son for being a drag on his resources or for failing to appreciate all the sacrifices he has made to provide for the family. Yunior, for example, who has never had carsickness before, throws up every time Ramón takes him for a ride in his Volkswagen van. "Brand-new, lime-green and bought to impress," as Yunior tells us, the car operates as a visible sign of Ramón's financial success, one he is very proud of (27). Yunior, however, seems determined to rain on Ramón's parade, throwing up in the car every time Ramón goes above twenty miles an hour.

Jason Frydman has speculated that "perhaps the family's imminent upward mobility, provokes a nascent neurotic condition in Yunior," arguing that Yunior's carsickness and later his inability to make financial progress himself as a young man comes about because he associates upward mobility with the betrayal of his mother (140). One such betrayal, Frydman notes, occurs when Ramón marries Nilda in order to become legal. Another betrayal occurs around the time Ramón buys the van which leads to Yunior finding out about Ramón's latest affair: "I met the Puerto Rican woman right after Papi had gotten the van. He was taking me on short trips, trying to cure me of my vomiting" (34-5). For Frydman what bothers the adult Yunior and keeps him from rising up economically is the problem of how to do so while maintaining his sexual preference which is to be a monogamous, heterosexual male.

From Yunior's point of view, however, it is possible to see Ramón's periodic bouts of upward mobility as associated not so much with his father's sexual infidelity or Yunior's own crisis of masculinity, as with the fear that financial success entails a mind-numbing loss of
intimacy both for the breadwinner and for the members of his family. When Ramón, for example, after being in the U.S. for two years, doesn't come for Virta and the kids as he promised not only does six-year-old Yunior scream, throw himself about "like [he] was on fire" and tear his clothes, but Virta suffers a mental breakdown and is sent away for five weeks (83). When she returns, Yunior discovers his relationship with his mother has drastically changed: "She didn't treat me badly . . . but we were no longer as close; she did not call me her Prieto or bring me chocolates from her work. That seemed to suit her fine. And I was young enough to grow out of her rejection" (84). It actually seems, despite Ramón's anger and the physical punishments he imposes on Yunior to try and get him to stop throwing up, that Yunior's illness is an unconscious attempt to get closer to his distant father: when his father begins taking him on short trips to cure him, Yunior admits, "It wasn't really working but I looked forward to our trips, even though at the end of each one I'd be sick. These were the only times me and Papi did anything together. When we were alone he treated me much better, like maybe I was his son or something" (35).

It seems plausible that what Yunior finds difficult about succeeding financially, alongside all the very real racial and class barriers he must contend with, is the soul murdering cost that succeeding financially seems to exact on one's life as things and money become more important than one's own internal development, one's family, and one's community.

Legacies

At first glance it seems that all that Ramón is able to pass on to his son Yunior is, as Rafa might say, shit. Rafa only appears in Drown as an adolescent; we don't get a chance to see what happens to him when he becomes a young adult, though we already know enough about him at twelve and fifteen years old to anticipate that his road will be rocky. The young adult narrators
that we do encounter in the set of stories that occupy the center section of the novel—"Aurora," "Drown," "Boyfriend," and "Edison,"—all seem to be stuck in place, going nowhere: they have little to do that is productive and no sense of a better future. The title of the novel, taken from one of these stories, underlines just how little purchase these young men feel they have on the life in which they find themselves set adrift.

None of the narrators of these four stories are named but the narrator of "Drown" is almost certainly Yunior. While the narrators of "Boyfriend" and "Edison" might be Yunior, the narrator of "Aurora" is definitely not. The fact that all these young men seem to occupy a similar dead-end space creates the feeling that we are looking, in these four portraits, not merely at the trajectory of one particular son, but at the story of a whole generation of young men who are going under.

Yunior is not the first in his family to feel stuck, but he is the first to feel so completely cut off from the possibility of improving his situation. Neither his father nor either of his grandfathers have seen their dreams of achieving a better life pan out, but they all had dreams, a period when they were actively working towards them, and at least some degree of success and fulfillment in their working lives. Yunior's generation, however, is coming of age at a time when the general trend for working people in the U.S. is downward. As the century edges towards its conclusion, it is common even for children of the middle class who were born and bred in the U.S. to be unable to achieve the degree of wealth and social status that their parents did. It stands to reason that first- and second-born immigrant generations from the poverty-stricken sector of the Dominican Republic would have an even tougher time achieving financial success or, after seeing the work experiences of other family members and peers, believing that the American Dream has much to do with them.
Part of what Yunior has learned from watching his father's and grandfathers' breadwinning histories, is that work, once the U.S. economic system becomes something men have to "plan on," takes more out of a man than it gives him in return. It often disfigures men, grinding them down both mentally and physically. We have already seen how Stefan, one of Ramón's apartment mates when he first arrives in Miami, seems to be literally working himself to the bone, having already lost his eyesight and one of his fingers. His inability to stick up for himself when he is being exploited indicates that his spirit, too, is being filed down. An even more extreme example is the case of Ramón's father José who lost part of his foot after accidentally dropping a can on it while working in a hotel kitchen in the Dominican Republic. He surreptitiously smashes more cans on it figuring the worse it was, the more money he'd get when he finally showed the bosses. It saddened and shamed Papi to hear of this while he was growing up. The old man was rumored to have wandered the barrio he lived in trying to find someone who would take a bat to the foot. For the old man that foot was an investment, an heirloom he cherished and burnished, until half of it had to be amputated because the infection was so bad. (203)

The fact that Ramón hears about rather than sees this incident himself and that it is "rumored" that the father goes looking for neighbors to further smash up his foot, is reminiscent of the story told by the community about Ysrael and the pig. Like that traumatizing event, the story of José and his damaged foot becomes something for the community "to talk about" (7). Though the text doesn't delve into Ramón's feelings, it is probable that he is ashamed of how the incident makes José look like a buffoon. If José had managed to win a large compensation for his damaged foot, he would have been seen, no doubt, a clever tiguere who broke the rules and managed, by doing so, to "emerge well." As it is, the story of José's injured foot becomes a
cautionary tale of how not to behave: José appears pathetic, hurting only himself as he hurls himself without effect against the powers that be.

Focusing on the spectacle of José's self-mutilation, is a way, as it was in the case of Ysrael and the pig, to concentrate on the victim and leave aside the question of responsibility for José's original injury. The story that the community ignores is the exploitative work environment that would cause an injured worker to take such extreme measures. As we see later when Ramón himself is injured at work and not only doesn't get any compensation for his injury but is actually demoted as punishment for expressing the smallest amount of discontent, the system is stacked against workers and their rights. The underlying humiliation which José's story points to and which other members of the community feel even if they cannot express it overtly, is the dehumanization that workers under capitalism face. Just as José disassociates himself from his foot, seeing it not as a part of his living body but as an "investment" or an "heirloom" which he can "burnish" and turn into money, the bosses objectify the labor of their workers, sometimes actually referring to them as "hands," in order to turn the labor that those hands produce into money that they themselves will pocket. By doing to himself what the bosses do to the workers every day, José calls ironic attention to the ethics of an economic system that splits off and appropriates workers' labor with little or no thought for their overall humanity or well being.

Beyond the humiliating experience of being treated as if one were an object and even coming to see and treat oneself that way, there is the problem for working class men that meaningful or satisfying work is fast disappearing. We have already seen how Yunior's grandfather Abuelo loses his sense of purpose when he loses his farm. Moving to the city to live with his daughter Virta, Abuelo is, as Riofrío has pointed out, "a broken man" (27). He spends
his time sleeping or hanging out with friends. Eventually he builds a rat trap and lends it out to
neighbors, never for money but with the proviso that he always be the one to arm the steel bar
explaining that it was too dangerous to allow the neighbors to do. "[I]n truth," Yunior tells us,
"he just liked having something to do, a job of some kind" (72). Once he spends two nights with
a neighbor family killing rats: "when he came back he was grinning and tired, his white hair
everywhere, and my mother had said, You look like you've been out getting ass" (72). Having a
purpose, even if it is just volunteering to help his neighbors kill rats, makes Abuelo feel like a
man.

While Ramón's job as a guardia seems like reputable, meaningful work, a closer look
reveals it is not. For one thing, Ramón is able to slack off at work and seems to do so frequently.
He begins an affair with a woman he meets while breaking up a fight on her block, for example,
and thereafter spends time "loafing around her street when he was supposed to be on patrol"
(163). In addition, since Ramón was employed as a guardia in the capital from the mid-1960s
to the early 1970s, he would have been called upon to enforce the violent repression "President"
Balaguer unleashed against political opponents and the poor during those years. While Ramón
never talks about his work as a guardia, it is hard to imagine that it didn't cause him to question
what kind of productive role he could be playing as part of such a corrupt and violently
undemocratic power structure.

Working takes its toll on men draining their energy and changing their relationships to
family and friends as well as to themselves. When Ramón escapes the "umbra of his fellow
immigrants" and lands a good job at the Reynolds Aluminum factory he finds himself, after two
hours of travel each way and a day of "tendon-ripping labor," too exhausted to visit with his best
friend (194). Instead, after dinner he plants himself in front of the tv and watches the cartoon
cat-and-mouse show Tom and Jerry, "delighted . . . with their violence." Calling Nilda into the room, he exclaims, "Oh, that's wonderful . . . They're killing each other!" (194). Ramón's delight in the violence he sees on tv is a displacement of the rage he feels at work where he is treated unfairly but has no power to speak up or fight back. Instead he must pretend that the men he works with, "whites [who] were always dumping their bad shifts on him," are his friends for whom he is happy to do a favor. When Chuito, the other Latino immigrant at the plant complains about being coerced by fellow workers into taking the worst shifts, he is "written up for detracting from the familial spirit of the department. Both men knew better than to speak up again" (194). Keeping up the pretense that the factory workforce is like a family and the men there are Ramón's brothers takes emotional energy and adds both to the exhaustion Ramón feels after the work day has ended and to the smoldering anger he brings into the home, anger which surfaces from time to time and is directed at his real family.

Against the background of a downward decades-long trend in the U.S. economy which begins in the 1970s and the unsatisfying and even unproductive work histories of the generations of men that have gone before them, it's no wonder that Yunior's generation feels itself at a standstill.

When we first meet Rafa and Yunior they are boys marooned in the countryside spinning their wheels and looking for activities to fill up their days. Just outside their Tíos' house the rosebushes, we are told, "[blaze] round the yard like compass points" (4). None of the points seem to be labeled: there is a big world emanating out from where they stand, but no guidance from their father or the other adults as to how to go about exploring it. The confusing lack of direction the boys experience is underlined at the end of the first story when, after unmasking Ysrael, the boys seem to get on the wrong bus, one that was "heading for Ocoa, not for home"
The disorientation the boys feel overall in life is replicated in the reader by this phrase. Does Yunior mean that the bus they have boarded is not going in the right direction to reach their tíos' house which is "just outside Ocoa" (4), or does he mean that the bus is, in fact, heading towards their Tíos' house but that, after the traumatic day they have just had, Yunior wishes it were going "home" to Santo Domingo where the boys normally live with their mother? The fact that it is not clear exactly which "home" Yunior means fits the overall feeling that the boys, abandoned by their parents, don't actually have a strong connection to home.

The young men depicted in the stories that occupy the middle section of the novel are still floundering in a sea of possibilities, cut off from shore without a clear sense of either the direction they might take to move forward or the way home. Towards the end of the novel, however, in the last story entitled "Negocios," Yunior shows signs that he is beginning to have a stronger connection to himself and to others and that these changes bode well for his ability to both be more in control of the direction his life is taking and to create a stronger attachment to home.

"Negocios" tells the story of Ramón's first years in the United States when Virta and the boys were still in the Dominican Republic. Included in the sources that Yunior draws upon to create this portrait is Nilda, Ramón's "American" wife whom Yunior arranges to meet for the first time in order to get her perspective on Ramón. The interview with Nilda takes place at her house over the course of one long afternoon and it is not easy, at first, for Yunior to participate in the discussion. Shortly after he arrives he finds himself "no longer as willing to ask her questions or even to be sitting there. Anger has a way of returning." His impulse to flee at the first sign of uncomfortable feelings is reminiscent of Ramón's modus operandi which was to avoid such feelings by either becoming aggressive towards those who elicited them or by
running away. Yunior, however, sits for a minute with his anger: "I looked down at my feet," he tells us, "and saw that the linoleum was worn and filthy. Her hair was white and cut close to her small head" (206). Seeing Nilda not as an enemy or, as his mother called her when she gave Yunior her address, "a puta [whore]" (206), but as a human being softens Yunior and allows him to notice his angry feelings but not allow them to distract him from his mission: "We sat and drank [cafe] and finally talked" (206-7).

At the end of the conversation when Nilda invites him to visit her restaurant, Yunior makes another decision which shows he is beginning to move in a different direction from the one his father routinely took: "when I got there and stared through my reflection in the glass at the people inside, all of them versions of people I already knew, I decided to go home" (207). Unlike his father, Yunior rejects the temptation to spread himself too thin, to acquire multiple families rather than root himself more deeply in one.

Yunior's inheritance, it turns out, is the story that Ramón leaves behind for him to parse. Like the note that Ramón leaves for the immigrants who will come after him, telling them to be careful, Ramón's life story is a cautionary tale warning Yunior, if he can find a way to hear it, about the dangers of his father's approach to masculinity, family, and work. In the steps that Yunior takes to tell Ramón's story, including, for example, the choices he makes as he interacts with Nilda, just described above, he reveals that he has already developed some degree of consciousness about the ways in which Ramón's mindset is not one that he intends to adopt wholesale. As he explores the story of Ramón's life and how his stance towards work and family came to be, Yunior is also able to explore his own mindset and ponder in what ways the consciousness which defined his father also defines him.
In this regard, one of the most important things Yunior does in "Negocios" is put the events of his upbringing and his relationship with his father, the man both he and Nilda agree played the role of a traumatic "event" in their lives—"a whirlwind, a comet, a war"—into a larger context (207). Doing so allows Yunior to begin to heal and, in the process, to start filling in some of the directional markings on the compass points blazing around him.

Drawing upon the research of psychologist James W. Pennebaker, Louise DeSalvo argues in *Writing as a Way of Healing* that to heal from traumatic events one must link "detailed descriptions of what happened with feelings—then and now—about what happened" (25). Expressing only one of these aspects by themselves—describing the trauma itself, expressing feelings about the trauma at the time it is experienced, or expressing feelings and reflecting upon the meaning of the trauma in retrospect—does not lead to healing. In fact, DeSalvo notes that in at least one experiment researchers discovered "that simply venting feelings might have made the writers somewhat sicker" (25). Pennebaker found that when people were asked to link feelings and a detailed description of the traumatic event together in their writing, it led to "improved immune function, improved emotional and physical health, and behavioral changes indicating that [people felt] able to act on [their] own behalf" (DeSalvo 25). DeSalvo lists some of the "substantial" behavioral changes that have been observed when people have been able, using writing, to successfully integrate what happened with how they feel about it: "Students' grades improve. People get new jobs more quickly. People are absent from work less. Grieving people are healthier. Sick people are somewhat healthier" (25-4). Pointing to a number of literary works that "were written expressly so that their authors could heal from a psychic wound," DeSalvo notes that Diaz "has said in an interview that he wrote to overcome the losses he incurred by

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32 Pennebaker's experiments and findings are described in his book *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Confiding in Others.*
living through colonialism, emigration, and poverty and his grief at his brother Rafa's illness. Diaz began by 'scribbling long letters to Rafa' when he was hospitalized" (35).

If we think of Yunior's relationship with his father and particularly of his father's absence as a psychic wound that Yunior must heal from if he is ever going to be able to move away from the feeling that he is drowning and towards a more buoyant sense of self, life, work, and masculinity, then we can see the stories Yunior narrates in Drown as placing him on that path. He thoroughly describes the trauma itself, first in the earlier stories by giving a detailed account of what life was like both with and without his father, and then in "Negocios" by describing, also in detail, what life was like for his father during his time away from the family. He also combines these descriptions of his father's absence with a recounting of his emotions, both at the time the trauma was happening (in the earlier stories) and in retrospect after the traumatic event is over (in "Negocios").

By the time he is nine and Rafa is twelve each brother has created a fantasy scenario about Ramón's return. These fantasies close "Aguantando." Rafa's is somewhat ordinary: Ramón will come in the night and take up where he left off with Mami and the boys. Yunior's return scenario, in contrast, is filled with longing. It addresses what he unconsciously perceives to be true by casting everything in its opposite light. Ramón will be a man with hands and eyes like mine. He'd have gold on his fingers, cologne on his neck, a silk shirt, good leather shoes. The whole barrio would come out to greet him. He'd kiss Mami and Rafa and shake Abuelo's reluctant hand and then he'd see me behind everyone else. What's wrong with that one? he'd ask and Mami would say, He doesn't know you. Squatting down so that his pale yellow dress socks showed, he'd trace the scars on my arms and on my head. Yunior, he'd finally say, his stubbled face in front of mine, his thumb tracing a circle on my cheek. (87-8)
In Yunior's fantasy Ramón will be rich, signaling that his absence has been worth it. In addition, his return will be a public event involving "the whole barrio." Thus everyone can see how Ramón is not the low-down deserter who, as one of Mami's friends likes to tell Yunior "took too much," but is returning victorious, an upstanding man, father and husband (76). He will look like Yunior and he will take a special interest in Yunior and in getting to know him. The very last set of images in Yunior's fantasy concern Ramón tracing his scars, a gesture that brings attention to the wounds the father, in neglecting his son has actually inflicted. When the father traces a circle on Yunior's cheek it may remind nine-year-old Yunior of the hole he recently saw in Ysrael's cheek. It should remind readers of the way Ramón pokes Yunior hard in the cheek in "Fiesta, 1980" to punish him for throwing up in his car when Yunior is twelve.\textsuperscript{33} Since "Aguantando" is told, like all the stories from Yunior's childhood, by Yunior after he has grown up, the image of his father gently drawing a circle on his cheek is both an acknowledgment of his father's cruelty and an attempt to massage it away.

When Yunior is young, he has an extremely subjective view of his father: being still a child, his experience of and reaction to his father is understandably rooted in his own set of needs and wants. More, he sees his father only in the familial context. He knows nothing about his work life or the socio-economic pressures his father is shaped by. Nor does he know anything about the life his father has when he "abandons" Yunior and the family to work in New York.

In "Negocios" Yunior re-envisions his father's return. This time, because Yunior is now a young adult and perhaps also because Ramón has, by this point left the family "for good," Yunior has the distance to see his father from a wider angle (206). He begins his narration several months before Ramón leaves Virta and the kids to go north and ends it on the day Ramón

\textsuperscript{33} In fact, since "Fiesta, 1980" comes before "Aguantando," we have already read about Ramón's "torture" of Yunior's cheek before reading about Yunior's fantasy of his father stroking that same cheek three years earlier (30).
"[flies] south to get us" (208). These are the last words in the novel, an indication of the important place Ramón's absence and return occupies both in Yunior's individual psyche and in the novel as a whole.

Rather than seeing his father in a largely negative light as a "torturer" (30) or as a "cheater" (40) as Yunior does during his childhood years, or seeing him as an attentive father and possible hero as he is in Yunior's fantasy of Ramón's return, in "Negocios" Ramón appears for the first time as a three-dimensional human being with both positive and negative aspects. There is no doubt that Ramón has some serious feet of clay, but the choices he makes and the difficulties he faces are fleshed out in such a way that we find ourselves understanding, empathizing with, and even at times admiring him.

The word "Negocios" means "business" in Spanish. As the title suggests, a large part of the story of Ramón's first years in the States is the role that money, economic necessity, and work play in his life. In discovering and piecing together Ramón's work experiences, Yunior begins to see, as he couldn't when he was a child, the complicated and often contradictory socio-economic forces operating upon his father, forces that play a large role in shaping his actions and his own sense of identity.

What becomes evident in this final section of the novel is that Yunior is beginning to question and go beyond the mindset his father adopted to cope with a violent, unequal society. In seeking out his father's version of the time he spent away from his family, Yunior is acknowledging that his own subjective experience of his father's absence is not enough, that he needs to know his father's side of the story as well. The sense that knowledge is a collective process, that it involves opening oneself up to other voices and viewpoints—in this case his father's viewpoint—challenges the idea that the manly man is solitary and self-sufficient. Under
the masculinity code, the less one says about oneself and the less one acknowledges not having all the answers the better since to admit that one doesn't know something makes one appear weak and to share information, in a system that celebrates cutthroat competition, creates the possibility that that information might be used against you.

Keeping things that belong together separate—one's own experience separate from the experiences of others, for example, or feelings separate from the hard facts of "what happened"—makes it difficult to arrive at a clearer view of the world and one's place in it. The conceptual gulf between work and home is one more in a long list of such binaries. Ramón, bowing to the societal convention, tries to keep home and work separate but finds that reality won't let him: he has "difficulty separating the two threads . . . that of negocios [business] and that of familia, and in the end the two became impossibly intertwined" (191). Like needing to hold both what happened and how one feels about what happened in mind at the same time in order to contextualize and heal from a trauma, it is also necessary to hold the realms of work and home, which often arrive to us separately, together in one's thinking in order to grasp reality more fully. As Yunior takes a step back in "Negocios" and sees his father's work world in a new way, he also begins to see another story, the story of how the socio-economic set up of society has shaped the contours of his and his family's life.

In tracing Ramón's steps during his first years in the U.S., Yunior sees that what Ramón does to make money is influenced—not all the time, but often—by what he feels he owes to his family. His choices can't be viewed separately from the demands breadwinning places on him, even if sometimes he wishes he could slip the traces and forget about Virta and the kids. It turns out that the family's evaluation of Ramón and what he has been doing during these years is also distorted. In order to stop Yunior from crying, Rafa, in the first story of the novel, tells him, "Do
you think our papi's crying? Do you think that's what he's been doing [in the U.S.] the last six years?" (14). On the surface, the question is simply a way to assert that whatever Ramón is encountering, he is surely acting like a man about it by keeping difficult feelings to himself. But the question beneath Rafa's rhetorical jab at Yunior hangs in the air unanswered: what has Ramón been doing? If he is not crying, perhaps he is doing the opposite. Perhaps he is having a great time in New York without a family to weigh him down.

In "Negocios" we discover there were plenty of times when Ramón felt like crying. One of the most difficult times occurs when Ramón is swindled out of all the money he has saved when the deal to become legal by marrying Flor de Oro goes bad. It took him a year to earn that money working "twenty hour days, seven days a week" cleaning offices and washing dishes (177). Early in the novel we learn that, about two years after he left, Ramón writes to Virta to say he is coming to get her and the kids. The appointed day comes and he never arrives. The effects on the family are profound: Virta has a nervous breakdown and the relationship between her and Yunior changes drastically as she withdraws emotionally. Family members are enraged at Ramón after this incident, believing that he doesn't care about them and furthermore that he can't be trusted. In "Negocios," we discover that this incident occurs around the same time as Ramón suffers the marriage swindle. With the addition of this new bit of information we can see that having failed to obtain citizenship and with all his money gone, Ramón must have felt that he was no longer in a position to bring his family to the States. Ramón makes his family's impression of him quite a bit worse by not explaining what has happened, but his silence is of a piece with Rafa's demand that Yunior stop crying: it is easier for Ramón to have his family angry at him than to admit to them, and perhaps to himself as well, how little control he really has over the world and how hurt and vulnerable he feels as a result.
It is not clear if Yunior makes the connection between Ramón having been swindled and his failing to bring Virta and the kids to New York that same year. If he does, he never says so or does anything to overtly draw our attention to the relationship between the two traumatic events, the one that happens to Ramón when he is swindled, and the one that happens to his family when they are abandoned by Ramón. Like so many of the other themes the novel traces, this incident is presented in a fragmentary way with the key parts appearing in disparate stories. The result is that readers are put in the same predicament that Yunior is in: we have to cobble together our understanding of Drown's fictional world from the bits and pieces we have been given. The process, while challenging, can also put us in a position to think outside the dominant mindset. In the case of this incident, what needs to be breached if we are to step outside the conventional way of seeing things and attain a better understanding of the characters and their environment is the tendency to keep home life and the ups and downs of the socio-economic world in two separate conceptual boxes.

In a similar way the novel is constructed so that we view certain characters first without much empathy and later with a great deal of empathy. This movement towards a more empathic gaze over the course of the novel allows us to better consider the mindsets of the male characters who, by and large, avoid empathizing with each other in order to maintain control over their personal space. Besides Yunior, the two most important male characters are Ysrael and Ramón. For most of the novel these two characters are viewed from the outside, via Yunior's narration. In the final two stories, however, the narration takes us inside these characters' lives and we begin to see things from their point of view. In "No Face" the close third-person narration allows us to empathize with Ysrael, a boy that the majority of the community objectifies and even sees as a monster. In "Negocios," while Yunior is technically the narrator and he sets the scene and
comments occasionally throughout, his voice gives way for most of the story to a close third-
person narration that gives us, for the first time in the novel, a sense of what it is like to be
Ramón. Just as Yúniор overcomes his initial response of anger towards Nilda by becoming
empathetic, so in his willingness to give the narrative reins over to a point of view closely
aligned with Ramón in "Negocios," he puts aside the negative feelings he has towards his father
and allows himself to enter without prejudice into Ramón's world.

It is not an easy thing for Yúniор to exercise the sort of empathy on display in
"Negocios." As Riofrio points out, Yúniор, like so many boys, learns the danger of empathy
early in his life. In the first story of the novel, which takes place when Yúniор is only nine, he
begins to bond with Ysrael immediately upon meeting him. Yúniор is so deeply on Ysrael's
wavelength, in fact, that he can tell when the deformed boy is smiling underneath his mask,
which is why when Rafa smashes a bottle down on Ysrael's head, Yúniор reacts as if it were
happening to him. As Riofrio observes, "The explosion of the bottle, Rafa's awful, cruel
disregard for Ysrael, . . . and the terrible sight of Ysrael's disfigured face serve to inform Yúniор
as to the totalizing and inevitable consequences that empathizing with another brings" (31).
Yúniор's tía has also warned him of the dire consequences: "[I]f we were to look on [Ysrael's]
face," she tells Yúniор, "we would be sad for the rest of our lives," an idea that terrifies Yúniор:
"I had never been sad more than a few hours and the thought of that sensation lasting a lifetime
scared the hell out of me" (9). It is a testament to how far Yúniор has come that he is ready, by
the end of the novel, to brave such feelings in order to empathize with his father. Riofrio points
out, in fact, that Yúniор's ability to empathize in "Negocios" is a hopeful sign that he is not going
to "turn out to be just like his father" who, as a result of his struggles "against both assimilation
and emasculation" has become "incapable of empathy" (34).
These two stories coming at the end of the book, one about a son the other about a father both of whom have been scarred by society's cruel behavior and both of whom wear masks to hide their wounds and what they have been conditioned to think of as their weaknesses, offer an antidote to the male mode of violence and hard-heartedness that has dominated interactions in the novel up to this point. It is not that Ysrael or Ramón have changed. They have not lowered their defenses or taken off their masks. It is that Yunior's and our view of them has changed. As a result of seeing them through an empathetic lens in these last two stories, our thinking about them deepens and we not only begin to see and identify with the vulnerable human beings that lie beneath their hard exteriors but we begin to think about the ways in which we may have been too quick to judge when we first encountered them.

This is particularly true in Ramón's case. It is easy for readers to look under the mask and care about Ysrael who, damaged through no fault of his own, has clearly become the scapegoat for a society that doesn't want to take a look at its own face. It is more difficult to see the ways in which Ramón, with his all his abusiveness, has also become a target for the unacknowledged ills and woes of the larger society. As Yunior imaginatively carries himself inside his father's life, it becomes apparent that the figurative mask that Ramón wears not only tamps down his feelings, but that it also keeps him from understanding his place in the world. In particular, because he is so walled off from others, Ramón blames himself or those close to him for his failures. Yunior, looking closely at his life, can see more, can see, for example, that his father has been set upon and disfigured by the socio-economic system in which he was only ever slated to be a pawn. It is not Ramón's fault to have been born into a society shaped more by the lust for profits than by the needs of people, a society that couldn't protect Ramón and his peers from the ravages of the U.S. economy which, like Ysrael's pig, somehow got into the Dominican
house and was allowed to eat whatever it wanted, even the deliciously soft parts of men's faces. Unable to see how he fits into this larger context, Ramón cannot heal from the trauma these vast economic forces have inflicted upon him, nor does he see a reason to reverse the protective albeit disfiguring measures he has taken to keep himself safe—shutting off his feelings, warily keeping everyone, even family members, at arms' length, and approaching conflict with a mind-numbing combination of aggression and swaggering bravado.

The acts of empathy which are celebrated in the last two stories in *Drown* address what has been wrong throughout the novel in terms of the relationships among people. Everyone is hunkered down thinking about themselves and their needs. The walls that men, in particular, build around themselves in order to keep them safe also keep them from making deeper connections and common cause with others. Compounding the isolation, their anxious, fort-like mentality prevents them from taking the intellectual and emotional risks necessary to step beyond the status quo and think critically about their lives.

In "Fiesta, 1980," twelve-year-old Yunior, angry at his father, has fantasies of publicly exposing his abuses. He writes a school essay entitled "My Father, the Torturer" (30). At the party he waits for the "big blowup" when his mother will accuse his father of being a cheater: "This was how I always figured Papi would be exposed, out in public, where everybody would know" (40). His teacher makes him write a different essay, thinking he is kidding, however, and his mother's big blowup never happens. In "Negocios" Yunior finally does take his father's story public, but tempered by age and perspective it has turned into something altogether different. As John Riofrío observes, in the end Yunior "finally [moves] beyond his anger" to create "a beautiful but also realistic portrait . . . [which] neither heroicizes nor demonizes his abusive father" (35). I would add that, as DeSalvo suggests, Yunior's ability to contextualize
Ramón in this late portrait is partly the result of his having, earlier in the novel, thoroughly expressed and explored the anger and pain he felt towards his father.

In opting for empathy over anger, Yunior steps away from the hard-hearted code his father has lived by. Since the exploitative economic system that helped to create his father's defensive persona is still in force, the question becomes why doesn't Yunior simply follow in his father's footsteps? He doesn't because the socio-economic world that Yunior inherits from Ramón's generation is different in a very significant way from the world Ramón inherited from his parents' generation. Yunior has less to lose by letting down his guard and trying something new than his father did because by the early 1990s when Yunior is coming of age it is crystal clear that the trajectory of working people in the U.S. is steadily downhill. The young men who narrate the center four stories of the novel are illustrative of this fact: they are still afloat but seem to only be able to swim in place. With no foothold in sight they are in imminent danger, as the novel's title suggests, of drowning. While Ramón and his peers did not have stars in their eyes when they immigrated to the States, they believed that they would be able, with hard work and some luck, to better themselves and their families. It was a struggle and not everyone made it, but for the most part a modest rise was achieved. For Yunior's generation, in contrast, the concept of the American Dream no longer seems relevant with real wages stagnant since the early 1970s and the standard of living for all but the richest Americans in decline. The hopelessness expressed by the young men in the center stories of Drown can be seen as a stage in the process of disassociating from a mindset that no longer speaks to their situation. In "Negocios" we get the sense that Yunior is beginning to emerge from this state of depression and disillusionment. Seeking to understand and engage with the past is an optimistic statement not

34 The four stories where this obtains are "Aurora," "Drown," "Boyfriend," and "Edison, New Jersey."
only about the importance of the past, but also about the importance of the present and the future.
In addition, as we have already seen, the way Yunior goes about exploring Ramón's life shows that he is beginning to develop a mode of dealing with the world that is different from his father's. This new mode, because it responds to the changing socio-economic landscape of late 20th century U.S. society, involves a different mindset and set of tactics than the ones Ramón relied upon.

Ramón's alienating hyper-masculine behavior can be seen, in part, as a response to the particular economic crisis that beset his generation. We have seen how both Ramon's and Virta's fathers were broken men, crushed by the lack of autonomy in the work world as a result of the economy's takeover by U.S. interests. For the working-class men of Ramón's generation, their ability to be good providers was stymied first by the harsh economic environment U.S. imperialism imposed on the Dominican Republic and then, forced to immigrate as a direct result of these economic conditions, by the conditions they encountered when they first arrived in the U.S. The inevitable first years of low-wage jobs and poverty that Dominican immigrants in particular faced during this period or, as Ramón puts it, the "slow upward crawl through the mud" men of his generation had to go through, added to their sense of humiliation and emasculation (190-1). With the experience of having their sense of self-respect and manhood, as measured by the ability to be a good provider, torn up, and with the humiliating spectacle of their fathers reduced to a life without dignity or purpose hovering in the background of their consciousness, a compensatory masculinity grew up, covering over the damaged self, parts of which had gone missing. It is this we see in Ramón with his loud voice, his refusal to talk about

35 John Riofrío points out that “in the eyes of mainstream America any 'new' immigrant is expected to play the role of . . . the assimilationist Bootstrap Puerto Rican or the successfully assimilated Cubans who came before him. This expectation is, of course dangerously flawed in that it negates absolutely the material conditions which mark Cuban or Puerto Rican immigration as dramatically different from that of other Latin Americans” (32).
or engage in anything that makes him feel vulnerable, and his ability to care, in only the most superficial of ways, for his children or wife.

The fact that Ramón has doled out such abuse and has proved so difficult to love plays a role in Yunior beginning to develop an alternative mindset, and, in an ironic way, is Ramón's most important legacy to Yunior. In grappling with the pain Ramón inflicts on him and on the rest of the family, a pain that is personal enough to demand a deeply personal response, Yunior finds himself delving into his own psyche and, as a result, developing a new set of skills, chief amongst them the ability to empathize with others. As the magnitude of the trauma he has suffered compels him to look closely at his relationship with his father, recounting both the details of what has happened between them and parsing his feelings about it, he begins to be able to place both his and his father's life in a larger context. The ability to step outside the standard mindset and see how larger socio-economic forces have shaped Yunior's father and his family is an exercise in orientation that offers Yunior and perhaps other young men of his generation a way to read the compass points blazing all round them and chart, if not a way home, then at least a more surefooted way through to land.
CHAPTER FIVE

RABBIT-LIGHT AND THE ROCKETS’ RED GLARE

BREADWINNER DADS AND THE AMERICAN CENTURY
IN JOHN UPDIKE’S RABBIT SERIES

Pop stands whittled by the great American glare, squinting in the manna of blessings that come down from the government, shuffling from side to side in nervous happiness that his day’s work is done, that a beer is inside him, that Armstrong is above him, that the U.S. is the crown and stupefaction of human history. Like a piece of grit in the launching pad, he has done his part.

—Rabbit in Rabbit Redux

And to feel that the light is a rabbit-light
In which everything is meant for you
And nothing need be explained;

Then there is nothing to think of.
—Wallace Stevens "A Rabbit As King of the Ghosts"

The thing that makes an economic system like ours work is to maintain control over people and make them do jobs they hate. To do this, you fill their heads with biblical nonsense about fornication of every variety. Make sure they marry young, make sure they have a wife and children very early. Once a man has a wife and two young children, he will do what you tell him to. He will obey you.

And that is the aim of the entire masculine role.
—Gore Vidal in 1980

My novels are all about the search for useful work. So many people these days have to sell things they don't believe in and have jobs that defy describing.

—John Updike

If society is the prison, families are the cells.
—Nelson in Rabbit Remembered
I: INTRODUCTION

Against Díaz’s compact spareness, John Updike’s Rabbit series of four novels and one novella, which are crammed to overflowing with the details of protagonist Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom's life, offer a stark contrast. Mary O’Connell, author in 1996 of the first book-length feminist study of Updike’s portrayal of gender in the Rabbit novels, notes that “long before [the study of gender] rose to the surface of American popular culture, John Updike had begun work on the longest and most comprehensive representation of masculinity in American literature” (2). Though it has not generally been acknowledged, Updike's Rabbit series also gives us one of the most comprehensive representations of fatherhood in American literature.

Updike’s massive body of work chronicling the life and times of Rabbit Angstrom begins in 1960 with the appearance of *Rabbit, Run*. Three more novels and a novella published at approximately ten-year intervals follow, stretching the story of, in Updike’s words, “a specimen American male’s evolution into grandpaternity” over four decades and through some 1500 pages (*Odd Jobs* 872). Embedded in the Pennsylvanian heartland, where most of the action of the novels takes place, Rabbit rises from his working class roots to enjoy moderate prosperity during the 1970s and 80s. His story offers readers a detailed portrait of white, working and middle-class American fatherhood during the second half of the twentieth century.

Updike zeroes in, as do Junot Díaz in *Drown* and Jane Smiley in *A Thousand Acres*, on the way the conditions of work in the U.S. eat away at men's souls affecting their relationships with their families and especially with their children. Trapped into the role of male breadwinner, what Rabbit feels pressured to do in order to support his wife and children leaves him feeling alienated and rebellious. In essence he is a late twentieth century version of Leslie Fiedler's "man on the run," desperately searching for a way to escape what he experiences as the "daily
doom" of marriage and the stultifying grip of a society that seems to be intent upon robbing him of both his individuality and his zest for life (Rich 228).¹

_Rabbit, Run_ (1960) lays out the central predicament of Harry ("Rabbit") Angstrom: at 26, Rabbit experiences the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood as a noose around his neck. He longs to break free, to find something “more,” but, though he makes several attempts to get away, he is never able to actually do so. Unable to find a better alternative to his life with his wife Janice and his son Nelson, he returns to them but continues to feel ambivalent; one of his feet is always poised just outside the door, ready to take off running again. Over the course of the next three novels while he continues to be torn between his individual desires and the pull of family and society, the world around him changes significantly. He experiences the political upheavals and sexual experimentation of the late 1960s in _Rabbit Redux_ (1971), the energy crisis of the late 1970s which is contrasted to Rabbit’s growing prosperity both at work (he is Chief Sales Representative of Springer Motors, a Toyota agency) and at home—(he purchases a luxurious middle-class home, and becomes a grandfather) in _Rabbit is Rich_ (1981), and, finally, the downside of the American pursuit of happiness as Nelson’s descent into drug addiction causes the family to lose the Toyota franchise and a series of heart attacks, attributable to Rabbit’s over-consumption of junk food, leads to Rabbit’s death in _Rabbit at Rest_ (1990). A novella, _Rabbit Remembered_ (2000), provides further insights into Rabbit and the world he left behind, as, ten years later, Nelson, working out troubles with his own wife and children, introduces Rabbit's thirty-nine-year-old "love child" Annabelle to Janice and the rest of the family.

¹ For more on the idea that the classic protagonist in U.S. novels is "a man on the run" see Leslie Fiedler's _Love and Death in the American Novel_, especially pages 25-6. See also, my discussion of this phenomenon in Chapter Two.
Despite Updike’s thick description of Rabbit’s inner and outer world, what emerges from this set of works is a rather murky portrait of fatherhood, one which raises at least as many questions as it answers. Partly this is so because Updike wrestles, in creating his portrait of the absent/present father, with the same conundrum that Smiley and Díaz have had to contend with: the problem of illuminating the inner life of a character who, due to the pressures of living in an extremely competitive society, is constantly attempting to elude detection. Rabbit feels his external identity, the masculine persona he has cobbled together to help him succeed at work and in the domestic sphere is at odds with his inner self where he envisions a more sensitive or 'authentic' side of himself quietly dwelling. As is the case with Larry in A Thousand Acres and Ramón in Drown, however, it becomes clear over the course of the Rabbit novels that Rabbit's "inner self" has been so tampered with and, in many cases, so tamped down or repressed, that it is extremely difficult to ascertain where his outer self leaves off and his inner self begins or if, indeed, there even is an inner self.

The narrators in Smiley and Díaz's works, both grown children, stand outside the father, piecing together his story from their own observations and from the clues that other characters are able to supply. The portraits that Ginny and Yunior create out of these scraps are frustratingly incomplete, largely because access to each father's voice is blocked off but also because the truth these two narrators seek is shaped by their own purpose: they seek information about the father and his legacy because their own lives, each at something of a crossroads, need direction. Because there is a high degree of self-consciousness on both Ginny and Yunior's part about the need to sort through their own biases and misperceptions as they strive to create a more accurate picture of their fathers, both narrators engage in self-conscious discussions with the reader about the process by which they have come to know what they do know about the father. In the end
readers have a fairly clear map of both what is known and what is not known or is, perhaps, still to be discovered. Part of the resolution of each narrator's quest to understand the father, in fact, involves accepting that there is much about the father which they may never know or understand.

In the Rabbit series the question of what can and can't be known about the absent/present father takes a quite different turn, largely because the narrator is the father himself. As Marianne Hirsch points out, it is extremely rare in nineteenth and twentieth-century European and American fictional texts for either mothers or fathers to narrate their own lives; instead, the parent's story is almost always told from the son's or daughter's perspective (12). Against this narrative tradition, Updike's decision to have the absent/present father tell his own story stands out as a bold, even revolutionary, choice.

The portrait of Rabbit that emerges is far more extensive in scope than the fathers depicted in either Smiley or Díaz's work and at the same time is, paradoxically, far less distinct; there are many gray areas to the canvas and it is often difficult to know if one is actually looking at a portrait of Rabbit or of something else altogether. The question of how insightful a perspective Rabbit can offer on himself and on the phenomenon of the absent/present father is further complicated by the fact that the narration Updike uses is not exactly direct; instead of using the first person, Updike tells Rabbit's tale through a close third person narration. The use of a narrative voice which is simultaneously Rabbit's and not Rabbit's adds to the general murkiness as it is difficult to tell where or from whom ideas and feelings are originating. This gives the effect, among other things, that society and the individual are so completely interwoven as to be indistinguishable. Updike's literary aesthetic adds to this sense: viewing a liminal relationship between author and text as a positive good partly because it encourages a more

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2 For more on the relative paucity of mother or father narrations of family life, see my discussion in Chapter One.
active interaction between the reader and the text, Updike has said, "There is a certain necessary ambiguity. I don’t wish my fiction to be any clearer than life" ("Desperate Weakling" 108).

Updike's lack of emphasis on the role that socially-constructed categories of identity play in the thought patterns and experiences of his most famous character adds another layer of complexity to his portrait of the absent/present father. Though Rabbit is clearly rooted in a specific race, gender, sexuality and economic stratum, Updike tends to make universalizing claims for his work, calling Rabbit an “angst-ridden Everyman” and asserting that “the Rabbit in us all remains both wild and timid, harmful and loving, hardhearted and open to the motions of Grace” (Hugging the Shore, 850-51, emphasis added). This tendency on Updike's part can also be discerned in Rabbit who views himself and the other characters through a lens of white middle-classness without seeming to be aware of how this lens distorts his understanding.

Updike's skill as a realist writer means that Rabbit's world—including especially its material and psychological/interpersonal dimensions—is rendered with breath-taking precision. At first glance the books offer an easy read: what is being described through the narration of Rabbit's rather ordinary life is the dominant culture and mindset in which most of us in the U.S., even if we are not white, male, or middle-class, have been thoroughly steeped. But beneath this "easy" reading of events and circumstances, a deeper, more critical look at Rabbit's life and times is layered, one that comes into view when we slow our reading down and pay close attention to the cache of observations and insights the texts contain. In this chapter I dig down to get as deep and rich a look as I can at Updike's portrait of the absent/present father. In Part II I analyze the way that the father's tale is told, including how it is that a narrative style which seems to glance away from what it is discovering at every turn nevertheless results in quite deep revelations. In
Part III I explore how these texts understand the relationship between Rabbit's absent/present fatherhood and the capitalist world in which he is embedded.

II: INTO THE RABBIT WARREN: "YES, BUT"
AND THE ART OF TELLING THE FATHER'S STORY

Despite Updike’s thickly-detailed description of his main character's inner and outer world, what emerges from the Rabbit novels, at first glance at least, is a rather blurry portrait of Rabbit. Updike chooses to tell the story of this father and husband who always has one foot out the door by inhabiting his consciousness, a choice which allows us a ring-side seat to the way Rabbit thinks about and processes his life. We experience firsthand how his mind skitters over the surface of a thousand different points, unable to stop and dig down deeper into any one experience, thought or feeling. We are privy to his continual attempts to gain a perspective on himself and his society and watch as whatever insights Rabbit does manage to attain are washed away again a few paragraphs later, seemingly forgotten as the flow of existence carries him off into a new set of experiences. Confined to the warren of Rabbit's mind, readers experience along with him the sensation of being swept along in a flood of fast-moving but shallow water. Along the way the amount of undifferentiated details to which we are subjected creates a confused and even, at times, a hypnotic state of mind which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to step beyond Rabbit's world view and analyze what creates or fuels him.

Written in the present tense, the books offer no reflective vantage point from which to view and sum up the action and history presented, no still point from which to assess the turning world. Instead, events flow on ceaselessly, one thing melding into or giving way to another. There is no way to stop the action or slow it down. Nothing, even the most tragic of events, such
as the drowning death of Rabbit’s infant daughter Rebecca, stands in center stage for long: instead, each occurrence seems to get pushed aside by the news that is coming after.

As the details of contemporary life pile up on every page, Rabbit has enormous difficulty making intellectual and emotional sense of the world avalanching past him. This confusion is one of Updike’s major themes. Rabbit spends a good deal of time nervously assessing the past, which is always intruding into his sense of the present, but, despite his efforts, Rabbit is able to make only tenuous connections between past and present or, for that matter, between cause and effect. He is likewise unable to go beneath the surface appearance of things to discover their deeper significance, though he frequently seems to sense that there is a deeper significance that he is somehow unable to access. This perception causes him to feel frustrated and anxious. Though neither Rabbit nor the narrator make this connection, we can infer that Rabbit’s inability to make these kinds of internal mental connections is linked to his inability to make a permanent and settled connection to either his family or community. That is, unable to put down mental roots, he is also unable to shed his liminal relationship to the physical world.

Updike’s use of the present tense in the Rabbit novels adds to the feeling that his main character is stranded in an eternal present, where, without the triangulation that a sense of history provides, it is difficult to get one’s bearings.\(^3\) Rabbit continually tries to orient himself and sometimes, in rare, receptive moments, he is able to push the present moment to the back of his consciousness and envision himself and his surroundings in a different way. After an angioplasty procedure, for example, he lies in his hospital bed in his hometown of Brewer staring out the

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\(^3\) This effect would have been most pronounced for readers who read the early novels as they came out, since Updike’s use of the present tense for a third person narration was considered revolutionary in 1960. “A Rabbit novel has certain traits,” he explains. “For one, the present tense, taken up when it was a daring novelty and sustained into this present period [1990] when it has become a cliché. It is a delightfully apprehensive tense, quick on the pickup and easy to ride between external event and inner reflection” (Odd Jobs 870).
window at the brickwork high up on the buildings across the street and finds himself wondering about

those dead bricklayers who bothered to vary their rows...with such festive patterns...these men of another century....He tries to view his life as a brick of sorts, set in place with a slap in 1933 and hardening ever since, just one life in rows and walls and blocks of lives. There is a satisfaction in such an overview, a faint far-off communal thrill, but hard to sustain over against his original and continuing impression that Brewer and all the world beyond are just frills on himself, like the lace around a plump satin valentine, himself the heart of the universe. (Rest 243)

Rabbit’s vision of himself as something other than “the heart of the universe” cannot be sustained for long. And even when he does see himself as part of a larger whole, it seems “faint” and “far-off.” There seems to be no middle ground, no compromise perspective in this vertiginous landscape. Rather there are two poles: the emotionally muted, alienated perspective of the overview and the feel-good, myopic perspective of the self-centered.

Through Janice’s eyes, Rabbit floats through life unfettered, but in the negative sense of the word; she sees him moving along in a vacuum without help or a sense of belonging. Though she shares some of these rudderless feelings, she also sees herself as being more grounded than Rabbit: “Though all four of their parents were alive when they courted...she and Harry were orphans really, he more than she even. He saw something in her that would hold him fast for a while” (Rest 424).

In using a third person narrator who is so tightly fused to Rabbit’s own viewpoint, Updike gives us a window into Rabbit’s mind and especially into this question of things and people only being able to hold onto Rabbit “for a while.” 4 Through this narration readers are

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4 Though the narration is in general from Rabbit’s point of view, there are a few times when the point of view shifts briefly to Janice or to Nelson. Most notably, we are inside Janice’s head during the afternoon when she accidentally drowns her infant daughter in Rabbit, Run as well as in Rabbit at Rest during the final scene when Rabbit is lying in the hospital. In Rabbit is Rich, we are given Nelson’s perspective on several key occasions, including the night when he and Pru, who is seven months pregnant, go to a party and she ends up falling down a flight of stairs. The novella
exposed to—indeed, almost trapped in—Rabbit’s consciousness. Like one suffering from
attention deficit disorder, he skips from subject to subject, never staying in one spot long enough
to deepen his, or our, understanding. There is a movie-like, visual quality to the effluence of
prose which Updike produces as he replicates Rabbit’s camera mind, roving through a scene,
enumerating observations and details but offering very little in the way of interpretation.

It is interesting, in this vein, to reflect upon the fact that Updike initially conceived of the
first novel in the series as a movie:

*Rabbit, Run* was to be subtitled “A Movie.” The cinematic art knows no tense but
the present. I even had an introduction, discarded, leading the reader down the
aisle to his seat. The opening scene, of the boys playing basketball around a
telephone pole, was meant to be the background for the title and credits…. The
film medium, a superb mirror of the visible furniture of our lives, cannot show the
shadow of moral ambiguity. Without this impalpable novelistic substance, this
unspoken but constant discussion between reader and author, the actions make
insufficient sense.” *(Hugging the Shore 850)*

Despite Updike's assertion that, in contrast to film, novels contain a "discussion between
reader and author" which helps the action "make sense," passages in the Rabbit series can leave
us feeling that we are still in movie mode since, despite the great pile-up of language, very little
"sense" seems to get communicated. During the wind-up to a session of love-making between
middle-aged Rabbit and his wife Janice, for example, a page-long paragraph begins with a
thumbnail description of Rabbit’s sexual history with Janice—how she tends to want to make
love when she and her mother have had a fight, how it was hard to get her to “put out” in the
early days of marriage, how now, after an affair with his best friend Charlie, she is more sexually
loose and has also become more interested in sex than he. About a third of the way into the
paragraph the prose arrives at the present moment as Rabbit starts to think about his feelings and

*Rabbit Remembered*, which takes place ten years after Rabbit’s death, is mostly from Nelson's perspective although
Janice's point of view is also given several times.
thoughts about sex as he lies in bed waiting for Janice to finish up in the bathroom. He first makes a passing connection between his sexuality and the political world: “Somewhere early in the Carter administration his interest…began to wobble and by now there is a real crisis of confidence. [Rabbit] blames it on money, on having enough at last, which has made him satisfied all over.” These thoughts lead to what he does with his money which leads to thoughts about the country club he and Janice have joined all of which thinking culminates in a philosophical statement about one of the things associated with the club, the game of golf: “It is like life itself in that its performance cannot be forced and its underlying principle shies from being permanently named” (Rich 44-45).

Rabbit (or the narrator) might be talking about life in general, or the wavering feelings Rabbit is having about being “forced” into making love with Janice when he is not really into it, but instead of connecting this thought to the previous ones about money and politics and the elusive nature of desire, the paragraph plunges on to the kinds of things Rabbit tells himself while playing golf—“Shift the weight. Or Don’t chicken-wing it . . .”—after which the narrative moves to a consideration of whether “it’s all in the hands” or perhaps in the shoulders or the knees, which leads to a comparison between golf, which entails so much thinking, and basketball which is instinctual as is—Rabbit’s next thought rambles on—walking. The paragraph concludes with a sentence that superficially, at least, ties together golf, desire, thinking, and his flagging interest in sex: “Yet a good straight drive or a soft chip stiff to the pin gives him the bliss that used to come thinking of women, imagining if only you and she were alone on some island” (Rich 44-5).

In the paragraph just described, each thought or observation holds the promise of some interesting further discovery, but we never seem to get there. There is certainly a theme—
growing old and the diminishing of sexual desire—but that theme is circled around rather than explored head on. Rabbit’s mind, distracted by the myriad of associations that each thought sets off, simply moves on, getting pulled into a new eddy of thought, spinning out of that thought into another associative eddy, back out again, and on and on.

This is not to say that Rabbit’s thinking pattern is totally random. Rather, there is a recursive quality to it as he turns again and again to ponder the same events, images, and themes. Perhaps he goes over the same ground again because he is continuing to try to understand it, but it is just as likely that because he is an associative thinker, whatever he is thinking about simply triggers a set stock of themes and associations already lodged in his brain.

The fact that images and ideas recur with frequency gives Rabbit the feeling that he is embedded in a landscape of meaningful connections; it is a sensation that we, as readers eager to interpret his world, also share. But if deeper meanings exist amongst the great connected loops of information that Updike proffers, nothing in the texts points overtly to them. As readers, we are set adrift along with the characters in a world that can’t quite be interpreted, whose rhythms and messages can be felt but not quite parsed.

Take, for example, the case of the image of a Japanese beetle, which appears twice in *Rabbit is Rich*. In his backyard garden on the afternoon before the love-making scene with Janice, Rabbit is thinking about his son Nelson who, he has just learned, has lost his summer job and is going to be returning home with a woman no one in the family has heard about before this afternoon. Feeling numb and shutdown, Rabbit “looks into his heart for a welcome, welcoming love for his son. He finds instead a rumple of apprehensiveness.” Nelson seems unreal to him and, thinking of his “own numb life,” he realizes that “each day he is a little less afraid to die.
He spots a Japanese beetle on a bean plant leaf and with a snap of his fingernail—big fingernails, with conspicuous cuticle moons—snaps the iridescent creature off. Die" (Rich 43).

Later, in bed with Janice, he thinks again of the beetle. Feeling “invaded” and objectified by her “blank unfriendly wanting,” Rabbit has taken a while to achieve an erection (46). By the time he does, Janice has fallen asleep. ‘‘Jan?’ he whispers. 'You awake?’ He is not displeased to be thus stranded, another consciousness in bed is a responsibility, a snag in the flow of his thoughts. . . . He decides to fuck her, the stiffness in his cock is killing him. His hard-on was her idea anyway. The Japanese beetle he flicked away comes into his mind as a model of delicacy" (Rich 50).

What does the beetle mean to Rabbit? Why does he call it “a model of delicacy?”

Perhaps killing the beetle in the garden made him feel powerful and in-control at a time when he felt insignificant and out of touch with others and himself. Perhaps it is a gesture of distain towards his son, his wife, and, even, his own life—each of which he sometimes seems to want to snap off as quickly and ruthlessly as he does the beetle. Perhaps crushing the beetle signifies a loosening of the inhibitions which tell him what he “should” feel (love towards his son, excited by his wife’s consciousness) as opposed to what he does feel (apprehension, numbness, the burdensome responsibility of another consciousness). The beetle may even point to the way Rabbit himself is under the thumb of the Japanese Toyota Corporation which informs so much of Rabbit’s work life and which, in the final novel, Rabbit at Rest, will summarily withdraw the Toyota franchise from Springer Motors after fiscal irregularities are discovered.

The beetle may represent all of these things or none of them; its meaning is slippery, indeterminate. We can form hypotheses and it is, in fact, enjoyable to do so, but it is always a speculative endeavor: it is difficult to say whether any of our theories converge upon Updike’s or
Rabbit’s or the narrator’s understanding of things. Just as in Díaz’s *Drown* where readers must step in to draw their own connections amongst the sparse details and lacunae, Updike’s Rabbit novels ask us to intervene mentally and construct some sort of analytical grid to manage and make sense of the great crush of material pouring past. But while in each work readers are invited to connect the dots or fill in the parts of the story that the author has left open to interpretation, there is an important difference: in Díaz's work a fairly clear narrative, once the reader does the work of assembling the pieces, is able to emerge; in contrast, in Updike's Rabbit novels what is happening and why is coated in so many layers of ambiguity that a clear view seems practically impossible.

What is clear, in the above scene, is that Rabbit enjoys thinking his own thoughts and doesn't easily welcome other consciousnesses in. Drawn by the narrative perspective into Rabbit's world, readers can find a similar kind of enjoyment as, carried along by Updike's seductive language, our minds are asked to ramble in an undisciplined fashion amongst Rabbit's creative associations and unfixed meanings. Instead of attempting to deepen an idea the next time it comes around, we can indulge alongside Rabbit in a kind of mindless pleasure at the appearance of something familiar, something already “owned.” This pleasure of recognition gives us, just as it seems to give Rabbit, a sense of security; reaching back nostalgically to the last time we encountered the idea, we get the misleading feeling that we know where we are.

Updike’s abundant use of contemporary allusions adds to our enjoyment, comfort, and ease of engagement as we move through the Rabbit texts. Peppered with large historical events such as the Iranian hostage crisis (*Rabbit is Rich*) or the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland (*Rabbit at Rest*), and with scraps of social history—popular songs, movies, the brand names of products, snatches from advertising jingles, extensive descriptions of
furniture, clothing, or the latest dance moves—Updike’s novels seem designed to trigger powerful personal associations in readers. Even if we are reading the novels long after the contemporary events they describe have occurred, most of us remember where we were and what people around us were saying when Armstrong first walked on the moon, for example, an event that informs Rabbit Redux. Bringing our individual associations to these texts, we enliven the reading and give them, a deeper, more meaningful feel. Indeed, Updike believes that such a process defines reading: “Words have a merciful vagueness wherein readers can—nay must—use their imaginations. . . . Written images perforce draw upon imagery our memory has stored; no one reads the same book, and each reader is drawn into an individual exchange with the author’s voice. A seductive relationship is in progress” (Odd Jobs 35-6).

Updike, writing in the introduction to the Everyman Library edition of the Rabbit tetralogy, explains that Rabbit has served for Updike as “a way in—a ticket to the America all around me” (qtd. in Broer 2). Elsewhere Updike has said that “my fiction about the daily doings of ordinary people has more history in it than history books” (qtd in Greiner 14) and that “America—its news items, its popular entertainment, its economic emanations—is always a character in the Angstrom tetralogy as well” (Odd Jobs 870-71).

Under the sensuous spell of Updike’s language, the demarcation line between the historical perceptions put forth by Updike and by his characters and our own sense of that same history softens and blurs. This dissolution of the boundary line between text and reader is hinted at in Rabbit Redux where newspaper items that Rabbit, as a linotype worker, sets, begin to make their way onto the pages of the novel, printed in their original newsprint typeface. Simultaneously Rabbit begins to fantasize fearfully that his own life will begin appearing in the newspaper.
The novels themselves are a study in the blurry intermingling of the private and the public; it is often difficult for readers and characters alike to determine where one realm ends and the other begins. In *Rabbit Redux*, for example, Janice, reflecting the tenor of the late 1960s and the burgeoning women's movement, seeks to become more independent. She begins to work at her father’s car agency and enters into an affair with Charlie, a fellow worker. Eventually she moves out of the house to live with him. While she is gone, a flower child named Jill and a Black revolutionary named Skeeter move in and undertake, each in a different way, to politically re-educate Rabbit and Nelson (who is now thirteen). To borrow a phrase then current in feminist circles, one which was probably not far from Updike’s mind as he plotted this novel in the late 1960s, the personal has become political. Threaded throughout the novel also run the events of the public world: it is the summer of 1969 and men are landing on the moon. The television brings their garbled voices to Rabbit as he keeps his ailing mother company. Each time he drives through downtown Brewer, Pennsylvania (the fictional setting for Updike’s tetralogy) the text makes a note of what movies are playing at the theater. In the next novel in the series, *Rabbit is Rich*, the economic theme of “running out of gas” and of energy consumption in general dovetails with Rabbit’s private recognition that he has entered middle age and is slowing down. At novel’s end, as Rabbit holds his new granddaughter on his lap and thinks of her as “fortune’s hostage,” the Iranian hostage crisis, which has threaded its way through the work, merges with another theme of the novel—the average American’s self-involved and wasteful lifestyle and what it will mean for the generations coming after Rabbit. But the reference also holds a personal meaning: this grandchild will inherit (or be hostage to) all that Rabbit has managed to pass on to his son Nelson, the negative as well as the positive (*Rich* 437).  

5 The fact that Nelson ran off just before Pru gave birth and hasn't returned home to see his infant daughter yet raises the suspicion that one of the things he has inherited from Rabbit is the tendency to be an absent/present father.
The novels blend the personal and the political, the micro and the macro, but they also lurch between the two realms in the same skittery way that Rabbit’s consciousness lurches from topic to topic. During a party at a private house, for example, Rabbit goes upstairs to use a bathroom and finds that every light in it is lit. “What a waste of energy,” he thinks. “Going down with all her lights blazing the great ship America.” This value-laden coupling of the domestic (a bathroom) and the political (the global resources crisis) is almost comically canceled out by Rabbit’s neutral cataloging of domestic trivia in the next sentence: “This bathroom is smaller than the one downstairs, and of a deeper tint, wall tiles and wallpaper and shag carpeting and towels and tinted porcelain all brown, with touches of tangerine.” Rabbit doesn’t seem to see how his own mind, filled with the consumerist mentality that this attention to the decor of the bathroom reveals, is addicted to the waste he simultaneously deplores. What happens next confirms this addiction, though, again, it is not clear that Rabbit himself has the ability to see the irony in his own thought processes. “Rabbit undoes his fly and in a stream of bliss fills one of this room’s bright bowls with gold. His bubbles multiply like coins.” This set of images, which point toward a fusion of toilet and bank, leads the narrative back to the interface between the political and the personal and Rabbit begins to think about the South African gold Krugerrands that he and his wife have recently bought as an investment (Rich 281).

Just as Rabbit forms an absent presence in his family, hovering around its edges but never really settling into it, the macro world of economics and politics occupies a kind of absent presence in the text as a whole. Big ideas are present, but because they generally function as associative springboards rather than as platforms for deeper exploration or synthesis, they are simultaneously absent.
In some cases, important information needed to complete the idea is missing. The significance of Rabbit’s buying of the Krugerrands in 1979, for example, is that by then the international movement against South Africa’s racist system of apartheid, was several years into a highly publicized campaign of divestment. Individuals, corporations, schools, and governments were all participating and a particular focus of the campaign was the boycott of Krugerrands. But this boycott is never mentioned in *Rabbit is Rich*; it is information that must be completed by the reader outside the text or not at all. As Rabbit and Janice become rich enough, partly through their investment in Krugerrands, to buy a house and climb ever higher into the middle class, a companion image will emerge in some readers’ minds: the immiseration of Black families in South Africa as male workers, uprooted from the land and separated from their families, are brought by the trainload to live in barracks and labor in the gold mines.

The jumbled way life presents itself to Rabbit dulls his consciousness and keeps him from making these sorts of connections. Though he actually occupies a rather privileged position in both the global and the national order, Rabbit’s inability to contextualize his life leads him to feel persecuted and out of control. The sense of being mastered as opposed to being the master, of being an object as opposed to being a subject, gives Rabbit both the angst and the feeling of being small and insignificant that his surname—Angstrom—implies.⁶

In fact, as Rabbit sees it, his story is one of constant rebellion as he tries to assert himself and assume control over his surroundings. In a foreshadowing of what will reoccur throughout his life, he flails out against the trap of domesticity and adult responsibility in *Rabbit, Run*, jumping in his car and heading south, away from pregnant Janice, two-year-old Nelson, and his meaningless job selling a kitchen gadget called the MagiPeel. When his wife’s family minister, Reverend Eccles, asks why he fled he explains, “It just felt like the whole business was fetching

⁶ In physics an angstrom is a measurement of the smallest magnitude.
and hauling, all the time trying to hold this mess together she was making all the time. I don’t know, it seemed like I was glued in with a lot of busted toys and empty glasses and television going and meals late and no way to getting out. Then all of a sudden it hit me how easy it was to get out, just walk out, and by damn it was easy” (Run 89).

But though he places himself “on the road,” Rabbit does not find the path cut by Neal Cassady and the other rebels of the beat generation. Indeed, their voices, like those of the anti-apartheid activists of the 1970s, do not make it into the Rabbit texts. Instead, Rabbit experiences himself as being caught in a net from which there is no exit. He makes it as far as West Virginia before he runs out of vision and, giving up the quest for an alternative, turns his car around and heads home. He will run again and again from Janice and Nelson and the domestic/work responsibilities that come with fatherhood and married life—leaving his family physically twice more in the first novel and absenting himself emotionally in the novels that follow—but in none of his attempts to escape will he ever scale the walls that surround his world and achieve a perspective on what lies beyond.

The overall narrative structure first of Rabbit, Run and then of the novels as a whole replicates the stalled out, recursive nature of Rabbit’s thinking structure. We have what seems to be a linear plot, a steady trajectory of life from one event to the next. On the largest scale it is a trajectory from youth to old age. Still, very little changes for Rabbit over the span of his life. There are small moments of insight, but those moments are swallowed up and forgotten in the rush of all the other material coursing by. He continues to feel trapped, confused, caught up in something not of his own making, and slightly dissatisfied without being able to put his finger on why or what. He remains wrapped up in the surface description of his life and of his problems,
unable to settle down and experience things on a deeper level or from a significantly different
vantage point.

Rabbit cannot disentangle himself enough to find a still point from which to view the
turning world because, as he tells Rev. Eccles, he is “glued in with a lot of busted toys and empty
glasses and television going” (Run 89, emphasis added). He locates himself neither in the
foreground, nor in the background, but on a par with all the things and events which surround
him. Rabbit’s inability to assign himself a distinct value is paralleled in the style of Updike’s
prose which seems to dwell with equal linguistic energy on everything, whether it be trivial or
monumental.

In the bathroom scene quoted earlier, we observed Updike alternating between large,
serious subjects like the environment or the world economy and domestic, everyday and, even,
trivial subjects. These phrase by phrase juxtapositions create the impression that everything is
simultaneously saturated with meaning and drained of it, that meaning has been flattened out and
"glued in with a lot of busted toys." Is urine, for example, elevated to precious gold as Rabbit
stands peeing into the toilet/bank or is the capitalist economic system which informs his world
reduced to the level of sewer waste? Further, if the color gold is so important in the passage,
then is the fact that the bathroom is mostly brown with a few “touches of tangerine” significant
as well? What in the passage is important? What merely a momentary distraction?

On the one hand, by placing everything together on a seeming par, Updike forces us to
work alongside Rabbit, prioritizing the material and forming judgments. Updike’s prose can help
us question our assumptions and prompt us to make creative, new connections. As readers, we
can see and begin to make connections between gold and global waste and global poverty, for
example, even if Rabbit cannot, and even if Updike does no more than mention the word “Krugerrand.”

On the other hand, the lulling, addictive quality of Updike’s language, with its endless fingering of objects and ideas, can put us to sleep just as it approximates the sleepy middle-class world of comfort and property that makes up so much of Rabbit’s life and aspirations. And, as Nelson notices, the pile-up of details, particularly those that are infused with a consumerist mentality, can cause us to lose sight of the bigger picture: “When [Nelson] was little he had loved December because it had Christmas in it toward the end and he was so excited by all the things there were to get in the world that he never noticed how the dark and cold closed in, tighter and tighter” (Rich 339).

Rabbit occupies a liminal position in his family, always positioning himself on the edge in order to keep his options open, but because family is not isolated from the rest of society, Rabbit’s relationship to society is also one of liminality. He complains of being trapped or glued in, but the very fact that he has these complaints indicates that he is able to dissociate himself somewhat from the way things are. He cannot escape to an alternative world, nor, indeed, even envision very clearly what one would look like, but he nevertheless holds himself back from total immersion in the world in which he finds himself. Rain becomes a metaphor for the psychological limbo in which Rabbit positions himself: “Rabbit has always loved that feeling, of being inside when it rains. Shingles in the attic, pieces of glass no thicker than cardboard keeping him dry. Things that touch and yet not” (Rich 108). Like his relationship to the rain, his consciousness inhabits a borderland space where he can simultaneously perceive and not perceive his society.
By holding himself back, there is much that Rabbit doesn’t know or understand about the world around him, but, paradoxically, his alienation also yields insights that many of the other people in his circle lack. Thus he offers critiques on his conventional surroundings, generally in caustic or ironic outbursts. His remarks are often greeted with annoyed protestation by other characters.

The scene in *Rabbit is Rich* where the family gathers around Pru’s hospital bed on a Sunday morning is a good example. Nelson and Pru had gone to a party the night before and Pru, who is seven months pregnant, has broken her arm falling down a flight of stairs. In the preceding scene Updike described the party from a point of view tightly fused to Nelson’s so we know a number of things about it and about Pru’s fall that her other hospital visitors—Rabbit, Janice and Ma Springer (Janice’s mother)—don’t. We know, for instance, that Nelson, ostensibly afraid for the baby’s welfare, had argued with Pru at the party, criticizing her for her over-consumption of pot and alcohol and for wearing a pair of impossibly rickety platform shoes. When they leave the party, Pru is extremely tipsy and when she clumsily bumps Nelson as she impatiently pushes past him, he pushes her back in a fit of irritation. His shove causes her to twist her ankle and begin her fall down the stairs.

The Pru we encounter in the hospital has gone through quite a transformation. In place of the partying “vampire” we encountered in the last scene whose voice was like “a dead level engine that won’t stop” (*Rich* 312), she now appears “virginal,” her “words come out as if sung” and she speaks “with an authority they haven’t seen from her before” (*Rich* 318-19). “I’m glad for [the broken bone]” she intones, “I deserve to be punished somehow…it’s God telling me this is the price he asks for my not losing the baby. I’m glad to pay it. . . . [W]hen . . . I knew there wasn’t anything for me to do but fall down those horrible stairs, the thoughts that ran through my
head!” She looks directly at Janice, who years before in a drunken stupor drowned her infant baby in the bath, and concludes with the words “You must know.” With a "yelp" Janice falls upon Pru and begins to sob (Rich 319-320).

The narrative point of view for this scene has moved back close to Rabbit’s perspective and the language used reflects his suspicion that Pru is using the accident to jockey for position in the family. As Janice weeps, Pru smiles “her crooked careful smile” and keeps “her eyelids with their traces of last night’s blue [makeup] closed serenely.” Her uninjured hand “sneaks around to pat Janice’s back” (Rich 319-20, emphasis added). And when Rabbit insinuates that Pru might have fallen because she was intoxicated, Pru vehemently denies it: “Oh no,” she says, looking “like she is falling through white space, singing. ‘I’d hardly had anything, the doctors all say you shouldn’t, it was those terrible tall platforms they’re making us all wear’” (Rich 321).

After they leave the hospital room, Janice asks the others “Didn’t Teresa seem sweet? It seemed like she’d grown up overnight.” Rabbit responds sarcastically, “Yeah . . . and if she’d fallen down all two flights she’d be older than we are.” His deconstruction of the hospital scene causes Nelson to explode:  “Jesus, Dad . . . Who do you like?” To which Rabbit replies evasively, “I like everybody . . . I just don’t like getting boxed in” (Rich 323-24).

Rabbit’s ironic observations often work as in the above example to interrupt the surface narrative of happy people with happy problems. His liminal stance gives him an ability to see things with a double vision—as both insider and outsider. Since he feels most comfortable when there is some distance between himself and others, he is willing to play the part of a bull in the china shop of family niceties, breaking the surface calm to expose tensions and contradictions. His blunt or ironic observations serve to reinforce his outsider/liminal status as they cause other members of the family to draw away from him in irritation or disgust.
Rabbit’s observations, however, are not all that earthshaking. He does not offer a sustained, thorough-going critique of society, for example, or use his words to open up a serious discussion. Rather, he strikes a glancing blow and then, as in the interaction above between him and Nelson, retreats into vague generalizations that often color him as a victim.

That Rabbit ducks responsibility for his words and actions is not surprising: he is embedded in a society where eschewing responsibility and connection seems to be the norm. The hospital scene, for example, is an extended meditation on guilt and responsibility. Underlying all the casual conversation looms a worried question: who is responsible for what has happened to Pru and what has nearly happened to the fetus? Nelson feels guilty about the awful things he said about Pru and the baby during their argument at the party. Rabbit blames Nelson for not catching hold of Pru and preventing her fall and also for taking her to the party in the first place. He blames Pru for being high. Pru blames the omnipresent fashion police, the “they” who “made” her wear her platform shoes. Nelson blames Rabbit and Janice for being unavailable to help after the accident because they were out late partying with their friends. A related question making the rounds is who is responsible for saving the baby? Is it Pru who does by sacrificing her arm in order to break the fall? Is it God who makes a deal with Pru? Is it Nelson who, Pru reports glowingly, “was wonderful [last night]. . . . So caring” (Rich 318)? And who is responsible for Janice’s drowning of her baby? “[T]he official family version is that the baby’s dying at Janice’s hands was all [Rabbit’s] fault. Yet now [as Janice lies sobbing on Pru’s chest] the truth seems declared that he was just a bystander” (Rich 320).

Like a game of hot potato, notions of blame and responsibility change hands and pass around the family circle. Just as we have seen Rabbit’s thoughts skittering from one topic to the next, the five family members keep changing conversational topics, ensuring that there is no
thorough exploration of any topic. Throughout the sturm und drang about the possible loss of
Pru’s baby and the real loss of Janice’s, Ma Springer, like a minor character in the opera,
reinforces the theme by wondering aloud about whether to go to a church meeting where she
might be made head of a committee: she doesn’t want to take on that kind of responsibility. In
the end, no character takes responsibility for their actions.

As can be seen from the round robin of guilt and finger pointing that goes on in the
hospital, these characters believe that human beings have agency, that people bear at least some
responsibility for their actions. But while characters feel able to assign agency or responsibility
to others, they generally leave an honest accounting of themselves out of the equation. They
know they are involved, but the scope and degree of involvement is swept aside, leaving plenty
of room for characters to invent more flattering versions of their actions. Pru’s refashioning of
the story of her broken arm into a tale in which she plays the part of a redeemed angel is an
example. Another tactic is to simply be silent about one’s role in things. This is essentially what
Rabbit does shortly after leaving the hospital. In the midst of a fight with Nelson he begins
thinking

furiously . . . of poor Pru lying there with a sniveling baby burying his head in her
side instead of a husband, of Melanie slaving away at the Crepe House for all
those creeps from the banks that lunch downtown . . . of Mom plunging her old
arms in gray suds and crying the kitchen blues until Parkinson’s [Disease] at last
took mercy and got her upstairs for a rest, of all the women put upon and wasted
in the world as far as he can see so little punks like [Nelson] can come along.

(Rich 325)

Conspicuously absent from this list of women oppressed by the men in their lives (there are three
other examples in the text that I’ve deleted here) is Rabbit’s own wife Janice, who, as we have
seen, has plenty of reasons for feeling “put upon and wasted” by her husband.
Updike’s use of a tightly-fused third person narrator means that Rabbit can neither speak with the authority of his own voice nor be viewed clearly from the outside by an authoritative narrator. Instead the narration of the Rabbit novels straddles worlds, occupying a liminal perspective itself as it broadcasts half from somewhere inside Rabbit’s head and half from somewhere outside it. It is a perspective which reproduces in readers the feelings of confusion and alienation that permeates Rabbit's experience of the world because it makes it difficult for us to clearly access Rabbit’s consciousness. It is not easy to tell who is speaking in a passage, and, in particular, which words or insights belong to Rabbit, and which to the narrator. It is not clear in the above episode, for example, if Rabbit really doesn’t see his part in the oppression of women, or if he is silent about his own actions and attitudes because, in the heat of arguing with his son, he is mainly trying to bolster himself as a way of tearing Nelson down. The novel's narrative style allows Updike to duck this question; instead, the activity of evaluating and judging Rabbit’s actions and motivations shifts to the reader.

Updike’s narrative style reflects a larger truth about his main character: Rabbit is so intertwined with his environment, so pinned down with a narrative that is not quite of his own making, that he cannot grab hold of a separate, independent voice. He cannot act in an independent manner because he can never completely disassociate himself from his society, just as he can never finally break free of his family. It is not only that he is imposing his mark on society; it is also, always, that society’s imprint is on him.

This murky intertwine between individual and society, along with the inability to clearly attribute ideas, feelings, and responsibility leaves readers adrift alongside the protagonist. Is Rabbit a product or a producer of his world? More a victim or a victimizer? There is no clear authorial intervention on these points. In fact, just the opposite: Updike has stated that “[m]y
books are all meant to be moral debates with the reader, and if they seem pointless…it’s because the reader has not been engaged in the debate” (Picked-Up 502). About *Rabbit, Run* he has written

Rabbit is the hero of this novel, but is he a good man? The question is meant to lead to another—What is goodness? Kerouac’s *On the Road* was in the air, and a decade of dropping-out about to arrive, and the price society pays for unrestrained motion was on my mind. In the end, the act of running, of gathering a blank momentum ‘out of a kind of sweet panic,’ offers itself as containing a kernel of goodness; but perhaps a stone or a flower at rest holds the same kernel. (*Hugging 850-1*)

How reminiscent of the style of the novels themselves Updike is in this statement! One question leads to another, but in the end there is no definitive stopping point or summation. Rather, the whole line of thinking skids to a halt with a “perhaps” and a comparison placing disparate things on a par. Just as the important and the unimportant are given equal weight in the pages of his novels, here Rabbit’s act of running away from his family, can (perhaps!) be equated to the properties of a stone or a flower at rest.

Updike’s style may prod readers to engage in the "moral debates" he poses, but it also allows Updike an escape route by which he is able to avoid revealing too much of his own thinking. Taking a page from his protagonist, Updike occupies a sort of liminal position vis-à-vis the readers of his Rabbit texts: he sets things in motion but then steps back and lets things play out without him. As Lawrence R. Broer observes, “each individual creates his or her own version of Updike’s elusive hero. . . it is less Updike than the reader who mediates between the text of reality and the text on the page” (6).

A complaint sometimes heard about Updike is that he tends to write superficially about things and to duck "large subjects" (Updike, *Picked-Up 503*). In response, Updike has said,

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7 For more on Updike’s use of ambiguity in the Rabbit series, see Donald J. Greiner's “No Place to Run: Rabbit Angstrom as Adamic Hero” and Ralph C. Wood's “Rabbit Angstrom: John Updike’s Ambiguous Pilgrim.”
"There's a 'yes-but' quality about my writing that evades entirely pleasing anybody. It seems to me that critics get increasingly querulous and impatient for madder music and stronger wine, when what we need is a greater respect for reality, its secrecy, its music. Too many people are studying maps and not enough are visiting places" (Picked-Up 503).

In writing the Rabbit novels, Updike says he wanted to present the “sides of an unresolved tension intrinsic to being human” (Rabbit Angstrom viii). "[T]o be a person, is to be in a situation of tension, is to be in a dialectical situation" (Picked-Up 504). In Rabbit, Run, for example, the dialectical dilemma is that one can say "[y]es . . . to our urgent inner whispers, but —the social fabric collapses disastrously" (Picked-Up 503). Updike sees this tension as a universal feature of human life, regardless of the socio-economic system:

You are born into one political contract or another, whose terms, though they sit very lightly at first, eventually, in the form of the draft, or taxes, begin to make very heavy demands on you. The general social contract—living with other people, driving cars on highways—all this is difficult. . . . In short, all of our institutions—of marriage, the family, your driver's license—everything is kind of precarious, and maintained at a cost of tension. (Picked-Up 509)

Updike's "yes, but" tendency is reflected in the ambiguous way each of the Rabbit novels ends. Rabbit runs at the end of the first novel, but we have no idea where he is headed. The second novel ends with a question—“O.K.?”—which encapsulates both the well-being Janice and Rabbit feel as they get back together and the worried uncertainty as they face anew their problematic relationship. The third novel ends with Rabbit being handed his granddaughter for the first time: “a real presence hardly weighing anything but alive. Fortune’s hostage, heart’s desire, a granddaughter. His. Another nail in his coffin. His” (Rich 437). Here the word “His,” like “O.K” in the previous novel, straddles opposites, pointing simultaneously towards decline and death and towards the rich possession of new life. And at the end of the final novel, Nelson stations himself by Rabbit’s bedside, shouting “Don’t die, Dad, don’t.” Then he
sits back with that question still on his face…. [Rabbit] shouldn’t leave the question hanging like that, the boy depends on him.

“Well, Nelson,” he says, “all I can tell you is, it isn’t so bad.” Rabbit thinks he should maybe say more, the kid looks wildly expectant, but enough. Maybe. Enough. (Rest 425)

In this ultimate exchange with his son, Rabbit’s “it’s not so bad” evasively emphasizes the negative: what it is not rather than what it is. Though Nelson wants more, this is “all [Rabbit] can tell.” It is not until Rabbit Remembered, published ten years later, that Updike lets readers know for sure that Rabbit has, in fact, died; this final scene leaves even that basic bit of information up in the air.

In Chapter Four, I noted the preponderance of gaps in Díaz’s text and the frequent use of imagery that marks the presence of an absence, like the hole in Yunior’s living room or Ysrael’s mask. The figure of the void is present in every one of Updike’s Rabbit novels, as well. In the opening chapter of Rabbit Redux the six o’clock news during the summer of the moon landing is, for example, “all about space, all about emptiness” (28). While stroking Janice’s belly in bed he thinks of how after the death of their baby “[i]t had all seemed like a pit to him . . . her womb and the grave, sex and death, he had fled her cunt as a tiger’s mouth” (33, emphasis added). In Rabbit is Rich Rabbit lives in his mother-in-law’s house where, on the sideboard in the dining room there are pictures of Janice, Nelson and, in a handsome gold frame, his father-in-law. Rabbit’s own picture is absent; the text draws attention to this gap in the family’s representation by meticulously mentioning only what is present as if the outlines of what exists will shed light on the dimensions of what cannot be seen. (94) In Rabbit at Rest the metaphor of an airplane exploding, pegged to several actual air disasters including the blowing up of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie Scotland, expresses Rabbit’s fear that his life is suspended over a void into which he may be ejected at any moment.
On one level, the void that Rabbit senses underlying everything is death. This is especially so in *Rabbit at Rest* which chronicles Rabbit's physical decline as, over the course of the novel, his heart gives out. Lodged in the void is also the tension which Updike sees as a permanent feature of all human life, specifically the dialectical tension between individual and society. In *Rabbit at Rest*, Rabbit imagines what it would have been like to feel, as the Pan Am plane blew up, "this whole cozy world dropping away and nothing under you but black space and your chest squeezed by the terrible unbreathable cold" (5). These thoughts lead him to make some specific observations about his society: "Everything falling apart, airplanes, bridges, eight years under Reagan of nobody minding the store, making money out of nothing, running up debt, trusting in God" (6). Rabbit may resist, like his creator, the reading of maps, preferring instead to visit places and experience things in an immediate, first-hand sort of way, but the thick collage of impressions that accumulates as Rabbit makes his way through the second half of the twentieth-century gives readers the materials to create their own maps of this time.

The impetus to do so comes from the desire to bring some meaning or order to Rabbit's chaotic and seemingly contradictory reflections. It also comes from the desire to better understand the void filled with dialectical tensions that Rabbit does such an excellent job pointing out but which he is unable to explore more deeply. Rabbit's pairing, for example, of the feeling of falling through space after a terrorist attack and the phenomenon of "making money out of nothing" a phrase which points to the dizzying increase of fictional capital in the U.S. during the Reagan years—a speculative activity that in fact does pave the way for the blowing up of the U.S. economy in succeeding years—is a brilliant association. It is simply, however, dropped into the text as one in a list of associations; without further comment on any of the items in that list, Rabbit's mind quickly skitters off to other subjects. In Part III I take a close look at
one of the major forces lodged in the void—capitalism. It's a force that deeply informs Rabbit's world, but, while its effects can be felt everywhere, it is seldom consciously considered.

III: HATING ONESELF WITH A CERTAIN RELISH: WORK, PERSONAL LIFE, AND THE MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY IN LATE CAPITALISM

Breadwinning and Inner Dwindling

Updike has said that when he was creating Rabbit he was thinking about the "mythic" figure of Peter Rabbit (Picked-Up 500). Like many folkloric rabbits, Peter Rabbit is a trickster who manages, with the help of his friends and relations, to outsmart more powerful characters like Farmer McGregor and the garden cat. Called upon to negotiate the difficult emotional trick of succeeding within the cutthroat ethos of capitalism, Rabbit must also at times take on the persona of a trickster. Like his literary forerunners, he relies on cunning to attain the main chance—usually in his case material goods or physical comfort.

The need to deceive or trick others is built into Rabbit's work life. Rabbit becomes "rich" after inheriting Springer Motors from his father-in-law, Fred Springer, a man whom Rabbit deprecatingly thinks of as a "con artist" because of the way he manipulates both his family and the public (Rich 144). But in order to be a successful salesman, Rabbit also must con people. He uses the gas crisis of 1979, for example, to sell "frantic" people Toyotas: “He tells them, when they buy a Toyota, they’re turning their dollars into yen. And they believe. . .” (Rich 1). Later, Rabbit watches without saying a word while his co-worker Charlie works a young Black couple, successfully “unloading” a ’73 Buick on them because they are “too far behind in the rat race to

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8 "Sometimes," Updike acknowledges, the relationship between the two is "semi-conscious; for example, only lately do I see that Brewer, the city of brick painted the color of flowerpots, is the flowerpot that Mr. McGregor slips over Peter Rabbit" (Picked-Up 500).

9 Br'er Rabbit is a good example of a folkloric trickster rabbit. For more on Peter Rabbit and the other rabbits in his circle who act like tricksters, see M. Daphne Kutzer's Beatrix Potter: Writing in Code, especially the chapter "Into the Garden."
know times have changed, we’re running out of gas, the smart money is into foreign imports with sewing machine motors” (Rich 117). Whatever Charlie and Rabbit really believe about the cars they are trying to move (Rabbit thinks at one point of the Toyota as “a piece of junk” much like any other car on the road), they know that the name of the game is to say whatever gets the cars sold (Rich 1).

Rabbit prides himself on being able to use his wits to keep clear of the numerous traps he sees laid out for himself along the path of his life. He acquires the nickname of Rabbit as a boy, partly for the “nervous flutter under his brief nose” (Run 7); it is an anxious sensitivity that continues throughout his life, a certain wariness that causes him to keep his guard up, his senses sharp, and a backdoor within reach. Grazing in the field along with the other herbivores, it is what causes him to look up quickly when he senses danger and to be the first to take off running.

But the keeping up of his guard has also hardened his heart: he has trouble making emotional commitments or, at times, empathizing with those whom he has hurt or deceived. No matter if he is selling cars or relating to family, friends, or the two women with whom he has significant extra-marital affairs, Rabbit keeps a part of himself in reserve. It is as if he needs to save some part of himself for the demands of the battle ahead—and there is always, in Rabbit’s frame of reference, a battle ahead because there is always someone to be wary of or someone trying to best him.

Like the tiguere in Dominican culture, the figure of the trickster evokes a complicated response. In the Native American tradition, for example, while the trickster's deceitfulness and thievery are alienating, his actions sometimes bring fruitful new situations into being and the bounty acquired through his exploits often benefits others. According to Funk and Wagnalls’ *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, even the storytellers find these
contradictory characteristics challenging: “The combined role of creator and trickster in one character who is portrayed in one aspect as altruistic and creative, in another aspect as gross and greedy, is puzzling to [Native American] narrators, and is frequently commented upon by them” (Leach 1124). The cultural work that these stories do is likewise filled with contradiction, making them as difficult as the characters themselves to locate: they are simultaneously cautionary tales which warn listeners what not to be and how not to act, and stories which evoke listeners’ admiration and even emulation as the trickster/underdog successfully bests bigger, more powerful adversaries (Leach 1124).10

Rabbit has elicited similarly contradictory responses. His exploits have been followed closely by both critics and the reading public since 1960, and he is arguably one of American literature’s best-known and, in some circles, most admired characters. Critics compare him in stature and interest to such fictional luminaries as Natty Bumppo, Hester Prynne, Ishmael, Huckleberry Finn, Nick Adams, Jay Gatsby, Babbitt, and Tom Joad. Updike has won a number of prestigious prizes for his Rabbit series, including two Pulitzer Prizes—one for Rabbit is Rich and one for Rabbit at Rest.11 And yet, Rabbit and Updike have also come in for scathing critical review and there is a large segment of the reading public, particularly amongst feminist readers,

10 The idea that texts can be said to be doing “cultural work,” or, in other words, that “a text offers a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social, or religious conditions” is explored in Jane Tompkins’ important work Sensational Designs (xvii). She explains her approach in this way:

   Rather than asking “what does this text mean?” or , “how does it work?,” I ask, “what kind of work is this novel trying to do?” My assumption in each instance has been that the text is engaged in solving a problem or a set of problems specific to the time in which it was written, and that therefore the way to identify its purposes is not to compare it to other examples of the genre, but to relate it to the historical circumstances, and the contemporary cultural discourse to which it seems most closely linked. (38)

11 See Lawrence R. Broer’s “Introduction” to Rabbit Tales for a sense of Rabbit's and the series' prominent place in the field of American letters.
who express indifference, disappointment, or active dislike of both Rabbit and his creator. Bernard Schopen has written that “the novels of John Updike have spawned a criticism rather remarkable in its contentiousness. His books have evoked critical outrage, bewilderment, condescension, commendation, and an enthusiasm approaching the fulsome. The same novel might be hailed as a major fictional achievement and dismissed as self-indulgence or as a failure” (523).

The contradictory reactions in readers of the Rabbit series experience stem in part from the frustrating way that Rabbit, whose consciousness we cannot escape, is himself stuck amidst contradictory ideas about himself and the world: he is always on the verge of a breakthrough in consciousness that never seems to come. Moreover, if Rabbit is, as Updike has said, a portrait of the American everyman, that portrait is bound to set a great many American readers' nerves on edge since while Rabbit's weaknesses and flaws may be eminently understandable, they point to uncomfortable and even ugly truths about U.S. life and society. At the same time, Rabbit's and Updike's passivity in the face of these truths has led some readers to feel that the series as a whole is a lengthy apologia which works to shore up the status quo.

What is certain is that Rabbit's story draws out and highlights in breathtaking detail the contradictory aspects of the American Dream and its effects on ordinary people. Throughout *Rabbit is Rich*, for example, Rabbit watches through the window of his car dealership the progress of a maple tree struggling to survive against the encroachment of businesses, litter, and car exhaust along Route 111. Finally, in *Rabbit at Rest* we learn that Pizza Hut has cut down the “stately old maple tree” in order to “expand its red-roofed facility. . . . He ought to be grateful, [Rabbit] thinks, to have a lively business along this struggling little strip.” The careful

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12 For examples of criticism of Updike's Rabbit series from the feminist perspective, see Mary Allen’s “John Updike’s Love of ‘Dull Bovine Beauty’” and Jan Clausen’s “Native Fathers.”
language—"he ought to be grateful"—flags the fact that Rabbit feels something else, though what that is goes unsaid. He is silent before the contradiction that what is good for his business is bad for the environment and involves as well the death of something Rabbit himself valued and enjoyed. The loss of the tree is not directly addressed, as if bringing the contradiction fully to light would be too painful or perhaps might even provoke Rabbit to take a stand or lodge a protest. Instead the narration, through a single line of description—“the roof is shaped like a hat, with two slants”—offers its own subtly negative reaction, drawing attention to the roof’s shape, which mimics the tree’s shape, but, diminutive and dependent upon humans for its value—"a hat"—is clearly less than the beautiful tree it replaces. The paragraph that begins by announcing the death of the tree ends with Rabbit decrying the loss of loyalty in the world of sports as the Phillies trade away two of their “old all-stars.” Though he does not speak up for the tree, its plight triggers Rabbit’s thoughts about the baseball players and his melancholy feeling that “[t]here’s no such thing as loyalty anymore.” The fact that men and trees have lost the ability to claim ownership of the place where they have lived and put down roots troubles Rabbit, even though Rabbit is, at the same time, implicated in the economic system bringing about these changes (Rest 290).

While the contradictions embodied in Rabbit’s life generally hover just below the surface of his consciousness, as in the above example, occasionally they break through and he has a stark vision of himself as a being deeply divided. Standing at the same window from which he viewed the maple tree, he catches “a sudden reflection of himself and is startled by how big he is, by how much space he is taking up on the planet.” He remembers how he marched as Uncle Sam in a local Fourth of July parade:

\[s]tepping out on the empty roadway as Uncle Sam . . . he had felt so eerily tall, as if his head were a giant balloon floating above the marching music. Though his
inner sense of himself is of an innocuous passive spirit, a steady small voice, that
doesn’t want to do any harm, get trapped anywhere, or ever die, there is this other
self seen from outside, a six-foot-three ex-athlete weighing two-thirty at the least,
an apparition wearing a sleek gray summer suit . . . a fearsome bulk with eyes that
see and hands that grab and teeth that bite, a body eating enough at one meal to
feed three Ethiopians for a day, a shameless consumer of gasoline, electricity,
newspapers, hydrocarbons, carbohydrates. A boss, in a shiny suit. (Rest 316)

The self Rabbit glimpses in the window reflection is literally and figuratively enlarged by
the excess of resources it can, by virtue of being an American and a boss, unfairly lay claim to.
But though this self is the visible or public part of him, Rabbit feels dissociated from it "as if his
head were a giant balloon floating above the marching music." He doesn’t generally view
himself as a boss. He is surprised, in fact, to think of himself this way or to think that others
might see him this way. Even as he is taking in this view of himself, he attempts to move away
from it by casting this self as more of a costume than an authentic self, a "shiny suit" that, like
the Uncle Sam outfit, he has the power to put on or take off.

It's clear that Rabbit identifies with a different self, one that lies quietly within him, not
visible to the outside world. In contrast to his outer self which is described graphically and at
length in the above passage, this inner self is small and elusive: it takes up only a few lines of
text and its description is vague. This inner self is underdeveloped partly because it is positioned
in opposition to the dominant economic organization of things. The idea, for example, that
Rabbit “doesn’t want to do any harm” necessarily challenges capitalism’s need to continuously
expand profits and the production of goods with scant regard to the ethical or moral
considerations of what is being produced or who is being hurt. Rabbit’s inner self, the one he
experiences as more authentic, lives an ill-formed existence, its access to development blocked
by the dominating weight of his outer self.
Rabbit has this rare vision of the contradictory aspects of his own persona just minutes before he meets Mr. Shimada, the Japanese owner of Rabbit’s Toyota franchise. Indeed, it is probable that the meeting with Mr. Shimada, who is Rabbit’s boss, stimulates Rabbit’s self-conscious view of himself and what it means to hold power over others. Against Rabbit’s overweight outer self, Mr. Shimada is a study in contrasts: he is slim, urbane, manicured, polite and impeccably dressed. At first glance, he seems to be Rabbit’s inner, innocuous self as he presents his business moves (which include revoking Springer Motors’ franchise and giving it to a rival car dealership) in spiritual terms, as if his actions will help to bring about a greater good.

In the universal struggle between order and freedom, Mr. Shimada explains, Americans err on the side of choosing too much freedom: “Toyota company hope to make [islands] of order in ocean of freedom. Hope to strike proper [balance] between needs of outer world and needs of inner being” (Rest 326).

At issue is Nelson’s embezzlement of thousands of dollars from the franchise in order to buy drugs. Even though Rabbit was the one to alert Toyota to the fiscal irregularities and he has promised to quickly pay back all the money with interest, Mr. Shimada remains firm in his decision to withdraw the franchise. Rabbit watches Mr. Shimada’s lips and has a fleeting memory of stories from his boyhood about the cruelty of the Japanese to the prisoners on Bataan, but he does not consciously consider that perhaps Mr. Shimada is also, underneath his polished, innocuous-seeming exterior, a “fearsome bulk with eyes that see and hands that grab” (Rest 316).

Mr. Shimada wards off a negative image of himself by coating the bad news he brings to Rabbit with philosophical musings. He spends some time poking carefully around the conundrum that the frenetic production and consumption of goods is not making people happy. Young people are no longer afraid of starving, he points out, but they are “scared of something—
not happy….Brue jeans, rock music not make happiness enough. In former times, in Japan, very simple things make men happy. Moonright on fish pond at certain moment. Cricket singing in bamboo grove” (Rest 325). These sentiments recall Rabbit’s earlier thought that he should be happy about the cutting down of the maple tree to make way for an expanding Pizza Hut. Mr. Shimada can remember a time when a more harmonious relationship existed between the inner and outer world, between man and nature, but while he claims to be offering a solution which will help to re-calibrate the balance between inner being and outer world, in the end what he offers is the capitalist master plot of endless competition: “Peace a kind of war also,” he tells Rabbit. “We fight now not Americans and British but Nissan, Honda, Ford. Toyota agency must be a prace of discipline, a prace of order” (Rest 325).

In Mr. Shimada’s concept of endless war, there is no room for ambivalent feelings, doubts, or second guesses. When Americans “aporogize to me for Japanese internment camps in Frankrin Roosevelt days,” he tells Rabbit, “[a]lways I say to them, surprised, ‘Was war!’ In war, people need disciprine” (Rest 325). He notes that in Japan, where people “must make do with very near nothing,” discipline is much higher than in the United States (Rest 325). In times of scarce resources or of extreme duress, delving into the realm of subjectivity, into the world of torn feelings and split selves becomes, it seems, a luxury that people can ill afford.

Mr. Shimada’s ability to turn off all questioning and live life without listening to the “small steady voice” within is reminiscent of Rabbit’s father-in-law Fred Springer, who is held up to Rabbit by his wife and mother-in-law as the model of a successful business and family man. Like Mr. Shimada, Fred Springer has marshaled himself to look only in one direction—towards the battle. It is such an important character trait that Updike has built it into his character’s face, giving Fred “little dabs of eyebrows sticking out like toy artillery” (Rich 96). In
contrast, Rabbit and Nelson are frequently described as having curves in their eyebrows that seem to express doubt or some “unaskable question” (Rest 425). 13

In order to succeed as a breadwinner, Rabbit learns to push down, often times without even noticing it, the inner voice that raises questions and "doesn’t want to do any harm or get trapped anywhere." Sometimes this voice breaks through into his consciousness, as happens with Rabbit while he waits to see Mr. Shimada, but more often it stays in the background where its meaning, translated through the weight of the dominant public self, emerges distorted.

Complicating Rabbit's ability to access his inner voice is the fact that Rabbit has been seduced along with much of the developed world by the belief that material wealth will bring happiness and liberation into his life—the scene in Rabbit is Rich during which Rabbit spreads thirty gold Krugerrands on the bed and entices Janice into a passionate love-making session on top of them comes to mind (199-203). But perhaps because Rabbit has never gone hungry and has the security of knowing that his solid position in American society makes it reasonably certain that he will be able to satisfy his and his family's basic material needs, Rabbit’s fantasies, like the young people in Japan that Mr. Shimada describes, move beyond the quest for physical wealth to something intangible, something he can barely describe but which informs his feelings about himself and his life. “There’s something that wants me to find it,” he tells Rev. Eccles when, working for his father-in-law selling cars and living with Janice and their two young kids, he feels “closed in” (Run 107). He has “the feeling that somewhere there was something better for him than listening to babies cry and cheating people in used-car lots” (Run 225).

13 Rabbit sees “nothing of himself [in Nelson] except the small straight nose and a cowlick in one eyebrow that sends a little fan of hairs the wrong way and seems to express a doubt” (Rich 72). In the final novel, Nelson is described as having “some unaskable question tweaking the hairs of one eyebrow, so they grow up against the grain” (Rest 425).
As befits a character that feels more comfortable acting on his feelings than reflecting on them, the flight from what he experiences as the spiritual death of family life is acted out physically. Rabbit runs from Janice several times in the first novel and once again in the final novel. Twice he employs as his means of escape that great metaphor of twentieth-century rebellion and self-exploration, the road trip. For Rabbit, it is the non-industrial landscape that calls him: “He wants to go south, down, down the map into orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women….to park on a beach take off your shoes and fall asleep by the Gulf of Mexico. Wake up with the stars above perfectly spaced” (Run 25).

Alexis de Tocqueville, observing American men in the 1830s, described them as restless in the midst of abundance. . . . An American will build a house in which to pass his old age and sell it before the roof is on; he will plant a garden and rent it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he will clear a field and leave others to reap the harvest; he will take up a profession and leave it, settle in one place and soon go off elsewhere with his changing desires. (qtd. in Kimmel, "Birth" 140)

Though Tocqueville emphasizes the quest for material wealth in his comments, he links this quest for physical goods to the shape of men’s emotional life: "He who has set his heart exclusively on the pursuit of worldly welfare is always in a hurry, for he has but a limited time at his disposal….This thought fills him with anxiety, fear and regret and keeps his mind in ceaseless trepidation which leads him to perpetually change his plans and his abode" (qtd. in Kimmel, "Birth" 149).

While Americans in the 1830s expressed an anxious “yearning desire to rise” and showed themselves willing to uproot themselves to do it, Tocqueville also observed that “hardly any [men] appear to entertain hopes of great magnitude, or to pursue very lofty aims” (256). Ignoring the existence of class in America, Tocqueville ascribes this phenomenon to the democratic structure of American society which forces “all men . . . to pass the same ordeal” on
their path to advancement. The vast number of competitors and the multitude of petty hurdles creates a situation whereby “their youth is wasted and their imagination quenched, so that they despair of ever fully attaining what is held out to them and when at length they are in a condition to perform any extraordinary acts, the taste for such things has forsaken them” (258-59). Giving up their grand hopes, men “search nearer to themselves for less lofty and more easy enjoyments” (259), and ultimately spend their lives “eagerly coveting small objects which are within reach” (257).

Though Tocqueville makes his observations at the beginning of the American Industrial Revolution, what he observes about the lives and aspirations of workingmen in America still seems to have relevance during the latter stages of American industrial capitalism. Rabbit is motivated by lofty dreams and ideals early in his life, but in the end he seems satisfied with far less. By the late 1970s Rabbit, who has become chief salesman at Springer Motors, feels prosperous. Having accumulated “a margin of resources” he finds “that the stifled terror that always made him restless has dulled down. He wants less. Freedom, that he always thought was outward motion, turns out to be this inner dwindling” (Rich 89). Rabbit’s “inner dwindling” is not a zen-like liberation from materialism: he is more caught up than ever in Tocqueville’s “small objects” and “easy enjoyments.” Rather, now that he is no longer so economically driven, the nagging inner voice that spoke up for alternative lifestyles and desires seems also to become quieter. By the late 1970s, Rabbit can look at himself and begin to acknowledge, with some relief it seems, that his soul has finally “shrunk to fit” the size of his closed-in life (Rich 265). Where thirty years before he had fantasies of driving straight to the edge of the sea and sleeping barefoot on the beach, by the late 1980s he looks at the ocean and feels frightened, seeing a
lawless realm where “man is nothing. . . . He loves freedom but a grassy field is his idea of enough” (*Run* 25, *Rest* 403).

Rabbit thinks of his life as a ball thrown skyward—going up with power and wonder and delight, hovering at the apex for just a moment, and then plunging earthward towards death. But the high point of Rabbit’s life comes extremely early, before Updike’s narrative of Rabbit even begins. By the time we meet him, Rabbit is reminiscing about the pure glory he felt in his pre-pubescent years and later, during high school, the heavenly magic of playing basketball and making love with his girlfriend, Mary Ann. “Whenever he went out with [her]…he felt like a winner, offhand, calm, his life set at an irresistible forward slant,” (*Rest* 155) the “space between her legs . . . safe, a world apart” (*Rich* 408). His life begins its earthward trajectory when Rabbit joins the Army in the early 1950s and spends two years stationed in Texas. During his absence, Mary Ann marries someone else. “Maybe she sensed something about him. A loser,” Rabbit thinks still trying to process the rejection thirty years later (*Rest* 154-55). Shortly after he returns from Texas he meets Janice. When she accidentally becomes pregnant, they enter into (Rabbit’s words) the “daily doom” of marriage (*Rich* 228).

Wracked by guilt when Janice, distraught over his having left her, accidentally drowns their second child, Rabbit tries to forget about his quest for liberation and follow his minister’s advice: “Be a good husband. A good father. Love what you have left” (*Run* 233). He settles himself into the traces of being a steady family man and breadwinner and makes the best of both his work life and his marriage. Years later, Janice remembers back to when she had first seen Rabbit on the high school basketball courts: a hero “glorious and blond, like a boy made of marble. . . . [h]e had come to bloom early and by the time she got to know him . . . he was already drifting downhill” (*Rest* 422-23).
He settles . . . and yet, a part of Rabbit never loses touch with the feeling that there is “something better” out there. Resistance to the breadwinning life makes itself manifest indirectly, through Rabbit’s stance and style: his love of the liminal, of “things that touch and yet not,” for example, which places him on the edge of events (Rich 108) or the doubting, “yes but” approach which permeates his interactions with family members, irritating them and causing them to shut him out of their thoughts and counsels. The barriers that Rabbit creates in this way between himself and the other family members is so slowly yet solidly built that Janice is surprised to discover, as Rabbit lies dying, that “since those glimpses of [Rabbit] shining on the basketball court she had slowly ceased to see him, he had become invisible” (Rest 423). Rabbit’s obstructionist outer self provides cover for the subversive space inside where thoughts and feelings contrary to the status quo, including the “small steady voice that doesn’t want to . . . get trapped anywhere, or ever die,” can continue to exist (Rest 316).

Rabbit’s inner voice enunciates a freedom that is negative in its outlines—the freedom to reject the status quo. In the 1850s Herman Melville’s Bartleby makes public his refusal to participate in the work force by countering each of his boss’ requests with a “I would prefer not to.” Lacking a positive alternative, Bartleby’s refusal ends inevitably in his death. Rabbit, in contrast to this literary predecessor, survives by splitting himself in two, simultaneously committing his outer self to the project of being a good worker and family man and his inner self to the project of rebelling against those very commitments as he struggles to keep some small part of himself “his own.”

But though Rabbit thinks of his inner self as a sort of sanctuary separate and inviolate from society, that thought is as illusory as the nineteenth-century notion that the home was a haven from the dehumanizing ethos of the capitalist workplace. Indeed, by the late twentieth
century the family, because of its function as a site of consumption, has been so thoroughly
penetrated by the ethos of the capitalist market that the conceptual boundary of where capitalism
cannot reach has shrunk: where once the boundary line was the family, now it is the private
thoughts of individuals. Even so, just as the home is affected by the society that surrounds it, so
the individual's "inner voice" is also marked by the world beyond its borders. The dimensions
and properties of Rabbit's inner voice are staked out not so much by Rabbit's individual dreams
and desires as by his reactions to the circumstances surrounding him.

The epigraph to *Rabbit, Run* is a Pensée by Pascal: "The motions of Grace, the hardness
of the heart; external circumstances." The Pensée emphasizes the idea that while there are
contradictory moves within the individual (grace and hardness of heart), there is also the
surrounding world which, as the semicolon implies, presents a counterbalance to what is going
on inside the individual.

Wallace Stevens' poem "A Rabbit As King of the Ghosts," the opening stanza of which
serves as an epigraph to *Rabbit is Rich*, takes this theme of how the surrounding world can
dictate self development a step further. The poem opens:

The difficulty to think at the end of the day,
When the shapeless shadow covers the sun
And nothing is left except light on your fur—

In the poem, a rabbit at the end of a day, tired from having had to deal with a cat "slopping its
milk all day" is able for a while to forget about its nemesis. Once the predator cat is gone from
the scene ("forgotten in the moon"), the rabbit can enjoy "the peacefulllest time" and is free

. . . to feel that the light is a rabbit-light,
In which everything is meant for you
And nothing need be explained;

Then there is nothing to think of. . .
As the rabbit basks in "rabbit-light" it sinks into a solipsistic state of mind:

. . . The grass is full

    And full of yourself. The trees around are for you,
    The whole of the wideness of night is for you,
    A self that touches all edges,

    You become a self that fills the four corners of the night.

At the end of the poem, the rabbit is "humped higher and higher" until it has grown so tall that its head is now like a "carving in space." From this exalted perspective the rabbit looks down to see that the cat has become "a bug in the grass."

Released from the heavy weight of having to deal with the cat, the rabbit's ego expands to fill every available space. In its moment of freedom from the pressure and anxiety of everyday reality, the rabbit hopes to experience an inner peace. However, even though the cat is gone, the rabbit is not able to sink into a zen-like state of awareness in which it can more deeply and clearly view itself and its surroundings. Instead, it resorts to the default mindset of its daytime world: just as it has been dominated and made to feel small and frightened throughout the day by the cat, now in its fantasies it becomes the dominator of all it surveys. In reaction to having been made to feel that the viewpoint of the cat (perhaps representative of a boss or, more generally, the status quo) is more important than its own, the rabbit revels during its afterhours in looking at everything by its own light, by "rabbit light." The inevitable outcome of viewing life through such a prism is an over-sized sense of self which, while it gives the rabbit sensuous pleasure—"everything is for you"—also creates a distorted picture in the rabbit's mind both of its own identity and of the world surrounding it. Thus, even when freed to think its own thoughts, the rabbit's "inner self" cannot escape the influence of the external world.
The way the rabbit grows so huge that its head towers above the landscape is reminiscent of Rabbit's vision of himself as a bloated Uncle Sam, his balloon head floating high above the Fourth of July parade. Rabbit's tendency to exaggerate his own point of view and diminish other perspectives appears early in the novels. Like the rabbit in Stevens' poem, faced with a situation that makes him feel defensive, Rabbit often responds by pumping himself up into a state of extreme self-aggrandizement. When Janice, for example, who has given birth to their second child less than six weeks earlier, refuses Rabbit's request for sex, he becomes angry and upset. "Why can't you try to imagine how I feel? I've just had a baby," Janice says, to which Rabbit replies, "I can. I can but I don't want to, it's not the thing, the thing is how I feel. And I feel like getting out" (Run 207).

Rabbit's inner voice is so full of itself that when he listens to it, he often arrives at a distorted view of things. One area in which this consistently occurs is in his dealings with people of color. Rabbit suffers from a feeling of victimization that is closely tied to his feeling that white men are on the losing end in late twentieth-century America. Another area in which Rabbit has trouble seeing the humanity of others is in his dealings with women. Driven, once again, by feelings that he is part of an oppressed group—in this case a man in the female-dominated sphere of the home—he takes refuge in a self-centered view of women, evaluating them mainly on the basis of what they can do for him. Throughout the Rabbit series he views Janice negatively, calling her "dumb" at every turn and often blaming her for his inability to enjoy life. At other times, in a classic about face, he puts Janice or another woman up on a pedestal, and thinks of her as his ticket to happiness and/or liberation. In his early years, for example, Rabbit thinks that perhaps if he leaves Janice and lives with Ruth, life will begin again to have the kind of glow it had when he was a basketball hero. In his middle years, when things
are finally going well economically and he has become contentedly ensconced in the middle class, he decides he is basically happy with Janice whom he now thinks of as “the keystone of his wealth” and his “stubborn prize” (Rich 426). Obsessing in a "rabbit-light" sort of way about what women or people of color are doing to him or for him functions as a distraction which prevents Rabbit from seeing more clearly the effect that capitalism is having on him and on his world.

Extra-marital affairs become a place marker for the rebellion that does not take place elsewhere in Rabbit's life. Somewhat like his inner voice, these relationships, operating separately from the conventional world of work and family, offer Rabbit a space that feels liberating even as they leave the status quo safely intact. Siphoning off some of Rabbit's dissatisfaction and rebellion, these affairs prop up his conventional lifestyle by giving him the ability to cope more calmly, even numbly, with the problematic aspects of his marriage or the troubles he faces at work.

The second epigraph for Rabbit is Rich is taken from Sinclair Lewis’s 1922 novel Babbitt. In that novel, successful business and family man George F. Babbitt, follows a trajectory of seeking relief from the tyranny of conventional life through affairs and flights of fancy. When first we meet the middle-class salesman, it is early morning and he is sleeping on the veranda dreaming about “the fairy child”: "For years [she] had come to him. Where others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth. She waited for him, in the darkness beyond mysterious groves. When at last he could slip away from the crowded house he darted to her. His wife, his clamoring friends, sought to follow, but he escaped, the girl fleet beside him" (6).

We quickly discover that Babbitt detests “the grind of the real-estate business and [dislikes] his family, and [dislikes] himself for disliking them.” In fact, “[n]o longer greatly

14 For more on the connection between Babbitt and the Rabbit series, see my discussion in Chapter Two.
interested in the possible and improbable adventures of each new day,” he “[fumbles] for sleep as for a drug” trying to return to the dream of the fairy girl and “[escape] from reality till the alarm-clock [rings]” (7).

Updike underscores the connection between the two characters by giving Rabbit his own “fairy girl” dream on the first Sunday morning after he and Janice move into their new suburban house. Janice tries to wake Rabbit up for church, "but he . . . wants to return to the warm pocket of a dream he had been having, a dream involving a girl, a young woman . . . they have met somehow at a party and are in a little bathroom together, not speaking but with a rapport . . . the bliss of a new relationship, he wants it to go on and on but is awake and can’t get back" (Rich 428).

American literature is full of stories of men plotting to escape the “daily doom” of domestic life. Rabbit’s nineteenth-century predecessors, characters like Huck Finn or Ahab, eschew the domestic world altogether in order to pursue their quests. Rabbit, in starting a road trip within the first few pages of Rabbit, Run, seems about to follow in their footsteps. His goal, when he leaves home, is to head for "the huge white sun of the south," but within just a few hours, feeling that he is caught in a “web” and that all roads lead back towards home, he has turned his car around (28). Barely twelve hours after he left, he is back in Brewer, Pennsylvania. Despite the magnitude of his restlessness, the Rabbit saga is resolutely set within the domestic sphere.

Though the tone of the Rabbit novels is generally light and Rabbit's adventures seem circumscribed and trivial compared to Huck and Jim rafting down the Mississippi, or Ahab and his crew sailing the high seas, the subject of the horrors of U.S. society which undergirds Twain's and Melville's works, is present as well in the Rabbit series. It is just that Updike presents the
themes of man's oppressive behavior towards his fellows and towards nature in a softer, more diminutive fashion as if the subjects themselves have become domesticated. We have seen how Rabbit has suffered an inner dwindling as a result of his role as a breadwinner in postwar capitalist America. Paralleling the paring down of self that Rabbit has undergone, nature appears diminished as well, coming to us in images that feel housebroken because, in lieu of a wild, majestic force, nature now appears smothered in human needs and purposes.\textsuperscript{15}

In \textit{Rabbit, Run}, for example, when Rabbit learns that his mistress Ruth is pregnant, he offers to go to the delicatessen and buy some food. On the way to fulfill this domestic chore, responsibility and guilt begin to “slide together like two substantial shadows inside his chest” (253) and he begins to ponder what he sees as his two choices: “the right way and the good way, the way to the delicatessen—gaudy with stacked fruit lit by a naked bulb—and the other way, down Summer Street to where the city ends” (254). But though Rabbit wants to flee in panic, he cannot finally imagine a space beyond the city: "He tries to picture how [the city] will end, with an empty baseball field, a dark factory, and then over a brook into a dirt road, he doesn’t know. He pictures a huge vacant field of cinders and his heart goes hollow" (254).

In either case, whether he is contemplating the gaudy fruit under the naked bulb in the delicatessen that, in its posture as a commodity, seems completely divorced from its origins, or whether he is picturing a field full of cinders just past the dark factory, nature for and of itself seems to have vanished from the equation.

\textsuperscript{15} As Leslie Fiedler noted in the 1960s, the “typical male protagonist of [American] fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid “civilization,” which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility” (26). See Chapter Two for more on Fiedler and the flight from domesticity in American literature as well as on the horror of social problems like the "rape of nature and the exploitation of dark-skinned people" which novels that eschew domesticity, according to Fiedler, are intent on exploring (31).
In order to avoid making a decision about whether to stay with Janice or leave her and marry Ruth or even seek some third, as yet undefined, alternative, he turns his inner self into a “pure blank space in the middle of a dense net.” It is a defensive tactic borrowed from his basketball days, a maneuver designed to deflate and alienate those pressing around him: ultimately, he thinks, they will feel foolish when they discover that there is “nobody there,” that he has already passed the ball (Run 254-55). Simultaneous with this inner evacuation, he transforms the city into a landscape swept of its human inhabitants and connotations: coming to a curb “he steps down, with as big a feeling as if this little side-street is a wide river” (Run 255). The block on the other side of the street becomes “the next patch of snow” he “wants to travel to” (Run 255). Unable to access the actual natural world, Rabbit relies upon his imaginative powers to superimpose a natural landscape on the man-made objects around him. Nature becomes a safe, controlled space, an intellectual construct that one can use as a means of escape without having to actually go anywhere and, especially, without having to experience the depths of fear and the heights of wonder that encounters with unadulterated nature bring.

The closest Rabbit allows himself to come to enjoying undomesticated nature is the weedy overgrown patch out back of the Springer Motors car dealership, an area he contentedly thinks of as “Paraguay” (Rich 156). The mental maneuvers implied in Rabbit shrinking a country of vast grasslands and forests and rivers to the status and size of a weed patch that he owns and controls points once again to a connection between Rabbit’s collusion with and indebtedness to an economic system that fosters inequality and the intellectual as well as the physical rape of nature. As he inherits his father-in-law’s vacation cottage and grows ever wealthier, Rabbit continues to find safety and pleasure in the experience of subjugated nature which is, again, linked to economic inequality: at the vacation cottage, he discovers that “Nature
isn’t just something that pushes up through the sidewalk cracks and keeps the farmers trapped in
the sticks but is an elixir, a luxury that can be bought and fenced off and kept pure for the more
fortunate, in an impure age” (Rich 127).

On rare occasions nature circumvents Rabbit’s defenses and he finds himself face to face
with less-mediated experiences and feelings. When he goes to spy on the farmhouse where Ruth
and his grown daughter Annabelle now live, for example, “[h]e crowds so close to the little tree
that his lips touch the bark of its crotch, bark smooth as glass save where darker ridges of
roughness at intervals ring its gray. The miracle of it: how things grow, always remembering to
be themselves.” Rabbit’s feelings of awe are quickly followed by terror: “His lips have flinched
back from the unintended kiss. Living microscopic red things—mites, aphids, he can see them—
will get inside him and multiply” (Rich 104).

Rabbit’s experience of the tree follows the general emotional arc of his life: a feeling of
unmediated wonder (his high school days) gives way to fear and panicky maneuvers to protect
himself as he struggles to “make a living” until by the time he is in his mid-forties, he is padded
in “his own numb life . . . each day . . . a little less afraid to die” (Rich 43). Rabbit’s encounter
with the tree which is also a brush with untamed, undomesticated nature, recalls the thorny
problem of identity, the problem that Rabbit has tried to contain in a tiny inner space much as the
wealthy fence off their country retreats from the “impure” world of environmental and social
disaster beyond. The tree reminds him of an alternative way of life, one where rather than
tailoring oneself to the dictates of society, individuals could grow according to their own
indigenous patterns, “always remembering to be themselves.”

As Rabbit backs away from the farm in panic at being discovered, he worries that Ruth
will report his name to the police who will in turn tell Janice. “Won’t wash so good at Rotary
either,” Rabbit immediately thinks, an idea which recalls Sinclair Lewis’ protagonist Babbitt whose speech on the ideal citizen (from which Updike draws his epigraph) concludes that the “ideal of American manhood and culture” is “a God-fearing, hustling, successful, two-fisted Regular Guy . . . who belongs to the Boosters or the Rotarians” (Lewis 158). Lewis hammers home the way bands of businessmen enforce conformity amongst their ranks in his description of the men of the Good Citizens’ League which Babbitt also joins: “all . . . perceived that American Democracy did not imply any equality of wealth, but did demand a wholesome sameness of thought, dress, painting, morals, and vocabulary” (317).

Like Babbitt, Rabbit harbors quiet doubts and questions about the wholesomeness of this “sameness.” Specifically there is a suspicion that men under these kinds of pressures suffer a stunting of growth that keeps them from “remembering to be themselves.” Later in the novel, as Rabbit drives out in the country for another round of spying on Ruth and her farmhouse, he thinks again about his colleagues at the Rotary Club and finds himself focusing on their arrested development: “The thing about those Rotarians, if you knew them as kids you can’t stop seeing the kid in them, dressed up in fat and baldness and money like a cardboard tuxedo in a play for high-school assembly. How can you respect the world when you see it’s being run by a bunch of kids turned old?” (Rich 255).

Just as Rabbit has difficulty locating his own authentic identity for himself, he is not able to go beyond the man-made world and experience nature on its own terms, as itself. Indeed, the two problems—human identity and the domestication of nature—are linked. Rabbit thinks of the American South as a place where nature is still free and beautiful and where he himself might find freedom and an alternative lifestyle, but when he flies over it, he sees “cities at the bends and mouths of rivers, streets eating into the green, America disgraced and barren, mourning her
hostages” (Rich 400). Although the mention of hostages is topical—the book is set during the taking of American hostages in Iran in 1979—“hostages” also points to the takeover of the natural environment by cities and streets and, on another level, to the takeover of Rabbit himself by societal structures and pressures. When Rabbit and Janice finally do buy a condo in Florida, he finds he is neither closer to nature nor to a freer version of himself; he has merely landed in a “mass-produced paradise” where the sound of lawnmowers breaks his dreams and the breeze brings nothing but the “scent of fresh fairways” (Rest 35).

**Become a Big Boy Yourself**

Rabbit becomes conscious of the crass economic underpinnings of American society sometime in the 1980s when Kroll’s, a downtown department store that had been a beloved staple in his world since childhood, shuts down as part of the postindustrial economic changes sweeping American cities:

Rabbit realized [when they shut Kroll’s down that] the world was not solid and benign, it was a shabby set of temporary arrangements rigged up for the time being, all for the sake of the money. You just passed through, and they milked you for what you were worth, mostly when you were young and gullible. If Kroll’s could go, the courthouse could go, the banks could go. When the money stopped, they could close down God Himself. (Rest 383)

The idea that money dictates the emotional tenor of life is not new to Rabbit. In his childhood he remembers

Living embattled, Mom feuding with the neighbors, Pop and his union hating the men who owned the printing plant where he worked his life away . . . Pop and Mom and [Rabbit] and [his sister] against the world and a certain guilt attaching to any reaching up and outside for a friend. Don’t trust anybody: Andy Mellon doesn’t, and I don’t. Dear Pop. He never got out from under. Rabbit basks above that old remembered world, rich, at rest. (Rich 63)

Not wanting to live his father’s life or adopt his credo, Rabbit earns enough money to get “out from under.” In the late 1970s he joins a brand new country club called the Flying Eagle
that caters to Brewer’s rising middle class—retail, service, and computer technology workers. Contrasting sharply with the atmosphere of Rabbit’s childhood family, the club has a communal feel, “everybody knowing everybody else, and the kids in the pool, that somebody would save even if that . . . lifeguard-girl . . . weren’t on duty” (Rich 59).

As Rabbit sits poolside, feeling happy to have escaped working-class existence—a “darker older world he remembers but wants to stay buried. . . . where the farmer’s drudgery and the millworker’s lowered like twin clouds over land and city”—a conversation about the economy unfolds amongst his friends (Rich 62). Buddy Inglefinger, who does “something with electronics,” asserts that the powerful are manipulating inflation rates in order to get other people’s money (Rich 53). “The big boys are getting rich out of this,” he says, aggrieved. Webb Murkett, a roofing contractor and the acknowledged leader of Rabbit’s group of club friends, responds, his voice coming “from a height, gravelly, humorously placating: ‘Become a big boy yourself I guess is the only answer’” (Rich 63).

Though Rabbit may have some misgivings about Webb Murkett’s “become-a-big-boy-yourself” advice, at this stage of his life Rabbit is mostly reveling in the feelings that come with being near the top of the food chain:

At the Flying Eagle [Rabbit] feels exercised, cleansed, cherished; the biggest man at the table, he lifts his hand and a girl in the restaurant uniform . . . takes his order. She doesn’t ask his name; the people here know it. Her own name is stitched Sandra on her blouse pocket; she has milky skin like his daughter but is shorter, and the weary woman she will be has already crowded into her face. (Rich 56)

Having grown big enough to finally “be somebody” in society, Rabbit doesn’t have to advertise his name on his pocket like the small waitress, the “girl” in the standardized uniform, whose job it is to serve him, take his orders and, in this and other ways, help to prop him up from below.
Webb Murkett is one of many middle-class surrogate fathers that Rabbit turns to in an attempt to get the kind of advice that his own working-class father could not provide. Webb advises Rabbit financially and shows him how to manage the social and consumer side of middle-class life. Webb is only six years older than Janice, but when he talks about “that tireless subject of money,” she “hangs on his words. . . . It occurs to [Rabbit] that she used to listen to her father bullshit this way, and likes it” (Rich 371-2). Webb, for his part, having admired Fred Springer’s business acumen, “respects [Janice], as Fred Springer’s daughter” (Rich 57).

Webb and Fred’s adeptness in the arena of money-making gives them an exalted quasi-paternal status in the community. Men, in particular, seek out their help and guidance in both business and social matters. But though on the surface Webb and Fred seem like dignified leaders, both men exploit others with a callous disregard. Rabbit reveals some of Fred’s shady business techniques to his son when, working at the car lot one summer, Nelson asks Rabbit to explain “the financing”:

By the time [Fred] had sold a car to a customer the poor bozo thought he was robbing old Fred blind when the fact is the deal had angles to it like a spider web. When he wanted Toyota to give him the franchise, he claimed sixty thousand feet of extra service space . . . got a contractor . . . to throw down a slab and put up an uninsulated shell. That shop is still impossible to heat in the winter, you should hear Manny [the head mechanic] bitch. (Rich 106-107)

Never mind that the mechanics at the lot, who already receive less status and pay than the salesmen, must work in a freezing cold shop; Fred got the franchise. But the conversation about “financing” that Rabbit has with Nelson reveals that Rabbit himself has, as he has risen on the ladder of wealth and power, adopted at least some of Fred’s tactics, squeezing money out of others without undue worry about the morality of his actions. Though it has been years since Fred died and Rabbit assumed control of the dealership, for example, Rabbit has never
undertaken to insulate the shop where the mechanics must work. He also carries on Fred’s practice of steering customers to a bank that charges a slightly higher interest rate on its loans than other area banks, so that, in return, the bank will kick some money back to the dealership. When it comes to used cars, an area that Nelson is particularly interested in, Rabbit allows as how “in the old days sometimes a mechanic, up in the dashboard anyway, kind of had his screwdriver slip on the odometer” and then goes on to justify rolling back the record of the car’s mileage by saying “[p]eople who buy a used car know it’s a gamble anyway. A car might go twenty thousand miles without trouble or pop a cylinder tomorrow. Who’s to say?” (Rich 107).

Nelson proves to be a quick pupil, turning this father-and-son talk about how to succeed in business into an opportunity to launch the opening shot of his own self-interested campaign to get Charlie Stavros—Rabbit’s best friend and the second in command at Springer Motors—fired. Rabbit complains to Janice and her mother, who are in on the scheme to replace Charlie with Nelson:

“The kid…sits here hinting to me I should can Charlie so I can hire him instead.”
“Well,” Ma Springer pronounces peacefully, “Nelson’s of an age. Fred made space for you, Harry, and I know if he was here he’d make space for Nelson.”
In on the sideboard, dead Fred Springer listens to the rain, misty-eyed. (Rich 112)

The dead weight of Fred Springer’s presence haunts the house where his wife Bessie and Rabbit and Janice live. His picture in the dining room is placed next to photos of Janice and Nelson, though Fred’s portrait is displayed in “a gold frame broader than his daughter and grandson got.” He looks out at the family “misty-eyed and wrinkle-free courtesy of the portrait studio’s darkroom magic” (Rich 94). The managed quality of the photograph points to the way
Fred’s manipulation of others has been obscured; his memory has been airbrushed into something unblemished and full of sentimentality.

Under Fred’s gaze, the firing of Charlie becomes a story over which the family can become sentimental. While Nelson and Rabbit talk finances, Janice and her mother watch The Waltons, a television show about family togetherness during the Depression. The program makes them weep even though Janice admits self-consciously, “It’s so stupid to get carried away. It was in People how all the actors couldn’t stand each other, that’s what broke up the show” (Rich 111). Their tears are a further gloss on Fred’s “misty” eyes: like the real-life problems of the cast of The Waltons, Charlie’s problems are simultaneously known—he is an older man with a heart problem and an ailing mother—and airbrushed out of the picture. The story of what this firing would mean to Charlie and what it means about the Springer family's sense of morality is suppressed in favor of a different story, one in which a father generously “makes space” for his son.

By making Fred into the apotheosis of a good father and husband, Bessie, and to a lesser extent Janice, can use his image to measure and control Rabbit. Whenever Rabbit threatens to go astray, Fred’s memory is conjured up to help force him back into line. Rabbit resents this dynamic and rebels against becoming like Fred, whom he has never liked or respected. His father-in-law’s manipulativeness troubles Rabbit who views Fred’s “hatchet face creased like an Indian’s from a constant salesman’s smile” with disgust, seeing it as an indication of “how much ass you must kiss” if you are a person who lives “by people” (Redux 77).

The fact that Rabbit’s picture is absent from the gallery of family photographs perched on the dining room sideboard is an indication of a lack of loyalty—his to the family and the family’s to him. Despite having adopted some of Fred’s wheeler-dealer techniques as he struggles to do a
good job running the dealership, Rabbit harbors enough doubts and scruples about exploiting others to never feel completely committed to the middle-class business lifestyle. Questioning the values that Fred Springer lived by makes Rabbit seem less solid and dependable than Fred and leads the rest of the family, in turn, to exclude him from their plans and deliberations. Around the time that Rabbit comes under pressure to fire Charlie, for example, he is not told that Nelson’s girlfriend is pregnant and that that is part of the reason they want Nelson to have the job. Janice confirms Rabbit’s feeling that there is something he doesn’t know, but when he asks why he can’t be told, Janice laughs and responds “[b]ecause you’re not a Springer” (Rich 116).

Rabbit fills Fred’s position as chief salesman at the car dealership after his father-in-law dies, but he holds off from becoming “a Springer,” instinctively recoiling from allying with a man that profited from dishonesty and "ass kissing." Instead, Rabbit latches on to Webb Murkett, who seems, with his social confidence and his aura of rugged individualism, to offer a more dignified and also more manly model of success in the work world. But Webb Murkett, as his first and last name (murk it) suggests, is actually quite like Fred Springer in terms of his approach to business; it is just that his glamorous veneer, derived partly from the high degree of hedonistic consumerism in which he engages, distracts Rabbit from seeing those underlying similarities. Webb inducts Rabbit into an exciting afterhours bohemian lifestyle which includes liberal amounts of alcohol, intimate, free-rambling talk, and boundary-pushing sexual experiences which culminate in a night of spouse swapping during a group vacation in the Caribbean. In the world of work and finances, however, Webb, like Fred, hews to the conventional mindset. In advising Buddy Inglefinger to “become a big boy,” for example, Webb endorses two basic premises of capitalist society—survival of the fittest and a hierarchical economic structure. His advice naturalizes the idea that human beings are locked in endless
struggle with each other for control of life’s resources. There is no whisper here of a more dignified or humane way to organize society or the world of work. The only remedy Webb offers for an unequal distribution of power in which someone is always being demeaned or made to feel small is to move upwards toward the top of the food chain, to become an oppressor yourself so that you can live off the energy and labor of those you have managed to rise or be born above.

Webb’s worldview resonates for Rabbit because it dovetails with the status quo ideology that life is an endless competition of all against all. Rabbit’s father’s major piece of advice to his son—"don’t trust anybody"—serves as more reinforcement for Webb’s individualistic, anti-communal approach. The business lessons Rabbit has learned from Fred Springer and is in the process of imparting to Nelson partake of the same message: to succeed as a salesman you must pit yourself against your fellows, use others to your advantage, manipulate and rip them off when necessary, cover up your misdeeds as best you can, and move on.

In its bid to build a country club that will attract the striving middle-class of Brewer, the Flying Eagle has chosen a name that positions this mindset in a positive light: the eagle prettifies the predatory act, draping it in an ideology of strength and freedom. But, like the wrinkle-free face of Fred Springer, the club’s eagle is a mythological construction; one has never actually been sighted in the environs of the club. When Rabbit spots a bird soaring the skies over the club, he thinks for a moment it might be “the fabled eagle” but after observing it for a while he realizes it is actually a buzzard (Rich 63). With this sighting, the text quietly opens up a second perspective: buzzards fly as high and free as eagles, but instead of evoking feelings of admiration and awe, these enormous birds, perceived as feeding upon tragedy, misfortune, and death, elicit more queasy feelings.
The fatherly advice imparted to Rabbit by his middle-class mentors works like an inoculation against the queasy feelings that arise when one examines the underpinnings of capitalism. The substitution of the buzzard for the eagle is a subtle re-introduction of this suppressed knowledge. Rabbit is the only one who notices the bird as he sits with his club friends listening to Webb's business pronouncements and he keeps the discovery to himself. More, there is no indication of what he makes of this sighting. The text’s silence on Rabbit’s feelings and thoughts reproduces the silence of his middle-class mentors on the morality of profiting from the subjugation of others.

At the same time, this silence calls attention to the difficult problem of understanding how a mindset naturalizing injustice and inequality comes to be accepted and reproduced by individuals and society as a whole. What is the state of Rabbit’s consciousness vis-à-vis these issues? Does Rabbit notice the bird because he is having queasy feelings about being part of a system that matter-of-factly wreaks violence on others, or does the bird function as a way to let off steam through a distanced or ironic acknowledgement of the truth which allows Rabbit, at the same time, to feel less involved or complicit in the savagery of an eat-or-be eaten mentality? It’s not clear. Perhaps, due to the overall impermissibility of its subject, the only way the figure of the eagle-turned-buzzard can take up residence within either Rabbit or the social world of the text is if it appears as an independent object beyond society’s comment and control. In this way the buzzard has metaphorical weight in the text and, at the same time, social meaning can be disavowed; the bird can slip by Rabbit and reader alike, just one more layer of detail in a text full of such details.

In the Rabbit novels, it is clear that the fear of losing status, of not being on top, deforms men, causing them to cut themselves off from themselves and others. At a party, while Nelson
resentfully watches his pregnant wife Pru dance with “all these blacks and queers she’s not afraid of,” Annabelle remarks to him that “women get more out of life. With men, it’s if you don’t win every time, you’re nothing” (Rich 306-07). Later, when Annabelle asks if he will join the dancers, Nelson replies “No. I sit and . . . feel sorry for myself. . . . [because] my father’s a prick.” After saying this, Nelson conjures up a vision of his father: Rabbit’s face appears to him “like an out-of-focus close-up in some war movie in the scramble of battle. . . . [b]ig and white and vague as . . . when the world was too much for [Rabbit and Nelson].” What “strikes Nelson about the large bland face . . . is a mournful helplessness” (Rich 308).

Nelson sees Rabbit as having neither agency nor identity: he is helpless, his face “bland” and “vague.” He situates Rabbit on the battlefield, a fairly accurate reflection of his father’s preoccupation with winning and the desire to dominate others as illustrated by this long-ago exchange between Rabbit and Annabelle’s mother:

Rabbit asks Ruth, “When’s your birthday?”

“August. Why?”

“Mine’s April,” he says. “I win.”

“You win.” As if she knows how this makes him feel warmer; you can’t feel master, quite, of a woman who’s older. (Run 51)

Nelson places Rabbit not in a real war but in the “out-of-focus” limbo of “some war movie.” His father’s life comes to him through the mediation of a generic story concocted by others, as if any of the combat movies produced in the first decades of the postwar period and shown over and over again as re-runs on television to Nelson’s generation will do. And, in fact, most will since they almost all hammer home the same theme: war is a traumatic but also unavoidable part of life. In these films it becomes a kind of rite of passage for men, a platform where one either proves one's manhood to oneself and to one's peers or where one is exposed as
a coward. These dynamics are present in everyday life as well where a war sensibility manifests itself in exhibitions of guardedness, the conviction that one must be ever ready to act against the aggressive other, and a win-or-lose mentality that links winning to manliness.

Nelson’s vision of his father deviates from the generic postwar movie in at least one important respect: in the son’s version, the bonding of men as allies which typically paves the way for military success and provides the crucible in which their own and each other’s masculinity is forged, is completely missing. Instead, Nelson sees Rabbit as alone and “helpless,” a description that more and more matches the experience of workers in late capitalism as their power declines and their lives become more atomized.

As we have seen, Nelson and Rabbit often experience themselves as victims and feel threatened by just about everyone around them but especially by women, gays, and African Americans. Nelson comes to the party where he has the vision of Rabbit on the battlefield feeling like a failure: not only can’t he dance but he is plagued by the fact that Pru can and, worse, that she is dancing with "blacks and queers." He also feels insecure about his class and work prospects as he sees himself unable, at the party, to "join in the flickering mind play of computer science and college generally" (Rich 303). Having dropped out of college, he is stricken by the feeling that he won’t be able to measure up to his father’s achievements: that he cannot “be the floating easy athlete his father had been” (Rich 303). But the vision Nelson has of his father in the midst of the “scramble of battle” tells him something deeper and in some ways even more frightening: before the vision, Nelson thinks of his father as his competition and as “a prick” deliberately withholding help from his son; the vision causes Nelson to take in a different side of Rabbit—his fearful, helpless side, the side that loses, that is a loser. Through the vision, Nelson discovers that his father is unavailable to help him because Rabbit himself is lost, unable
to figure out a way to successfully manage the battlefield of life. Nelson now becomes doubly burdened as his own fears and feelings of inadequacy are compounded by the dawning realization that his father is missing in action.

Nelson's vision of Rabbit as a solitary, helpless figure taps into larger cultural and socio-economic developments, but Nelson himself is not able to contextualize his father in this way. In the great winnowing and weighing of men that war traditionally affords, Nelson finds his father, not the system, wanting. Unable to see beyond his own fears and insecurities to the larger forces at work, he casts himself as a victim of his father's seemingly willful failures.

Rabbit’s military service, though scarcely depicted in the novels which begin several years after he has returned to civilian life, constitutes a major turning point in his life. As a result of being in the Army, Rabbit begins to think of himself as a loser and no longer views life as an exciting adventure, nor himself as a unique and interesting individual. That this should be so hints at the debilitating effect on men’s psyches of the combat mentality prevalent in capitalist society as a whole. Though never sent overseas, Rabbit returns home from two years of being stationed in Texas during the Korean War with psychic wounds. His mother finds him “a different boy.” His father is disgusted with the changes he sees in his son: “all he cares about [after the Army] is chasing ass... He’s become the worst kind of... bum” (Run 136-7). Rabbit himself feels depressed and adrift after being in the Army. His high school days over, there is no longer any forum in which he can display the easy athleticism Nelson will later come to envy. Worst of all, he discovers he is interchangeable: Rabbit’s high school sweetheart Mary Ann has married another while he was away. “It hurts,” Rabbit thinks towards the end of his life. “Though the stars recycle themselves and remake all the heavy atoms creation needs, [he] will never be that person again, that boy with that girl” (Rest 363).
When, shortly before his death, Rabbit recalls his experience in the Army, he thinks of the “aligned faceless men, the curious peace of having no decisions to make, of being told entirely what to do” and concludes, “[w]ar is a relief in many ways. Without the cold war, what’s the point of being an American?” (*Rest* 367). Though this final assertion is rife with irony, Rabbit offers it up with straightforward sincerity. A lifetime of banding together with faceless others to confront an equally faceless enemy has supplanted the harder, more emotionally-difficult but also more emotionally rewarding work of constructing an individual identity and purpose. Fear and conflict become the bedrock upon which the lowest common denominator of identity—“being an American”—builds its hollow shape.

Ruth and Rabbit’s conversation about their ages takes place in the late 1950s. By the end of the 1970s, gender relations have undergone significant revision. Ruth may have allowed Rabbit to feel like a master, but she has raised her daughter Annabelle to demand more for herself, encouraging her “not to back down . . . [simply] because [she’s] a girl” (*Rich* 306). Nelson’s wife Pru also refuses to play the submissive female. At the party, Nelson fumes at Pru’s “defiant dancing” and feels irritated when he remembers that she is a year his senior (*Rich* 307). He bullies her off the dance floor, grabbing her wrist and deliberately hurting her in the process. In the end, though, he cannot force her to leave the party and, unable to get his way, Nelson breaks down in tears. “He is nothing to her,” he thinks, “. . . a brat, a bug to be humored” (*Rich* 311).

The political terrain between men and women has changed, but Nelson, as he begins to come of age in the late 1970s, is still steeped in his father’s value structure. He sees life in win-or-lose terms, and when he loses—even if it is just a petty contest with Pru about when to leave the party—his identity is so fragile that he feels in danger of being rubbed out: he is “nothing”
or, worse, he becomes a different species, a “bug” which another human can easily squash.\textsuperscript{16} Like Rabbit, Nelson views human interaction through the lens of conflict. He feels especially threatened by those lower down on the social ladder. When he confronts Pru, whom he thinks of as “a slum kid” (\textit{Rich} 304), he sees “vampire” lips and, in her eyes, the “blank defiance of the poor: you can’t scare them enough” (\textit{Rich} 310). Unable to shed his antagonism and fear of those he feels called upon to master if he is to make something—rather than nothing—out of himself, Nelson spends most of the party sitting on the sidelines, isolating himself from his fellow human beings as he stewes with resentment and worry.

Nelson feels threatened by those above him on the social and economic ladder who, like his father, have made it, and by those of his own generation, symbolized by the partygoers, who are at or below his level. But, as Rabbit discovers, the sense of being in a pressure cooker does not stop when one rises up the hierarchy or surpasses one’s father’s status. By the last decade of his life, Rabbit has garnered enough money to live an extremely comfortable life, but he continues to be wracked by feelings of competition, anger, and fear. Taking a walk in his Florida retirement community, he discovers a posh neighborhood where, in contrast to his and Janice’s landlocked condo, people own houses fronting the ocean. “No matter how hard you climb,” he thinks, “there are always the rich above you, who got there without effort. Lucky stiffs, holding you down, making you discontent so you buy more of the crap advertised on television” (\textit{Rest} 402).

Much of the “crap” that Rabbit buys in this final novel is junk food and it becomes a metaphor for the way the struggle for economic resources takes an inward toll on men, clogging them up and cutting them off both from themselves and others. Released from the hospital after

\textsuperscript{16} Nelson’s use of the word bug easily evokes such an end since Annabelle has just told him that her boyfriend makes bug killers (\textit{Rich} 307).
an angioplasty procedure, Rabbit walks around Brewer visiting his old neighborhoods including the “slum” where Rabbit and Janice lived when they were first married. It has become upscale now but Rabbit remembers the “defeat” he and Janice felt living there, “a sense of defeat the years have brought back to him, after what seemed for a while to be triumphs” (Rest 271). He has acquired material wealth, but something is still amiss. He notices how as new housing developments have sprung up and spread out into the hills at the edges of the city, “deforested acres of the mountain reddish mud . . . [have] drifted . . . all along the fresh curbs and . . . onto the street’s blue-black asphalt. We’re using it all up. [Rabbit] thinks. The world” (Rest 271).

Rabbit turns the story of destruction and death he reads embedded everywhere in the world inward upon himself. “[T]o suppress his melancholy” and to push down the feelings of defeat and class resentment and anxiety, Rabbit buys a bag of Corn Chips. The violence embedded in physical survival and the marshalling of resources continues to ghost through his mind as he eats: “[e]ver since childhood . . . [he] has had mixed feelings about eating, especially the creatures that not too long ago were living just like you. Sometimes he imagines he can taste the terror of the ax in the slice of turkey or chicken” (Rest 271). Thoughts of physical bodies lead Rabbit to think of Thelma, his extra-marital lover for the last ten years, and how they also “eat” each other during sex. He struggles to understand why his relationship with Thelma has never deepened. At first his explanation stays on the external, material level, thinking “there [are] limits to what bodies can do,” but then he acknowledges “some limitation within him really, a failure or refusal to love any substance but his own” (Rest 272). Still, this small fragment of introspection doesn’t help Rabbit open up more to Thelma or himself: in contemplating Thelma’s approaching death he continues to feel little in the way of real feelings, only “helpless and in his helplessness hard-hearted” (Rest 272). The notion that he loves “his
own substance” is complicated by the final sentences of the paragraph: finishing the anesthetizing Corn Chips, he sees that “he has wrapped himself around . . . sheer poison, pure sludge in his arteries. . . .” and concludes, “[h]e hates himself, with a certain relish” (Rest 272).

The reason for Rabbit’s inability to have a deeper involvement with Thelma—or with Nelson, Janice, or even himself, for that matter—remains rather vague in his mind, but it seems likely from the train of thought leading up to his acknowledgement of “some limitation within him” that the problem lies in Rabbit’s inability to escape the eat-or-be-eaten mentality he finds everywhere in class society. Rabbit’s thought that there are “limits to what bodies can do” hints at this through its apparent recognition of the limitations of the purely physical world. Because the material aspects of survival are so pressing, they loom large in his mind. His heart has become hardened with “crap” because there is little room left for emotional, intellectual, and spiritual concerns. As literary critic Charles Berryman reminds us, “there is much talk about religion with the local minister in the first novel, there are only doctors in the last book” (31-2). The first novel’s epigraph from Pascal comes to mind again: “The motions of Grace, the hardness of the heart; external circumstances.” In the end, external circumstances—the compulsions and constraints of the surrounding capitalist society—steer Rabbit not towards grace but towards a vastly constricted heart where human relations have been all but squeezed out. “[T]ired and stiff and full of crud,” it is, as his doctor in the final novel pronounces, “a typical American heart, for [Rabbit’s] age and economic status” (Rest 137).

Rabbit’s preoccupation with material welfare becomes all-consuming partly because his material security under capitalism is in need of constant attention and tending. Michael Kimmel notes that “the emerging capitalist market in the early nineteenth century both freed individual men and destabilized them” ("Birth" 139). The term "self-made man" first makes its appearance
in 1832 when it was coined by Henry Clay in an address on the floor of the U.S. Senate. Characterized by “success in the market, individual achievement, mobility, [and] wealth,” the image of men rising by their own hard work rapidly became, according to Kimmel, the model of manhood for the rising middle class ("Birth" 140). But the opportunity to invent oneself in one’s own image comes with a steep price tag for men: “To derive one’s identity, and especially one’s identity as a man, from marketplace successes [is] a risky proposition. . . . The flip side of . . . economic autonomy is anxiety, restlessness, loneliness. . . . Success must be earned, manhood must be proved—and proved constantly” (Kimmel, "Birth" 139-40).

In Rabbit is Rich, Updike explores the effect of the ups and downs of the market on his main character’s psyche and on the quality of his relationships with others through a trip Rabbit and Janice take to the moneychanger. Webb Murkett, announcing that too many people have bought gold and that it is time to shift investments to silver, tells Rabbit, “When the little man climbs on the bandwagon, the smart money gets off” (Rich 340). Rabbit, who thinks of his working-class father as "one of the 'little men,'" wants at all costs to avoid being one himself (Redux 20); he promptly retrieves his gold Krugerrands from the bank and takes them to the moneychanger a few blocks away. With the gold in his pockets and Janice by his side, he marches almost triumphantly past “[u]nderfed little Puerto Rican women,” and “kids who ought to be in school, and bleary retirees in dirty padded parkas and . . . whiskey loose jaws ” whom “the mills have used . . . up and spit . . . out” (Rich 341). As he and Janice swing along in their expensive winter coats, Rabbit thinks “that he is all set, that they are all set, that their smiles as they walk along can afford to discard the bitter blank glances that flicker toward them on the street, then fall away” (Rich 341). On the way back, however, having changed the gold into a
much heavier load of worn silver coins, Rabbit is burdened by the uncertainty of the transaction. His financial worries color his perceptions of others: the people he had passed barely an hour before suddenly take on a more sinister cast. A Black man who approaches Rabbit for a handout causes him to veer into the middle of the street and the path of an on-coming bus in a panicky attempt to get away. Further on, “dark street kids” and “shaggy rummies in their winter layered look” become “a small crowd” that “threatens to collect around” him (Rich 346). As they get closer to the bank, Rabbit notices that people are “shying away” from him and Janice: they themselves have now become “menacing, distorted into struggling shapes by the force-fields of their [boxes of silver]” (Rich 347). Finally Rabbit imagines God looking down to see him and Janice like “two ants trying to make it up the sides of a bathroom basin” (Rich 347).

During the space of a lunch hour, Rabbit runs the emotional gamut, starting out on a high as he strides along like a god ignoring the human beings suffering below him and ending up down low himself, a tiny bug watched by a powerful and apparently indifferent god. Rabbit’s vision of himself and Janice as small, vulnerable insects fits with his overall feeling that, as he manages his family’s finances, he makes his way through a Darwinian landscape where the struggle for physical survival dwarfs other aspects of life. Updike conveys Rabbit’s sense that he is an animal on heightened physical alert by using language that evokes life in the wild: Rabbit “scents rising from [Janice] . . . a doubt that he has led them well in this new inflated world” (Rich 348, emphasis added). The sum of money Rabbit stands to lose or gain during this lunchtime venture is not large and has little to do with Rabbit’s actual physical survival or even with his ability to maintain his present standard of living; the extreme mental gyrations Rabbit experiences as he attempts to grow what is essentially a luxury fund is an indication of how completely his emotional life has become hardwired to the vicissitudes of the market.
Money has seeded itself in Rabbit’s relationships, taking up so much space that little is left over. On the way to the moneychanger, the street people, for example, serve as foils against which Rabbit can more thoroughly enjoy and appreciate his own good fortune. On the way back, the threat of financial loss causes Rabbit to look anew at these same people, but only in order to assess the risk they pose and to prepare for defensive maneuvers. In either case, whether going in confidence or returning in fear, Rabbit’s financial ups and downs becomes a variable lens through which the people around him become objectified.

This lens distorts his view of strangers but it also distances him from family and friends. In the case of Nelson, monetary considerations crowd out other ways of relating. When he is unable to cram all the silver coins into the bank deposit box, Rabbit worries that Nelson will attempt to steal the coins that must be brought home. This thought leads Rabbit to think about how much money Nelson is costing him in general and then to the prediction that Pru will get tired of such a financially inept husband and ask for a divorce. The couple’s dissolution will, he warns Janice sourly, “cost us too” (Rich 350). Becoming melancholy, Rabbit sees the silver coins he has stuffed into his bank deposit box as “dirt” and Christmas as a “great sad lie told to children . . . [which] stains” the commercial street he and Janice have traversed from bank to moneychanger and back again. “[T]hrough the murk he glimpses the truth that to be rich is to be robbed, to be rich is to be poor” (Rich 351).

Rabbit’s insight that being obsessed with wealth has cost him “loss after loss” is startling to him but also fleeting, as if Rabbit cannot remain himself and at the same time allow the truth he has uncovered to more fully penetrate his consciousness (Rich 350). Instead, the insight stays on a generalized plane; Rabbit never exactly enumerates his losses making readers unsure as to whether Rabbit sees his inability to relate in deeper, more meaningful ways to others as one of
the ways his pursuit of wealth has made him poorer. The next interchange between Janice and
Rabbit, however, underlines just this kind of tradeoff. Janice tries to recall Rabbit to a different
way of relating when she tells her husband, “Pru loves Nelson, and he loves her. They won’t get
a divorce.” But Rabbit, either unable or unwilling to talk emotions, shunts the conversation back
to money: “I wasn’t thinking about that. I was thinking about how silver’s going to go down”
(Rich, 351).

Mirroring the mercurial nature of the market, men's workplace relationships are in
constant flux, ranging from positive to negative and back again under the pressures of economic
competition and the ebb and flow of their finances. While men are often experienced as enemies,
male friends and relatives are also, at times, important allies. Rabbit's father Earl, for example,
relies upon the men in his union at the printing plant for support and protection and Rabbit
eventually reaps the benefits of the union's work when he obtains a steady job there working
alongside his father. When he is layed off, his father-in-law picks up the slack, offering him a job
at the car dealership. Once there, Rabbit becomes best friends with co-worker Charlie Stavros
and, after Fred’s death, the two men form an impressive sales team. Later, Rabbit turns to his
friend Webb Murkett for guidance in investing the business profits he has made at Springer
Motors and Webb’s advice helps transform Rabbit’s savings into a down payment on a house in
the suburbs.

But men's relationships to each other are never just one thing. Mirroring the uncertain up-
one-day-down-the-next relationship men have to a market economy, they not only have the
potential to be either enemies or allies, they also have the ability to begin as one and morph into
the other. The only thing for certain is that male relationships are almost always exercises in
ambivalence. As a tired Rabbit puts it towards the end of his life when he is confronted with his
son’s embezzlement and the decision by Toyota to take its franchise away and give it to another car dealership, “[t]here’s no such thing as loyalty any more” (Rest 290).

The experience of opposite states existing comfortably side by side seems, in fact, to be a feature of male work life. Nelson describes the business of selling cars as “all cutthroat but kind of jolly at the same time” (Rich 121). Later, when Rabbit tells Nelson that sales are down since he began working at the car lot, Nelson replies defensively, “I try to be friendly and aggressive and all that when the people come in” (Rich 356). Rabbit and Charlie work side by side at Springer Motors, though Charlie once had an affair with Janice. As the two men shoot the breeze and wait for customers Rabbit finds himself thinking “of Charlie’s prick inside Janice and his feeling is hostile and cozy in almost equal proportions, coziness getting the edge” (Rich 6).

The mixture of hostility and coziness with which men approach each other has its roots in the volatile economic world where men jockey for position, but these patterns of relating find their way into the home as well, sometimes catching family members, who have a different, more benign image of family life, by surprise. When Nelson leaves to live at a drug treatment facility, for example, his son Roy “hangs on to Nelson’s ear in parting and [Janice] wonders where Roy got this idea of inflicting pain to show affection” (Rest 262). In the next section I take a closer look at relationships within the home, concentrating in particular on how father-son and father-daughter relationships reflect and respond to the socio-economic forces at work in the larger society.

Exploding from Within

We have seen how beneath the everyday surface of family life in Díaz's Drown and Smiley's A Thousand Acres lie volatile currents born of social and historical ills that threaten to rip each family apart. A similar feeling of explosivity permeates family life in the Rabbit series.
*Rabbit at Rest,* for example, is punctuated by reports of so many plane crashes, some of which are brought down by terrorist bombs, that Rabbit concludes “[w]e can explode any second” (*Rest* 410). Running from Janice after having slept with their daughter-in-law Pru, Rabbit does just this at novel’s end when, suffering a fatal heart attack, he “bursts from within” (*Rest* 420). But though the Rabbit novels share with Díaz and Smiley's works the sense that family life is extremely volatile, the tensions in Rabbit's family are qualitatively different. Tensions aren't repressed until they explode catastrophically. Rather, there is a constant letting off of steam about the dissatisfactions of family life. The family hardly seems to go a day without some issue or other erupting into a minor skirmish or a spate of acting out and bad behavior. Perhaps because the family is middle-class and more firmly entrenched in a postindustrial mindset than either Ginny or Yunior's family are, there is also a great deal of verbalization involved as characters whimper, complain, justify, hurl insults, slip in satiric remarks or otherwise find ways to jockey for position by talking about the troubles and tensions of family life.

Eli Zaretsky observes that in developed capitalist countries during the twentieth century, as the possibility of owning productive property becomes more and more remote for most people, “work” and “life” come to be experienced as distinctly separate realms. The rise of “a separate sphere of personal life, seemingly divorced from the mode of production” develops in tandem with the capitalist socialization of production precisely because these developments in the work world give workers both less control over the productive process and, with the increased efficiency found there, a greater amount of free time to spend outside of production (14). “Under capitalism,” Zaretsky writes, “an ethic of personal fulfillment” develops and

[m]uch of this search for personal meaning takes place within the family. . . . The distinguishing characteristic of this search is its subjectivity—the sense of an individual, alone, outside society with no firm sense of his or her own place in a rationally ordered scheme. It takes place on a vast new social terrain known as
personal life, whose connection to the rest of society is as veiled and obscure as is the family’s connection. . . . The family now [becomes] the major space in society in which the individual self could be valued ‘for itself’. . . . Having no private property to uphold, contemporary individualism [as distinct from 19th century bourgeois individualism] upholds the self as an ‘autonomous’ realm outside society. This new emphasis on one’s personal feelings and inner needs . . . gives a continued meaning to family life and at the same time threatens to explode it from within. (15-18)\textsuperscript{18}

The relationship between fathers and sons is influenced by the ambiguous enemy-ally relationship that men have evolved in the work place, but the perceptual barrier between “work” and “life” keeps family members from seeing how the work realm informs family life. Being awash in contradictory feelings with no sense of where they come from or how they are attached to the rest of life intensifies the father-son relationship. The tension between fathers and sons, particularly white, native-born fathers and sons, grows even more fraught after mid-century when expectations for sons in the public sphere are heightened by both the rising economic prosperity of the postwar years and by an ideology of national progress fueled, in part, by the political imperatives of the cold war. Susan Faludi reminds us of the heady atmosphere of the late 1950s and early 1960s: “men of the fathers’ generation [veterans of World War II and the Korean War] had ‘won’ the world and now they were giving it to their sons. Their nation had come into its own, powerful, wealthy, dominant. . . . The fathers had made their sons masters of the universe and it felt . . . that what they had created would last forever” (4-5). But, as Faludi goes on to document, the economic, social and cultural changes of the next several decades

\textsuperscript{18}Zaretsky argues that in the nineteenth century, personal life was largely the province of artists, the upper classes, and the bourgeois family, which attached itself to the ideal of owning productive private property (i.e., the means of production). The sense of an independent self was expressed through social movements such as romanticism and utopian socialism. By the twentieth century, however, Zaretsky observes that with the increasing proletarianization of life, most people had neither access to nor the hope of acquiring private productive property. At the same time, there was no political movement in developed capitalist countries that sought to “transform both personal life and production.” These conditions have led to personal life becoming increasingly “characterized by subjectivity—the search for personal identity outside the social division of labor,” and the self coming to be seen as an “autonomous’ realm outside society” (18).
completely undermine the father’s “promise” to the son so that by the late 1970s “[t]he boy who had been told he was going to be the master of the universe” awakes to find himself “master of nothing” (30).

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, Rabbit and Nelson peer at each other across the living room and feel not that they are ensconced in the “safe haven” of the Victorian family nor in the triumphant post war scenario where the father is going to help his son rocket into a brilliant future, but rather that they are enclosed in a small space with a person who might just as soon inflict damage as lend a helping hand. An explosive, anything-can-happen atmosphere infuses their relationship, replacing the sense of trust and orderly inheritance that seem to characterize families from earlier eras. When Nelson comes home in the late 1970s for the summer of his junior year in college, Rabbit exclaims to Janice, “I like having Nelson in the house. . . . It’s great to have an enemy. Sharpens your senses” (Rich 116).

It’s true that the feeling of fathers and sons locked in a storm of anger and disappointment does not suddenly begin with the downturn of the economy in the 1970s. When Rabbit runs from Janice in the 1950s, Rabbit’s father Earl uses similar language to describe his son, referring to Rabbit as “my enemy” and a “bum” who “won’t come work in the print shop [with Earl] because it’ll get his fingernails dirty.” He suggests that “the girls [sic] parents get the police after him. . . . In my opinion a good swift kick is what he needs” (Run 137-8). But Earl’s harsh feelings for Rabbit stem from his desire to see Rabbit settle down and take his place in society as a solid citizen. Once Rabbit returns to Janice and begins again to shoulder his breadwinning responsibilities, Earl’s criticisms fade away and he and Rabbit return to a supportive, if somewhat anesthetized, relationship.
Rabbit’s dealings with his own son are far more contentious. In contrast to Earl who wants his son to come to work with him and when Rabbit does it becomes a place where, away from Rabbit's overbearing mother, father and son are able to bond and grow close, Rabbit does everything he can to discourage Nelson from working at Springer Motors. While Rabbit's relationship with his generally mild-mannered father is characterized by very few major flare-ups, Rabbit and his son are locked in a constant state of low-level tension: the least little thing can lead to an outbreak of hostilities. At the same time, Nelson and Rabbit have a deeper emotional bond than Rabbit had with his father: they pay close attention to each other and what happens between them matters. The intense ups and downs of Rabbit and Nelson’s relationship reflect the historical moment in which they live, a moment, as Faludi reminds us, that is freighted with outsized inter-generational expectations. It reflects, as well, their position in the class hierarchy: as a working-class man, Earl seems to expect less and settle for less than Rabbit, who has ingested the dreams and aspirations of the postwar rising middle class and has also passed them on to his son. Finally, the heightened level of emotional interaction between Rabbit and Nelson reflects the increasing call for interactive "people" skills in the workplace as manufacturing and production jobs like Earl's job as a Linotype operator give way to jobs in the service industry like selling cars or being a counselor as Nelson is when we last encounter him in *Rabbit Remembered*.

The heightened sense of expectation that Rabbit and Nelson bring to their relationship makes each other’s shortcomings stand out in relief and gives rise to a chronic atmosphere of irritation and disappointment. Rabbit sees Nelson as “poor in spirit,” “shiftless,” “a baby,” “a rat,” and just plain “bad news” (*Rich* 68, 278, 318, 397, 414). He winces internally as Nelson “slouches to his feet” (*Rich* 68), or “whines” instead of talking (*Rest* 21). For his part, Nelson
lambastes Rabbit for being “a lousy husband. . . . lazy . . . shiftless. . . . queer” who gets "nasty" when there is "another man around" (Rich 123, 296). He sees Rabbit as "a killer [with] a body count of two to his credit and his own son next if he can figure out how to do it without looking bad" (Rich 293).

The bickering between the two is endless as if the very air they breathe is filled with poison. When Rabbit picks Nelson and his family up at the airport at the start of a visit, Rabbit and eight-year-old granddaughter Judy wander off and get lost. When they meet up with the rest of the family a few minutes later, Nelson angrily accuses Rabbit of “kidnapping [his] goddamn daughter” (Rest 19). Rabbit, in retaliation, tries to see “how bad he can make [Nelson] look in front of the women” by asking Nelson “What’s the significance of an earring when you’re married with two children?” Nelson, adroit at the game of one-upmanship that the two have immediately fallen back into, “ignores the question in silence, making his father look bad” (Rest 19-22).

One impetus for this negativity between the two is a fierce struggle for control of the available resources. Because the sphere of engagement is domestic, who commands what chair becomes both the means of asserting dominance and the metaphor through which a larger relationship to each other and the world and its goods is expressed. After Nelson moves back home, Rabbit confides to Charlie that his son “walks all over” him and complains that “every time you come into a room it seems he’s sitting there with a beer” (Rich 120). A few pages later, Nelson uses the same metaphor to describe his feelings of being crowded out by Rabbit: “I can’t stand him,” he tells Melanie, “the way he sits there in the living room hogging the Barcalounger. He . . . just sits there in the middle of the whole fucking world, taking and taking” (Rich 123).
The fight over who gets to sit in the Barcalounger may seem trivial, even comical, but it reveals a deeper mindset that both father and son share: there is only one place of power in a room. As they warily circle each other, competing for the patriarchal seat like two children playing musical chairs, the language each uses to explain his actions and motivations is the language of Darwinian competition that, as we have seen, also infuses and justifies the hierarchical structure of the work world.\(^\text{19}\) Despite the fact that this father-and-son duo lives a suburban lifestyle located at a far remove from their more primitive ancestors, an eat-or-be-eaten rhetoric permeates their consciousness. Nelson sees his father as having evolved a new way of feeding and sustaining himself: “[h]e’s getting bigger and bigger . . . his skin glows like his pores are absorbing some food out of the air” (Rich 337). The spectacle of his father’s mysterious expansion reminds Nelson of a childhood book about a giant with “blubbery lips and separated teeth” who looks into

some cave where two children . . . brother and sister probably . . . are crouching . . . they are you, looking out, hunted, too scared to move a muscle or breathe a breath as the great bumpy gleeful face fills the sunny mouth of the cave. That’s how he sees Dad these days; he Nelson is in a tunnel and his father’s face fills the far end where he might get out into the sun. The old man doesn’t even know he’s doing it, it comes on with that little nibbly sorry smile, a flick of dismissal as he pivots away, disappointed, that’s it, he’s disappointed his father, he should be something other than he is, and now at the lot all the men . . . see that too: he is not his father, lacks that height, that tossing off that [Rabbit] Angstrom can do. (Rich 338)

The detailed description of the giant’s lips and teeth and the fact that his face fills the entrance of the cave implies—though it is never explicitly stated—that the children are in danger of being eaten. The use of the word “mouth” to describe the place where the cave and the giant’s face intersect reinforces this impression. But the fear of being physically torn apart transposes

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\(^{19}\) The Barcalounger is literally the patriarchal seat: it was Fred Springer’s chair.
itself in Nelson’s adult mind into something that feels equally terrifying to him: the sight of his father turning away in disappointment. Though, at first glance, Rabbit’s “flick of dismissal” seems far less severe than the physical trauma of being eaten by a giant, Nelson directly relates the emotional trauma of being abandoned to his physical survival: his father’s refusal to support him encourages Rabbit’s friends and associates—the other men at work—to also discount and dismiss Nelson. Without allies in the work world, Nelson might well end up without the ability to live. In this way the father’s emotional abandonment circles back around and becomes physical. Conversely, the limitations of Nelson’s physical body—he is shorter than his father, something both of them are acutely aware of—metamorphosizes under the pressure of modern-day life and work into an emotional liability: Nelson lacks his father’s “height;” he cannot measure up at work.20

While Nelson sees his father sitting at the center of the world “taking and taking,” able to make food out of thin air, Rabbit listens as his son makes his drunken way to the Barcalounger after a night on the town and imagines Nelson’s “surly and puzzled face . . . drinking and eating up the world and out of sheer spite at that” (Rich 334). No less than Nelson in the cave, Rabbit feels hunted, cornered, even paralyzed by his son’s presence: “how threatened his position is,” Rabbit thinks at one point, with “Nelson on his tail” (Rich 205). When Charlie is terminated to make way for Nelson at the lot, Rabbit exhibits a panicky desire to get away: “The kid’s taking over the lot Monday, let’s get the hell out of here” he tells Janice. When she expresses concern that he should speak about Nelson this way in front of two of Rabbit's friends who are also fathers, Rabbit retorts, “They’re not shocked. Their kids are eating 'em alive too” (Rich 280).

20 There is a great deal of worry on the part of both father and son about Nelson’s height. Rabbit is tall and was a basketball star in high school, while Nelson is short, a fact which made it impossible for him to follow his dream of becoming a baseball pitcher. Later, there is concern because Pru is taller than Nelson which seems to trigger the worry, whenever it is brought up, that she is therefore the dominant spouse in the relationship.
Father and son swim in symmetrical arcs, each fearful of being eaten by the other, each seeing the other as slurping up all the resources. Updike draws attention to the parallel mindset of father and son by setting scenes that illustrate their similarities in close proximity to each other. Thus, Rabbit’s image of Nelson’s face “drinking and eating up the world” comes just pages before Nelson’s vision of Rabbit’s face with its “blubbery lips and separated teeth” hunting the children in the cave. And Rabbit tells Charlie that Nelson is crowding him out of his domestic space by seeming to be sitting in whatever room Rabbit enters just pages before Nelson complains that Rabbit is hogging center stage in the living room by sitting in the Barcalounger. The fact that Rabbit’s views often come first in these careful couplings implies that it is the father who sets the tone in the relationship while Nelson, immersed in the whirlwind of emotions his father puts out, simply tries to hang in there and survive, giving back in order to defend himself from what is being dished out. Nelson discovers himself trapped in a similarly reactive posture when it comes to women: “Why can’t a woman just be your friend, even with the sex?” he finds himself thinking sorrowfully as his relationship with Pru goes from bad to worse. “Why do you have to keep dealing with all this ego, giving back hurt just to defend yourself?” (Rich 314).

While men and women in Updike’s novels are engaged in their own distinct inter-gender battles, females living under the family roof also become contested resources in the war of father and son. As we have seen, Nelson worries at the beginning of *Rabbit at Rest* that Rabbit is trying to “kidnap” his daughter. Later in the same novel, Rabbit “takes” Nelson’s wife Pru by sleeping with her. Another time, prompted by Janice asking why Rabbit is so hard on Nelson, Rabbit responds “He’s hard on me,” justifying his hostility towards his son by thinking to himself “[f]ucking kid not thirteen years old and tried to take Jill [Rabbit’s girlfriend] from him” (Rich
The competition between Rabbit and Nelson is not only for physical/sexual possession of the women, but also for their hearts and minds: “[Rabbit] wants to hear that Pru hates Nelson, that she is sorry she has married him, that the father has made the son look sick” (Rich 367).

Father and son live in an atmosphere of fearful hyper-vigilance. When Nelson sits perusing a book on financing that he “has stolen” (Rabbit’s perception of the act) from Fred Springer’s old office, it “makes [Rabbit] nervous to see the kid read. Like he’s plotting something” (Rich 106-7). When Rabbit makes a remark about how Nelson “wrecked” one of his cars, Nelson begins “darting looks at every corner of the ceiling looking for the escape hatch” (Rich 110). The making of each other into enemies reaches its logical conclusion in father and son objectifying the other to such a degree that they lose touch with anything positive or life-giving in the other: to Rabbit, Nelson becomes “a piece of dead weight” that the father is somehow obligated to carry (Rich 244); not too many pages later, Nelson complains that Rabbit’s “spark is gone, leaving a big dead man on Nelson’s chest” (Rich 293).

When Janice asks again, in another scene, why Rabbit’s “heart is so hard toward Nelson,” Rabbit thinks to himself “[b]ecause Nelson has swallowed up the boy that was and substituted one more pushy man in the world, hairy wrists, big prick” (Rich 209). But though Rabbit’s heart has hardened against his competitor-son, there are moments when his empathy for his son comes to the fore: “For all that is wrong between them there are moments when his heart and Nelson’s might be opposite ends of a single short steel bar, [Rabbit] knows so exactly what the kid is feeling” (Rich 361). There is nothing soft or overly loving about the image of the two hearts being connected at “opposite ends of a . . . steel bar.” Still, Rabbit’s identification with Nelson’s plight of having to settle down to the grind of being a breadwinner and family man, allows him to let go of his competitive stance and express concern and caring for his son.
her mother push for Rabbit to hire Nelson at the car dealership, Rabbit pushes back at them with “I don’t want him to live my life” (Rich 242).

“You worked at your father’s trade,” Janice tells him, “and that’s what Nelson’s asking to do.”

“Sure, sure,” [Rabbit] shouts, “when he gets out of college if that’s what he wants. Though frankly I’d hoped he’d want more.” (Rich 112-13)

Rabbit’s “I’d hoped he’d want more” recalls his own quest in Rabbit, Run to break out of the life he inherited and discover something “more.” By midlife, however, Rabbit’s idealistic impulses have been laid to rest: “[f]or a while [he] had kicked against death, then he gave in and went to work” (Rich 129). As Nelson leaves college and begins to work, Rabbit finds himself taking critical stock of his life. “What has he done, he wonders . . . with this life of his more than half over?” The answer is a list notable for its lack of passion:

He loves these people with him, penned in among the lines of the tennis court. . . . He never reads a book, just the newspaper to have something to say to people. . . . He loves Nature, though he can name almost nothing in it. . . . He loves money, though he doesn’t understand how it flows to him, or how it leaks away. . . . He loves men, uncomplaining with their pot bellies and cross-hatched red necks, embarrassed for what to talk about when the game is over, whatever the game is. What a threadbare thing we make of life! (Rich 129)

While Rabbit discourages Nelson from coming to work at the car lot partly because he feels uncomfortable letting his competitor-son into the stronghold of his workplace, he also has another, more empathetic, reason for pushing Nelson away: he doesn’t want to see his son suffer the “inner dwindling” that characterizes Rabbit’s life (Rich 89). Though it may be too late for him, Rabbit rebels against willing his son his own spiritually threadbare existence. He would rather pass on the quest for “more” which once lit up his own life.
But though Rabbit encourages Nelson to search for something meaningful and fulfilling to do with his life, he can offer his son little concrete help or direction. “There must be a good way to live,” Rabbit thinks wistfully, but he is unable to figure out what that “good way” might be or how it might become a reality (Rich 128). When he thinks about jobs or careers, he sees mostly negative choices. Hearing that one of Nelson's friends has decided to become an endodontist, for example, Rabbit thinks, "What a hellish way to make a living. Maybe there's no entirely good way" (Rich 189). Stymied, he can only steer his son away from the places and paths where he knows it is not. Rabbit didn’t go to college, so he urges Nelson to finish; Rabbit marks going to work alongside his father as the beginning of “giving in to death,” so he does his best to discourage Nelson from coming to work with him.

Alarmed by the “[f]ear that rolls off this kid so thick” that Rabbit doesn’t know if he can keep talking to him, Rabbit tries to shake his son out of his passivity:

"Maybe I haven’t done everything right in my life. I know I haven’t. But I haven’t committed the greatest sin. I haven’t laid down and died. . . . It’s against Nature, to give up, you’ve got to keep moving. That’s the thing about you. You’re not moving. You don’t want to be here, selling old man Springer’s jalopies. You want to be out there, learning something." He gestures toward the west. "How to hang glide, or run a computer, or whatever.” (Rich 355-56)

Never having found something meaningful to do with his life, Rabbit can only gesture vaguely toward the west and offer Nelson nebulous words like "something" or "whatever" as alternatives to working at the car lot.

Rabbit stumbled into his work life in the same way he stumbled into parenthood and marriage. In fact, all three are related since Janice's pregnancy, unplanned, led to their marriage and the immediate need for Rabbit to become a breadwinner. After a short stint selling a kitchen gadget called the MagiPeel, he worked for years as a Linotype operator alongside his father, and
then, at age 40 when the printing plant closed down, he went to work for his father-in-law at the car lot. As Janice puts it, "Your father got you one job and my father got you another, I don't call that any great adventure" (*Rich* 40).

Rabbit sinks into a depression as he realizes that he doesn't know how to help Nelson who seems now, because his girlfriend Pru has become pregnant, to be in something of the same boat. As he tries to decide whether or not to bring Nelson into the car business with him, the responsibility of his "paternity" weighs on him almost unbearably: "bringing a person into the world seems as terrible as pushing somebody into a furnace" (*Rich* 165). Rabbit's sense that he is always disappointing Nelson is long standing. He remembers Nelson as a "little tiny kid, looking right up to you while you're letting him down—you never forget it" (*Rest* 142). As he lies dying, when Nelson criticizes him for not speaking to Janice, Rabbit thinks to himself, "O.K. . . . what else am I doing wrong?" (*Rest* 425).

Nelson's lack of confidence in Rabbit's ability to help and guide him is a large part of what makes Nelson so resentful and full of fear. By the time he is a young adult, he has registered his father's absent presence and come to the conclusion that "at bottom the world was brutal, no father protected you, you were left alone" (*Rich* 294). At a party put on by friends he finds himself thinking, "there seems no protection against all the ugliness that is in the world, no protection for [his half-sister Annabelle] asleep [on a couch] or for him" (*Rich* 314). The sense that his father cannot help him make his way in the world is exacerbated once he is working at the lot: "he feels the old fear of being in the wrong place, of life being run by rules nobody would share with him" (*Rich* 309). He sees Rabbit as refusing to give him the tools he needs to succeed there: what he wants, he tells his father, is not advice about his career choice but for Rabbit to "[s]top making it so hard for me to fit in at the lot" (*Rich* 194).
The tensions between Rabbit and Nelson are in large part a result of the sea change that has taken place in the world of work as the U.S. economy shifts from industrial to postindustrial in the last decades of the twentieth century. The skills and values that helped the immediate postwar generation succeed no longer fit the circumstances that Nelson and his generation face as they come of age in the late 1970s. As Rabbit puts it in 1979 when the gas shortage hits, "the great American ride is ending" (Rich 1).

The Rabbit novels chart this momentous change through a description of the built landscape in Brewer. When Rabbit drives back into Brewer around the year 1960, after his first attempt to run away from married life, he sees “a treeless waste of industry, shoe factories and bottling plants and company parking lots and knitting mills converted to electronics parts and elephantine gas tanks lifting above trash-filled swampland” (Run 36). Twenty years later there are still some manufacturing plants in Brewer—those that “never had the wit to go south”—but in general the industrial landscape of smokestacks, “dead railroad track, . . . and empty boxcars” appear as monuments to a past age: they “stick in the heart of the city like a great rusting dagger” (Rich 31, 29). By 1979 the textile plants of Brewer have been turned into discount clothing outlets “teeming with a gimmick cheer of banners FACTORY FAIR. . . . the sole new buildings are funeral parlors and government offices, Unemployment and Join the Army” (Rich 29).

When Rabbit's workmate Charlie first went to work for Springer Motors in 1963, he remembers "we sold nothing but second-hand American models, you never saw a foreign car this far in from the coast" (Rich 23). Less than twenty years later, Springer Motors has become a Toyota franchise. For Charlie, the nature of work has changed dramatically: selling these new cars "isn't selling. It's like supermarkets now: it's shelf-stacking, and ringing it out at the register.
When it was all used [cars], we used to try to fit a car to every customer. Now it's take it or leave it. . . . there's no room to improvise" (Rich 207).

Rabbit feels content, since his father-in-law died five years before, to be the "Chief Sales Representative." He enjoys being "king of the lot," the "star and spearpoint of all two dozen employees and hundred thousand square feet of working space . . . behind him as he stands there up front" (Rich 2-3); the "nod he gets from the community," "the ample square peace of this masculine place," and "having money to float in" seem, in his middle age, to be enough (Rich 3-4). Nelson, on the other hand, is searching for a way to make work more interesting, more imbued with human interaction and meaning. He comes up with a plan to sell vintage American automobiles, a plan that allows him not only to "fit" the car to the customer as Charlie and Rabbit once did, but also to counter the influx of cheap foreign goods by buying American. While Nelson's idea has financial merit, Rabbit, perhaps because the plan threatens to reawaken his own feelings of alienation at work, shoots it down as a waste of time and money. Their disagreement climaxes when a frustrated Nelson rams one of the antique cars he had hoped to sell into another, turning them both into twisted wrecks while his father watches horrified. Years later, after Nelson has taken over Springer Motors and, having embezzled so much money to feed his drug habit that he has run it into the ground, he will tell Rabbit that the boredom and lack of autonomy he felt at work selling Toyotas was what got him into trouble: "Hanging around the lot all day waiting for some action, for the customers to show up, really preys on your self-confidence. I mean, you have no control. It was degrading" (Rest 398).

The skirmishes that Nelson and his father engage in around what kinds of cars to sell and the resentment, fear, and anger that builds up and periodically explodes is merely the visible tip of the iceberg of discontent they each feel about the conditions of work under capitalism. When
Nelson's innovative ideas are shot down by Rabbit in the first months of him working at Springer Motors, he thinks resentfully that "[t]he only lesson" that he is being taught working under his father is "that everybody is out for their own little pile of dollars and nobody can look up to have any vision" (Rich 297). The "vision" Nelson is thinking about here is limited. Selling antique American cars, while it might feel slightly more satisfying, would only, in the end, be another way to make a "little pile of dollars"; such a scheme would not change the underlying dynamics of the workplace.

Just twice in the Rabbit novels a truly alternative vision of how life and work might be organized emerges. The first occurs in Rabbit, Run when Rabbit, sitting in a bar with his old basketball coach Tothero and two prostitutes, recalls that his "best night" playing basketball was not the game where he shot forty points for his high school team during a high pressure tournament, but the practice game his school played with a team in a "little hick school" at the "end of the county." Because the two teams were not in each other's leagues, a relaxed atmosphere prevails. Away from the cutthroat competition, Rabbit finds joy just in playing: he finds he "can do anything," that his shots drop perfectly into the basket like "stones down a well." Later the two teams celebrate their camaraderie by passing around a jug of cider in the locker room. Coach Tothero, doesn't remember this game and Rabbit can't make either him or the two women "feel what was so special" about this experience (57-8). In Rabbit is Rich, Nelson, just starting out at Springer Motors, also has a brief vision of a different way to live:

"Why don't they make a society where people are given what they need and do what they want to do? Dad would say that's fantastic but it's how animals live all the time," he thinks to himself (338).
Nelson doesn't try to share his thoughts with anyone, writing them off as too "fantastic" to be taken seriously, while Rabbit who does talk about his one communal experience in the male realm and its positive effects, finds that his listeners are unable to hear what he is saying. Thus, alternative ways to order life occur to individual characters, but because these visions find no answering resonance in the larger society, they are relegated to the realm of the idiosyncratic and, in the end, largely forgotten.

The repression of alternative societal models contributes to characters' inability to see how economics enters into and shapes their feelings about themselves and others. Nowhere in the Rabbit novels is the confusion surrounding the conflation of the quest for money and resources with the desire for love and intimacy more apparent than in the push-pull relationship Rabbit and Nelson have with each other. Neither is ever sure whether he genuinely matters to the other or whether he is merely being used for some ulterior, generally economic, motive. Their hyper-sensitivity to the confusing mix of personal and socio-economic forces that make up relationships keeps them circling each other with an edgy tension, staying in the game but never exactly sure from moment to moment whether they are playing on the same or different teams.

Waiting for Nelson to come home from college, Rabbit goes out to his small backyard garden and tries to parse his feelings about this son “who has threatened to return”:

[He] looks into his heart for welcome, welcoming love for his son. He finds instead a rumple of apprehensiveness in form and texture like a towel tumbled too soon from the dryer. . . . He and Nelson have been through enough years together to turn a cedar post to rot and yet his son is less real to [Rabbit] than these crinkled leaves of lettuce he touches and plucks. Sad. Who says? (Rich 42-3)

The last sentence—“Who says?”— is classic Rabbit, circling back to second-guess both himself and society. A rumpled towel, a rotting post, a son who “has threatened” to return . . . it does seem sad, and yet when Nelson arrives home and for the first time “father and son are face to
face, and Nelson says, 'Hey, Dad,' and . . . his father wonders whether to shake hands or hug or touch in any way, love floods clumsily the hesitant space" (Rich 68).

It is the role assigned them as men in a male breadwinner society that causes Nelson and Rabbit to both clash and to bond. They are guardians of the family’s resources and also competitors locked together and fighting over the same limited supply. The intensity of their relationship is heightened by the increasingly grim trajectory of the American economy overall as wages stagnate and jobs go overseas. When Rabbit expresses fear that somebody—perhaps Nelson—will take what he has away from him, Janice asserts that “Nelson wants nothing from you except a little love and he doesn’t get that. I don’t know why you’re such an unnatural father” (Rich 66). Because Janice also wants to avoid examination of the financial aspects of the relationship between father and son, the mention of the economic aspect of their relationship is taboo, and Rabbit’s feelings in this regard are “unnatural.” This circles back to his anticipatory thoughts about Nelson which, viewed in the normal societal way, would be considered “sad.” But almost immediately Janice undercuts the assertion that all Nelson wants is love, telling Rabbit to leave the car out front because “Nelson may want it” (Rich 67). After the initial flood of hesitancy and love and a bit of awkward conversation on everyone’s part it is decided that Nelson will go out and pick up pizza. While Rabbit is on the phone ordering the pizza,

Nelson comes up behind him and rummages in his pockets. “Hey,” [Rabbit] says, “what’re ya robbing me for?”
“Car keys. . . .”
[Rabbit] . . . fishes the keys from his left pocket and, handing them over, for the first time looks Nelson squarely in the face. . . . He gives Nelson a ten-dollar bill. “We ought to talk sometime, Nellie, when you get some rest.” The remark goes with the money, somehow. (Rich 72-3, emphasis added)

Some days later, when Nelson gets into an accident and damages the side of Rabbit's car, Rabbit's ambivalent feelings towards his son surface again: "[h]e wants to put his hands on the
boy—whether to give him a push or comfort his instinct is obscure" (Rich 97). Rabbit doesn't get a chance to figure out whether he was going to express anger or compassion because, on guard, Nelson "stays just ahead of his father's fingertips, dodging into the summer night." The sense, so pervasive throughout the novel, that people are becoming things and things people as the objectification which takes place under capitalism seeps into everyday consciousness emerges with a sudden, startling clarity: Rabbit feels so closely identified with the car that it seems to him as if "his own side has taken a wound" (Rich 98). Nelson, trying to ward off Rabbit's anger for what he has done to the car, says exasperatedly, "Dad, it's just a thing; you're looking like you lost your best friend" (Rich 99). Nelson's words carry a double meaning, one which comments on Rabbit's weirdly anthropomorphic take on the car but also on his and Rabbit's relationship. This second meaning—that in many ways it does feel to Rabbit, given the sorry state of his and Nelson's relationship, that he has lost his best friend—is unable to be addressed directly, however, since it lies coiled within the reference to the car.

In the end, Rabbit's concerns about Nelson marrying and starting to work at the lot prove to be well-founded. In a segment narrated from Nelson's point of view we discover that, after just a few months working at the lot, he feels terribly unhappy: "he's married now, he works, he's not supposed to have any fun. He dreads work, he wakes every workday morning with a gnawing in his stomach" (Rich 337).

The effect of having a father whose sense of identity is so undeveloped, partly as a result of his inability to find meaning in work even as society has designated his chief role to be that of breadwinner, is that Nelson also has trouble developing a stable sense of self. The figure Rabbit presents to Nelson is too slender to provide a sturdy platform from which the son can push off into his own life. Instead, Nelson gets caught up reacting to Rabbit, who complains, in turn, that
“everything I try to tell him at the lot he goes and does the opposite” (Rich 331). Like the members of the Rotary Club who suffer from arrested development, father and son circle each other locked in nattering arguments and petty one-upmanships. Coming of age in the era of late capitalism when workers' roles in general and the role of male breadwinner in particular are undergoing radical change, it becomes extraordinarily difficult for Nelson to grow up or come into his own.

Nelson is not alone in feeling saddled by a father who seems unable to offer him meaningful advice and whose moral compass is suspect if not altogether broken. Pru has the same mindset. It is, in fact, one of the reasons they are drawn to each other. Her working-class father subjected her family to "beatings and rages and unexplained long absences" (Rich 294). Nelson's half-sister Annabelle, whose stepfather spent years groping her "in the name of parental affection," also feels she has had to face the world with no father to protect her (Remembered 346).

As we shall see shortly, the lives and past histories of Rabbit's daughters and daughter surrogates are never more than superficially explored. We only get, for example, the smallest glimpse of Pru's father or Annabelle's stepfather and so have no way of evaluating or better understanding their abusive behavior. We know that each man worked with his hands to produce things—Pru's father is a steamfitter and Annabelle's stepfather is a farmer—and perhaps this offers a clue as to why Updike figured the abuse in those families as largely physical. It may also be that, as often happens in patriarchal societies, Updike is unconsciously following the
conventional mindset which associates femaleness with the physical realm and particularly with things relating to the body and maleness with the intellectual/cultural realm.21

In any event, in contrast, to Pru and Annabelle's experiences of having had physically abusive fathers, the abuse Nelson experiences in his relationship with Rabbit is primarily emotional. Ten years after Rabbit's death, Nelson, now a mental health counselor, tries to explain Rabbit's psychological makeup to Annabelle, who never knew him:

He was narcissistically impaired, would be my diagnosis. Intuitive, but not very empathic. He never grew up. . . . I saw him, eventually . . . as a loser, who never found his niche and floated along on Mom's money, which was money her father made. . . . The only job he ever gave a damn about was operating a Linotype machine like his own father. Then Linotypes got obsolete. (Rembered 248-254)

Though Rabbit himself sometimes seems surprised by the idea, throughout the Rabbit novels, numerous characters comment on how alike father and son are.22 One of the biggest similarities is that both Nelson and Rabbit feel, to quote Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman, "kind of temporary" about themselves. They are on the lookout for something important, something that will help them feel more complete, but they don't exactly know what they are looking for. The sense that what they need is "out there" somewhere else makes it hard for them to be present where they are.

What jumps out in Nelson's analysis of Rabbit, quoted above, is the connection between being unable to find work that one cares about or something that feels meaningful to do and not being able to grow up or—perhaps the same thing—to put down roots. Rabbit's tendency, like the rabbit in the Wallace Stevens' poem, to escape from the oppressive conditions of his life by

21 For a discussion on the tendency for male and female genders to be assigned different realms of dominion in cultures around the world, see Sherry B. Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?"

22 Rabbit's extra-marital lover Thelma, for example, tells Rabbit, "he's just a young man like you once were, looking for his path" (Rich 392).
seeing himself writ large and everyone else as insignificant coupled with his general lack of empathy for others makes it impossible for him to develop adult give-and-take relationships either with friends and family or with the world at large. Rabbit becomes, as the title of the Stevens' poem suggests, a King of the Ghosts as he separates himself off from others and floats up to enjoy a narcissistic look at life by fur-light. Those left behind, like Nelson, feel the pain of having been abandoned. Looking back towards the ends of his life, Rabbit has "the feeling I've walked through my entire life in a daze" (Rest 311).

Nelson, by becoming a mental health counselor after Rabbit dies, has chosen a profession on his own instead of tapping into his family's money or connections, and this bodes well for him being able eventually to develop a more grounded sense of his own identity than Rabbit was able to do. Nevertheless, while the work that Nelson has chosen feels rewarding because, unlike at the car dealership, his job is to help others, he has questions about whether what he does is really making a meaningful contribution to his clients or to the community. In his early forties he still feels "kind of temporary" about himself. Meanwhile, he is making small strides on the personal front: he has managed to move out of his mother's house, is working on his long-distance relationship with his 14-year-old son, and, though he is separated from his wife, partly because she couldn't stand living with his mother any longer, a rapprochement with Pru seems in the offing. The feeling that both he and Annabelle, who is 39, are still struggling to find themselves after having been abandoned by their father is underlined, as he sits in a restaurant speaking to her about Rabbit's psychological makeup, by a mural of Hansel and Gretel he notices on the wall above the booths. The children are "holding hands, lost" in a forest of greenery (Remembered 255).
Michael Kimmel, thinking about the social construction of male identity, focuses in particular on the concept of the self-made man:

The central characteristic of being self-made was that the proving ground was the public sphere, specifically the workplace. And the workplace was a man’s world (and a native born white man's world at that). If manhood could be proved, it had to be proved in the eyes of other men. From the early nineteenth century until the present day, most of men’s relentless efforts to prove their manhood contain this core element of homosociality. From fathers and boyhood friends to our teachers, co-workers, and bosses, it is the evaluative eyes of other men that are always upon us, watching, judging. ("Birth" 141)

The idea that identity is something that can be fashioned by each individual as opposed to being assigned at birth as a reflection of one's rank in society arises as capitalism replaces feudalism but intensifies as the economic development that accompanies industrialization provides more and more opportunities for social mobility. As Kimmel points out, men watching and judging each other becomes crucial to the process of male self-fashioning under capitalism. A special subset of this larger community of men is the relationship between fathers and sons who view each other in uniquely intimate ways.

In Rabbit and Nelson's case, they see each other's flaws writ large and often think the worst of each other. At one point Nelson thinks, for example, "Nobody except Nelson in the world seems to realize how nasty Harry C. Angstrom is" (Rich 293), and he believes that "no witness but Nelson stands in the universe to proclaim that his father is guilty, a cheat and coward and murderer" (Rich 338). Rabbit is well aware of Nelson's caustic assessment of him, confessing to a friend, "I think one of the troubles between me and the kid is every time I had a little, you know, slip-up, he was there to see it. That's one of the reasons I don't like to have him around" (Rich 161). As we have seen, Rabbit is also extremely critical of Nelson and lets him know it at just about every turn.
But though the critical views each has of the other pushes them apart, it also brings them together as it opens the way to sharing themselves in ways they would feel too vulnerable sharing with anyone else. At one point, for example, Nelson admits to Rabbit that he is "not sure" if he gave his pregnant wife Pru a push the night she fell down the stairs.

[Rabbit] laughs, scared. "Of course you didn't push her. Why would you push her?"
"Because I'm as crazy as you."
"We're not crazy, either of us. Just frustrated, sometimes."
"Really?" This seems information the kid is grateful for. (Rich 355)

As Rabbit dances away from a serious conversation about Nelson's (and his own) abusive behavior towards women, his response can be seen as an attempt to leave their misogynist behavior unexamined and, therefore, unchanged. But his response moves in another, more positive direction as well. Amidst the hypermasculine atmosphere of criticism and competition that generally exists between father and son, Rabbit's expression of unconditional support for Nelson in this scene underlines a more compassionate dynamic the two are sometimes able to tap in to, one which, were it able to be more prevalent in Nelson's life, would, no doubt, go a long way towards helping him achieve a more stable and mature sense of self. It is significant in this regard that Rabbit also offers in this scene, albeit in understated terms, a caution against the tendency that both father and son have to beat up on themselves and each other for difficulties caused by the stresses and strains of the larger society.

Towards the end of his life Rabbit realizes, "though he didn't know it at the time," that "[w]hat he enjoyed most . . . was standing in the showroom . . . waiting for a customer . . . shooting the bull with [fellow workers], earning his paycheck, filling his slot in the big picture, doing his bit, getting a little recognition. That's all we want from each other, recognition" (Rest
One way to read Rabbit's surprising remark that it is great to have Nelson home because having an enemy under your roof "sharpens your senses" is, in fact, that the sharp way that Nelson looks at Rabbit makes him feel recognized and that this feeling seen makes him feel, because he is more in touch with his "senses," more alive. In a society where men feel invisible, neither able to shine in the home where women are the stars, nor at the workplace where the vast majority are filling a small "slot in the big picture" or, as Rabbit thinks of his father, are just "a piece of grit in the launching pad" of the larger American project, the quiet recognition men give each other becomes—though, as Rabbit indicates, it is not always apparent at the time—some of the most meaningful and pleasurable experiences in men's lives (Redux 20).

The repressed nature of the recognition men give each other sometimes takes on the flavor of something illicit. Near the end of his life Rabbit has a sudden surprising thought: "It turns out pricks are what we care about. . . . Maybe we're all queer, and all his life he's been in love with [his high school teammate and lifelong rival] Ronnie Harrison" (Rest 372). Throughout the last two novels Rabbit has been obsessively wondering about Nelson's sexual orientation, often locating signs that make him believe his son is gay. It's clear that if Nelson were found to be gay, the discovery would simultaneously diminish Nelson in Rabbit's eyes—Nelson would not be as much of a man as Rabbit is—and make him, because he was now less threatening, more lovable. It is significant that Rabbit has this insight into the intimate, even sexual nature of men's relationships to each other only at the very end of his life when he is on the run from his family after having slept with Nelson's wife Pru. Barbara Ehrenreich in The Hearts of Men details how fear of being homosexual was used, particularly in the postwar period when Rabbit was coming of age, as a sort of enforcer, keeping men separate from each other and preventing them from questioning or rebelling against the status quo of heterosexual marriage and male
breadwinning. It takes being close to death—Rabbit has just had a heart attack and is in danger of another—and the extreme violation of social norms that sleeping with his son's wife entails for him to go beyond the societal training that made close relationships with other men forbidden and explore some of the deeper structures upon which his life has been built, including the repression of male homosociality.

While Rabbit's relationship with his son Nelson assumes a large degree of importance in the Rabbit series, particularly in the last three of the works after Nelson becomes an adult, Rabbit's relationships with his daughters and daughter surrogates are much less important. Following Freud, we typically think of sexual desire and tension in the family as being located in the heterosexual axis, between fathers and daughters, sons and mothers, or brothers and sisters. Rabbit in fact does have sexual feelings for most of the daughter figures who populate Updike’s novels. Nevertheless, his view of these young women is generally from a distance and they are all far less important than is his relationship with Nelson. For Rabbit the daughter is neither a threat nor an ally. Instead of rivalry, she evokes revery. She becomes someone who can be idealized or projected upon. She is not someone who is brought into the inner sanctum of the home and treated as a living, breathing complicated individual. In Rabbit’s treatment of his daughters, there is much less identification with them, much less of a sense that they matter. This state of affairs is reflected in the texts where daughter figures take up very little narrative space and, in the case of his biological daughters at least, seem barely to exist: Rebecca dies in infancy and Annabelle, raised by her step-father, is never recognized as Rabbit’s daughter during his lifetime. The fact that the daughter figure is not being primed to inherit the father’s job, money, or mantle seems to make her less important than the son. She is not embraced,

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23 For more on the way fear of homosexuality functiones to keep men in the traces of traditional family life, see Chapter Two of Ehrenreich's The Hearts of Men entitled "Breadwinners and Losers," particularly pages 24-28.
recognized for her humanity, or given an inheritance. She is, in fact, far more bereft of a father than is Nelson.

When Rabbit is worrying about Nelson and whether he should give him a job at the car dealership, Webb advises against it. “I’ve had five kids, not counting the two tykes Cindy has given me,” he tells Rabbit:

When those kids turned twenty-one, boy or girl, I told each one of them, ‘It’s been nice knowing you, but you’re on your own now.’ And not one has ever sent me a letter asking for money, or advice, or anything. I get a Christmas card at Christmastime if I’m lucky. One once said to me, Marty the oldest, he said, ‘Dad, thanks for being such a bastard. It’s made me fit for life.’ (Rich 164)

Webb’s children never actually appear in the narrative, bolstering the sensation that their father hardly experiences their existence.

Rabbit’s relationship with his children is more multifaceted than Webb’s is with his family, but Rabbit, too, does his share of casting his children off, particularly girl children, leaving them to fend for themselves in a difficult world. This tendency is clearest with his daughter Annabelle. As he approaches middle age, Rabbit begins to suspect that Ruth did not have an abortion all those years ago as she has told him, that instead she has kept and raised the baby she was carrying when they separated. Finally he confronts Ruth to ask if the young woman he has seen about town and who "looks like him" is, indeed, his daughter. He offers Ruth money to help Annabelle “if she wants an education, for instance” (Rich 417-18). But Ruth denies that the girl is Rabbit’s daughter and Rabbit, though he doesn’t really believe Ruth, feels a “surge of relief” at not being called upon to assume responsibility for Annabelle’s welfare (Rich
He continues to secretly enjoy the idea that Annabelle is his daughter, but, though she is struggling financially, he never offers her assistance or openly acknowledges her existence. 

Sandra, the girl that waits upon Rabbit at the Flying Eagle, has “milky skin like his daughter” but is so weighed down by her class position that Rabbit can see “the weary woman she will be . . . already crowded into her face” (Rich 56). By comparing Sandra’s skin to Annabelle’s, Rabbit toys with the possibility that he has a connection to and responsibility for this person who labors beneath him on the economic ladder, but just as in the case of his daughter, Rabbit’s interest in his own pleasure and convenience overwhelms his momentary concern for this underling. The feeling that he is “the biggest man at the table” trumps Rabbit’s paternal impulse to care for or about those beneath him (Rich 56).

This vignette of Rabbit and the waitress suggests that hierarchical class relations both inform and borrow from the relationship between fathers and children and perhaps particularly, as gender enters the equation, between fathers and daughters. At the club Rabbit enjoys being in the dominant position, the big father whose small female child is given the role of supporting actress, propping up the father and giving him status and a certain definition or identity. When last we meet Annabelle in Rabbit at Rest, she occupies a similar position; she is a hospital nurse ministering to Rabbit after angioplasty. Like the waitress in the previous novel, Annabelle wears a uniform and displays her nametag on her chest. Her work is to attend to Rabbit’s needs. Annabelle’s own future, like that of the waitress, seems bleak: she is overweight, has strands of premature gray hair peeking out from under her nurse’s cap, and still lives with her mother because, as she tells Rabbit, “[l]iving alone is tough. Men can get nasty” (Rest 242). Rabbit

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24 It is confirmed that Annabelle is Rabbit’s daughter in Rabbit Remembered (2000), though by this time Rabbit has been dead for nearly a decade.
worries that Annabelle is turning into a “spinster” and wants to help her in some way, but these
caring impulses battle with the old, familiar urge to eschew responsibility for her welfare; in the
end, it is the impulse to disconnect that wins out. “Even if this girl is his daughter, it’s an old
story, going on and on, like a radio nobody’s listening to,” he thinks, as he turns away from
Annabelle (Rest 230).

Toning down consciousness of the father/daughter connection by making it into a
background noise, a kind of absent presence like the "radio nobody’s listening to," helps Rabbit
erase his sense of responsibility for Annabelle. And as his feelings of responsibility evaporate,
Rabbit’s sense of Annabelle’s distinct identity and of her particular relationship to him also begin
to fade: in their final interaction in the hospital, Annabelle has become “his nurse” (Rest 243).
Like the waitress at the club, her name has become less important than the supportive function
she performs for Rabbit.

In addition to Annabelle, the Rabbit novels contain two other daughter figures who are
abandoned or even, it could be argued, sacrificed like modern-day Iphigenias for the greater
good of father, family, and society. In Rabbit, Run, Rabbit’s infant daughter Rebecca drowns at
Janice’s drunken hands when Rabbit, frustrated by a lack of sex with Janice, precipitously leaves
the family. In Rabbit Redux the teenaged runaway Jill, who is both a daughter-figure and
Rabbit’s lover during the time when he and Janice are separated, dies in a fire set by Rabbit’s
disapproving neighbors. In a parallel to the circumstances surrounding Rebecca’s drowning,
Jill’s death occurs when Rabbit, who has gone off to sleep with another woman, leaves Jill alone
in the house with Skeeter, a Black power advocate who is too absorbed in his own problems to
protect her. Rebecca and Jill die during moments of crisis in Rabbit and Janice’s relationship. In
each case, the daughter’s death seems to provoke a sense of guilty responsibility which exerts a
stabilizing force on the couple, pulling them back into the orbit of conventional marriage and family life: after Rebecca’s death, Rabbit gives up Ruth and settles down with Janice, trying as hard as he can to be a good husband and father; not long after Jill’s death, Janice leaves her lover Charlie and she and Rabbit come back together.

The stories of Rabbit’s three “daughters”—Rebecca, Jill, and Annabelle—are told mostly in terms of their impact on Rabbit. We learn very little about any of these three female characters in their own right. It is their absence, the ghostly way they haunt Rabbit’s consciousness, that forms the biggest part of their presence in these novels.

In explaining some of the motivation behind his writing of Rabbit, Run Updike has said, “there is a case to be made for running away from your wife. In the late Fifties beatniks were preaching transcontinental traveling as the answer to man’s disquiet. And I was just trying to say: ‘Yes, there is certainly that but then there are all these other people who seem to get hurt’” (Picked-Up Pieces 502). In a “special message” to readers of the 1981 Franklin Library limited edition of Rabbit Redux, a novel set towards the end of the sixties, which was, according to Updike, “the most dissentious American decade since the Civil War,” Updike writes that the “cost of the disruption of the social fabric was paid [in this novel], as in the earlier novel, by a girl. Iphigenia is sacrificed and the fleet sails on with its quarrelling crew” (qtd. in Hugging the Shore 858-59).

But the erasure of the daughter from Rabbit’s family is not merely, as the above authorial comments suggest, a consequence of the personal and political questioning of the status quo which took place during the 1950s and 60s, nor is it some sort of retribution for Rabbit’s and
Janice’s sexual infidelities. Rather, despite Updike’s attempts to indict unconventional behavior and thinking in the elision of daughters, the Rabbit novels themselves point to conventional life and, particularly, the system of male breadwinning as being at the root of the problem. Thus, the family in which Rabbit passed his childhood during the 30s and 40s also contains an effaced daughter. Structured along classic male breadwinner/female homemaker lines, Rabbit’s mother Mary “was always in the house as long as [Rabbit] could remember, nobody ever came to visit,” while his father Earl worked long hours in order to support the family financially (Redux 19). While the father is away, Rabbit’s isolated and unhappy mother sets the house awash with emotional tension. She draws Rabbit close, demanding his allegiance and craving the power he has as a young man; at the same time she pushes her daughter Mim away. When Rabbit’s father comes home there are dreadful quarrels.

As soon as Mim is old enough to leave home, she escapes to the West Coast where she disappears from view, playing very little role either as a character in the novels or as a member of her family. She becomes difficult to locate out West, “sending postcards, always with a picture of a new hotel on them” (Redux 303). The first time Rabbit sees Mim in years is when she comes home right after the death of Jill. In a move reminiscent of the other sacrificial daughters, Mim deliberately sets out to break Janice and Charlie up by seducing and sleeping with Charlie exactly three times; their brief affair helps to break the spell between Janice and Charlie and Janice soon returns home to Rabbit. Though Mim hasn’t been home to visit in years and her mother Mary is in the final stages of a fatal illness, Mim leaves Brewer and returns to the West coast the day after completing this service for Rabbit.

25 The “problem” of Rabbit’s sexual indiscretions adheres to both Rebecca’s and Jill’s deaths. He was off having an affair when each death occurred in his home. Janice’s sexual appetite is also implicated in Jill’s death, since Rabbit would not have brought Jill into the home and into his bed if Janice had not already moved out of the house to live with her lover Charlie.
Mim’s views on her life, which she imparts to Rabbit during her brief visit home, reveal a woman who has worked to scoop out her insides. She went out West to become an actress but instead becomes a prostitute to gamblers and gangsters. She has mastered the “survival rules . . . for living in the desert” where the “beautiful faces” are “hard and blank as chips. Thousands flow back and forth without any expression” (Redux 312). It is difficult to know here whether Mim means thousands of faces or thousands of chips, so completely have the properties of money and people become fused in her thinking. In contrast to Rabbit, whom she labels “soft,” she has become like people out West, people who pride themselves on the ability to grow a hard “shell.”

“They’re like those chocolates we used to hate….those dark brown round ones on the outside, all ooky inside. . . . It embarrasses everybody but they need to be milked. Men need to be drained. Like boils. Women too for that matter. You asked me my specialty and that’s it, I milk people. I let them spill their insides on me. It can be dirty work but usually it’s clean. I went out there wanting to be an actress and that’s in a way what I got, only I take on the audience one at a time.” (Redux 313)

In the house across the way from the Angstroms during Rabbit and Mim's childhood, tensions similar to the ones experienced in the Angstrom household are in evidence. It is another male breadwinner/female homemaker family, and once again, it is the daughter who seems to become the receptacle or scapegoat for the uncomfortable feelings set in motion by the family’s economic set up:

All day long Mrs. Zim, who was plain . . . screamed at her daughter Carolyn, who was prettier than you’d think a five-year-old girl could be . . . and when Mr. Zim came home from work the two of them would shout together for hours. It would begin with Mr. defending the little girl, and then as the neighbors listened old wounds opened like complicated flowers in the night. Sometimes [Rabbit’s] Mom said that Mr. would murder Mrs., sometimes she said that the little girl would murder them both, as they lay asleep. . . . How does that poor man endure? If Carolyn and her mother don’t settle their differences they’re going to wake up some fair morning without a protector. (Run 20)
The process of evacuating and erasing Carolyn’s identity, of becoming “hard and blank,” as Mim would put it, begins early. She never, we are told, “left the house without a smile on her little heart-face, swinging herself along like she owned the world, though the Angstroms had just heard her mother throw hysterics at her all through breakfast” (Run 20).

Looking back as a young man, Rabbit thinks that the little girl’s public demeanor reveals “something cold-blooded about Carolyn” (Run 20). But this adult assessment of Carolyn exposes, paradoxically, a kind of cold-bloodedness on Rabbit’s part. He doesn’t search for alternative interpretations for her public persona, doesn’t consider, for example, that her smile might be a bid for normalcy, a desperate attempt to trade her fractured sense of self for the smiling world outside her door, or an attempt to protect her family from gossip and prying, or even that Carolyn, having figured out that help is not forthcoming, is simply determined to tough it out. Rabbit’s collapse of all these possibilities into her being “cold-blooded,” allows him to assume a passive posture vis-à-vis the question of Carolyn’s victimization: if Carolyn is emotionally cold, then most probably she has given her mother good reason to be angry at her; if she is emotionally numb, then the freight of “old wounds” being layered onto her body by the adults won’t cut and scar her the way they would someone else. Either way, Carolyn’s responsibility is heightened and others’ responsibility is diminished.

Rabbit’s mother, for her part, looks away from both Carolyn’s and Mrs. Zim’s feelings to side with Mr. Zim whom she sympathizes with —“poor man”—and defines as the family’s “protector.” But this definition of the father/husband role begs the question: in what sense is Mr. Zim a protector? Absent all day, he is not there to intervene when Mrs. Zim is taking out her frustrations on a five-year-old. In fact, it is his very status as sole breadwinner that keeps Mrs. Zim and Carolyn locked away together in the house.
Initially, the household that Janice and Rabbit set up seems destined to reproduce the same dynamics. Our first glimpse of their marriage is when Rabbit comes home from a day of selling the MagiPeel to find his lonely and enervated wife drunk and staring at the television. Despite the fact that he is away at work all day and not present to help Janice with her depression or with the lonely business of housework and childcare, society accepts this setup as normal and sees the family as intact. It is only when Rabbit stops faithfully playing the breadwinner role, when he stops going to work, moves out of the house, and begins to rock the boat with his questions and complaints about their lifestyle that worry sets in and public scrutiny descends upon the family. Both sets of parents begin to make disparaging comments and pass judgments. The Springer’s minister Rev. Eccles gets involved as does Rabbit’s old high school coach Tothero who, in an echo of the man-as-protector theme, tells Rabbit “it’s not so much you I’m worried about . . . you always land on your feet . . . it’s . . . Janice. She doesn’t have your coordination” (Run 39-40). When Rabbit leaves Janice and the whole breadwinner rat race for a second time, Janice "feels the workday approaching like an army of light, feels the houses . . . opening like castles to send forth their men, and regrets that her own husband is unable to settle into the nationwide rhythm. . . . Why him? What was so precious about him?” (Run 211).

Janice drinks the morning away and lies to her parents when they call, telling them that Rabbit is at work. Janice’s mother, sensing that the couple has broken up, harshly accuses Janice of “bringing us all into disgrace. The first time [Rabbit left] I thought it was all his fault but I’m not so sure any more” (Run 218). Janice’s mother insists upon coming over to check up on her, or, as Janice thinks, “to make sure she’s lost [Rabbit] again,” a prospect which drives the daughter into a frenzy of housecleaning as she attempts to conceal both Rabbit’s absence and her own shame at not being able to keep her man in step with the “nationwide rhythm” (Run 219). It
is during the drunken frenzy of trying to show that she is, in fact, a good homemaker by setting the house in order, that Janice accidentally drowns her infant daughter.

The baby’s death glues Rabbit and Janice back into the conventional male breadwinner/female homemaker role and there they stay until the world around them begins to change in the late 1960s. Responding to the loosening societal strictures, Janice takes a part-time job, an action in clear contrast to Rabbit’s mother who, while he was growing up, seemed almost chained to her kitchen, visited by no one “but the brush man and the Jehovah’s witness” (*Redux* 19). Shortly thereafter Janice begins to have a relationship with Charlie, one of her co-workers; eventually, she moves out to live with him. Meanwhile Rabbit begins his own series of sexual and social experiments, opening up his house to Jill and Skeeter. In another break with the traditional structure of things, Nelson, who is now twelve, remains with Rabbit.

Rabbit, true to his nature, is ambivalent about the status of women and girls. A part of him sees females as inconsequential objects, as property or, more exactly, as props, which can be used or arranged to one’s advantage and then, without too much emotional trauma, tossed aside. Another part of him, perhaps influenced by societal changes including especially the women’s movement, sees women as people with their own complex personalities and destinies to work out. Thus, when Nelson begs his father to help Jill whom Skeeter has hooked on heroin, Rabbit promises to talk to Skeeter but he also cautions, “you know, people aren’t property, I can’t control what they want to do together. We can’t live Jill’s life for her” (*Redux* 255). Rabbit reiterates this sentiment in the final novel when, as he lies in his hospital bed, he abdicates responsibility for Annabelle’s future telling her, “You know best how to live your own life” (*Rest* 243).
Whatever Rabbit’s thought process, whether he is objectifying women or supporting their autonomy, however, the result comes out the same: daughters are expendable; they can be left by the wayside. Not so, however, Rabbit’s one and only son who is central both to Rabbit’s consciousness and to the organization of the texts. Nelson is an inextricable part of Rabbit’s story not because he and Rabbit share a similar biology, but because, under the male breadwinner system, sons play such a vital role in the financial survival of the family. The privileged relationship to the work world that such men have has meant that in addition to being providers for their own family they have also served as conduits connecting past and future generations as they inherit, manage, and pass on the family’s wealth. The latter function becomes particularly important in middle and upper-class families where a sizable concentration of capital generally exists. In Rabbit and Nelson’s case, that capital takes the form of Springer Motors, the car dealership which Janice inherited from her parents and hopes to pass on to Nelson, and much of the drama in the final two novels circles around the problem of what kind of inheritance Rabbit has to pass on to Nelson, and what Nelson is able or willing to accept as he seeks to find his place in the world.

Nelson apprentices under Rabbit at the car lot and eventually takes over from his father who reluctantly “makes space” by retiring. But Nelson fumbles the pass, driving the company into debt by using the company’s money to buy AID’s medications for a sick friend and to support his own cocaine habit. As one of Rabbit's peers observes, Nelson "snorted an entire car agency up his nose" (Remembered 220). It is not a complete financial disaster: Rabbit, waiting in the wings, is able to step back in and help pick up some of the financial pieces, but in the end the family business is dissolved. Viewed from a different angle, however, Nelson does complete the
inter-generational pass. The legacy that Rabbit passes on to Nelson and the legacy the Rabbit series passes on to its large readership is the subject of the final section of this chapter.

Saying Goodbye to the Absent/Present Father

Nelson completes the inter-generational pass, but does so in a manner that neither his nor Rabbit's generation could have predicted. This is so because the historical conditions that shaped Rabbit's work and family life and helped to form his mindset are different from the ones that shape Nelson's, even though Nelson's world grows out of Rabbit's. In fact, the changes that occur from World War II on as the country's economy transitions from industrial to late capitalism are both so rapid and so dramatic that each generation finds itself facing a significantly different set of opportunities and challenges from the one that preceded it.

The rapid rise of the U.S. to superpower status during the immediate postwar period, for example, creates a heightened sense of self and purpose in the populace at large. Affected by the national zeitgeist, individuals coming of age during this period begin to envision a personal future of expanded wealth and power. Rabbit thinks of his blue-collar father Earl, who comes of age in the early part of the twentieth century, as "one of the 'little men'. . . . whittled by the great American glare," until he is content "[l]ike a piece of grit in the launching pad," to merely do "his part" (*Redux* 20). No longer content to be "little men" doing their part for the good of the whole, Rabbit's generation—especially those who are white, native-born, and male—push off from the launching pad of the previous generation aiming for loftier and far more individualistic lives than their fathers had.

This hitching of individual aspirations to the rising national star becomes the subject of irony in *Rabbit at Rest* when Rabbit, towards the end of his life, plays the part of Uncle Sam in a local Fourth of July parade. Walking along in his "towering costume," he discovers with grateful
amazement that the town still loves him for having been a high school basketball star and the
giddy impression "grows upon him . . . that . . . this is the happiest fucking country the world has
ever seen" (Rest 303, 308). Beneath the celebration of feel-good, highly individualistic pleasure
that Rabbit observes along the Fourth of July parade route in 1989 hovers the feeling that over
the preceding several decades a deeper kind of fulfillment has been pushed to the side and
forgotten. This is the essence of Rabbit's fleeting realization that "to be rich is to be robbed"
(Rich 351). The chance to move upward and secure a better life, often conceived of in material
or monetary terms, has, it turns out, robbed the American people of a more grounded or authentic
sense of self and community.

When the promise of upward rising that seemed so secure in the first flush years after
World War II begins to falter in the early 1970s and a downward economic trajectory becomes a
permanent feature of U.S. economic life, a more uncertain—and unhappy—state of affairs both
for individuals and for the nation ensues. Rabbit is Rich, which opens in the year 1979, marks the
start of the period of greatest tension between Rabbit and Nelson as Nelson, and, by extension,
his generation, begins to grapple with an economic future that is quite different from the
upwardly mobile trajectory their parents had hoped to pass on.

Rabbit's father Earl had been keenly aware of the presence of class struggle in American
life, so much so that Rabbit remembers the atmosphere in his house growing up as "[I]iving
embattled . . . Pop and his union hating the men who owned the printing plant" (Rich 63).
Rabbit, as he moves up into the middle class, is happy to leave the notion of class warfare
behind. In this he mirrors the national mood where the consensus forged between labor and
capital in the postwar period and the widespread anti-communist Cold War mentality makes it
nearly impossible for most Americans to think deeply or critically about capitalism let alone parse its effects on work and personal life.

When real wages stagnate and the economy begins its downturn in the 1970s, this lack of a critical perspective on capitalism causes Rabbit and Nelson to flail about looking for something other than the economic system to blame. They find plenty of scapegoats: women, gays, African Americans, the poor, the institution of marriage and domestic life, and, of course, each other. Nelson accuses Rabbit of scheming to keep all the family wealth and power to himself. Rabbit, in turn, reacts with hostility to Nelson's requests for help, fearful that his son's neediness will threaten his own financial and emotional wellbeing which continues to be precarious despite the fact that by the early 1980s Rabbit, now a member of the middle class, thinks of himself as "rich." The state of hyper-vigilance Rabbit and Nelson adopt to ward off both external threats and the nagging private fear that their lives are empty and meaningless makes it difficult for either of them to step back and think more deeply about the role socio-economic forces are playing in their troubles.

With more generosity than Nelson at the time is able to give him credit for, Rabbit begins to worry that by attempting to follow in his footsteps, Nelson is setting himself up for what Rabbit knows to be the deeper truth about his life: that despite having achieved a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle, he feels depressed, disconnected, and unfulfilled. In fact the third and fourth novels in the series, *Rabbit is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest*, set at the beginning and the end of the 1980s, serve as an extended meditation on how the quest for material wealth and success has resulted, at least for the white, middle-class stratum into which Rabbit has landed, in a lifestyle where unhappiness, though generally not acknowledged, is rampant and where intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development has been pushed to the side.
Perhaps the most devastating effect of the economic tensions of this period is the way Nelson and Rabbit each turn inward to beat up on themselves for what they see as their failure to create fulfilling relationships or a more meaningful, authentic life. We have seen how Rabbit experiences himself as split in two: inside, he is an innocuous being who "doesn't want to do any harm"; outside, he is "a fearsome bulk with eyes that see and hands that grab and teeth that bite . . . a boss, in a shiny suit," an Uncle Sam towering over the crowd (*Rest* 316). Having spent most of his adult life rift in two by the contradictions of life under capitalism, Rabbit, mulling over both the violence necessary to survive in this eat-or-be-eaten world and his personal limitations when it comes to loving deeply or fully, comes to the startling realization that "he hates himself, with a certain relish" (*Rest* 272).

The idea that Rabbit enjoys hating himself points to a complex socio-psychological reaction, a "new, white masculine fantasmatic" which David Savran identifies as emerging in the United States during the mid-1970s (128). Savran argues that this phenomenon, which is essentially sadomasochistic since "violent instincts are turned not only against others, but also against the self," arises at this time "in order to facilitate an adjustment to changed material circumstances," including the "steady decline in the income of white working- and lower-middle class men" and the loss of men's position in the family as its sole breadwinner (130, 128). Exploring the cultural representation of this fantasmatic, Savran shows how films like *The Right Stuff* (1983), *Rambo* (1985) and its sequels, and *Falling Down* (1993) create icons out of men who "enact a hypermasculinized heroism" in response to the sense that their power is slipping away (Savran 129). Such heroes, who both lash out aggressively at others and willingly inflict pain upon themselves, encourage, according to Savran, white men's "simultaneous embrace and disavowal of the role of victim" and form part of a trend, widely evident by the last two decades.
of the twentieth century, that positions white men as a "new persecuted majority" (128).

Savran argues that this mindset helps white men to rationalize both their continuing domination of other groups who are lower down on the social hierarchy and their desire for domination even as their own social standing and power is beginning to ebb (128).

The sense that he is both a victim and a victimizer has the effect of paralyzing Rabbit. Though Rabbit experiences a high level of dissension inside of himself as he both embraces and disavows the role of victim, such a state of mind, keeps him from taking any stand or point of view which might seriously challenge the status quo. This is so because he has essentially ingested the contradiction of oppression by owning both parts of it. The impetus to resolve the actual tension everywhere apparent in an unequal, exploitative society is thus siphoned off into the private solitary realm where it can be simultaneously enjoyed as a rousing idea and dismissed as nothing Rabbit needs to concern himself about. He can continue being a "boss" and go on reaping the rewards that have accrued to him as a white, middle-class American male imposing his will on others without accusing himself of moral turpitude because not only can he tell himself that he has been driven to violence by the "others" out there who threaten him and his family with harm, but also because he sees himself as, deep down, an innocuous being who himself wants to do no harm. In the end, claiming the role of both a victim and victimizer, both masochist and sadist, provides Rabbit with a way to feel whole as he navigates the treacherous world even as it also keeps him alienated from himself and others.

In the final work of the Rabbit series, the novella *Rabbit Remembered* set in 1999, characters continue to show very little conscious understanding of the effects that the larger

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20 For more on the cultural figuring of the anxieties that underlie the emergence of "white male paranoia" in the U.S. in the late twentieth century, see David Savran's "The Sadomasochist in the Closet: White Masculinity and the Culture of Victimization."
economic system is having upon them. There is, nevertheless, a discernible shift in the way Nelson and his peers approach life, family, and work. First of all, adapting to the downward trajectory of the economy, Nelson displays a more scaled-down sense of himself and of his life goals than Rabbit was ever able to do. Nelson's given name, which in Irish means "Son of the Champion," begs the question: will Nelson measure up to his father's heroic stature or will he fall short of the high mark Rabbit has set?\textsuperscript{27} Rabbit's tendency to see himself as a winner—based on his being a "hotshot" basketball star in high school—can be seen as a reflection of the heightened expectations his generation carried with them out of the postwar period (\textit{Rest} 305). The doomed sense Nelson has during his 20s and 30s that he cannot measure up to Rabbit's outsized stature and reputation is likewise a reflection of the lowering of expectations that Nelson's generation experiences as a result of the conditions of late capitalism and the postindustrial economy.

By 1999, Nelson, though not terribly well-off emotionally or financially, seems to have largely moved beyond the atmosphere of invidious comparison and competition that characterized Rabbit and Nelson's relationship. Nelson is not caught up in romantic fantasies of escape, the way his father was at his age, nor does he believe he is going to make it big someday à la the American Dream. Nelson's lower expectations make him less self-involved or, to put it more positively, allow him to be more interested in and sensitive to others and to the needs of the community than his father ever was. Even as he thinks and acts in less individualistic ways, though, he is not the self-effacing worker and family man his grandfather Earl was. Like Rabbit, he is acutely aware of the tension between the individual and larger social structures, but unlike either his father who veered towards a hedonistic hyper-individualism or his grandfather Earl who put his nose to the grindstone and accepted being a little cog in a big wheel, Nelson

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{27} The "Champion" is Lord Horatio Nelson who succeeded in repulsing Napoleon in the Battle of Trafalgar.
\end{footnote}
occupies a middle ground. He wants to create space for his own needs and desires, but he is also interested in supporting and encouraging the well-being of family, friends, and the larger community. In taking a more balanced approach to the dialectic of self and society, Nelson begins to step away from the pattern he learned under Rabbit's tutelage of simultaneously blaming others and beating up on himself.

Nelson has been working as a counselor for ten years when we meet up with him in *Rabbit Remembered* but, still unsure of himself "after the mess he made running the Toyota agency," and perhaps chastened, as well, by the specter of Rabbit's inflated sense of self, Nelson "has resisted suggestions that he go after an advanced license or degree"; instead, he keeps a low profile at work, because, as he puts it, he "has learned his limits" (*Remembered* 227). The psychological pressure Nelson felt so acutely during his 20s to carry on the family's Toyota franchise makes a cameo appearance in the novella when one of Nelson's patients, a young schizophrenic man being pressured by his "rich, self-made parents" to take over the family's dry-cleaning business, ends up committing suicide by wrapping his head in a plastic suit-bag (279). As Nelson's boss observes, the young patient's method of suicide appears to have been a pointed message to his parents: "'You want dry-cleaning, here's dry-cleaning'" (*Remembered* 332).

Instead of selling cars at Springer Motors, Nelson has chosen, by becoming a counselor, a career in one of the postindustrial "growth" fields. In fact, reflecting the changing economy, all of Nelson's family members and closest acquaintances seem to be migrating toward fields like health or human relations or computer programming: Annabelle is a nurse, for example, Annabelle's boyfriend is an orthodontist, and Nelson's wife Pru, has applied, when last we encounter her, to become a "Human Resources Assistant" for a bank (*Remembered* 247). Janice thinks of the economic changes these career decisions reflect as part of the "yuppifying" of the
city as "all these vague industries [come] in that didn't make anything you could handle or drive or put in a box really—'the information industry'" (Remembered 214).

The changes Nelson and his peers make during these years reflect changes in the larger society, especially the lessening in importance of the male breadwinner/female homemaker model as the two-wage family becomes the new cultural norm. The recalibration of gender roles this paradigm shift entails is reflected in Nelson's increasing ability to handle interpersonal relationships and Pru's burgeoning ability to take on more responsibility for large family decisions and for breadwinning. While Nelson's growth in emotional intelligence is adaptive to the new demands of the postindustrial work world where working collaboratively has become a requisite skill, he does not define himself chiefly by his job nor does his self-esteem depend upon his ability to draw a huge salary as had been the case for men attempting to be the sole breadwinner in the family. Acknowledging that he works a "shit job" because he makes very little money as a counselor, Nelson seems largely unfazed by this fact (Remembered 220). Instead, he focuses on doing what he can to help patients at the clinic and to forging better relationships with family members and friends outside of work. Meanwhile Pru has enough independence of mind, experience in the work world, and social support to take the children and leave Nelson when he continues to resist her long-standing plea that they move out of his mother's house.

Nelson's ability to take the emotional contours of life seriously and his desire to bring things that have been repressed out into the open where they can be shared are what make him most different from Rabbit who, feeling constantly under threat from "the hungry forces . . .

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28 Women, particularly working-class women and women of color, have always worked and a large number of school-aged children in the 1990s did not live in two-parent households. What I am describing here is not the reality of U.S. family life but rather the story society tells itself about how families look and function at any given historical moment. This story is inflected by white, middle-class experiences and aspirations and projected onto the national consciousness through various means, including novels.
loose in the world," felt the need to keep others and ultimately himself at bay (Rest 351). Less repression of self means that Nelson hates himself less than Rabbit and it also allows Nelson to forge deeper ties to others than Rabbit was able to do. This leads to Nelson feeling like a participant in family life rather than an outsider or victim which, in turn, helps him to put down roots instead of looking constantly, as his father did, for a way to escape.

Nelson at 42 still misses the sense he had when his father was alive that he could always rely on Rabbit to take care of him financially, but he also recognizes that these feelings are a throwback to an outmoded and ultimately unsatisfying form of fatherhood which, in casting the father as a good provider, allowed him to leave the work of intimacy to his wife. Recognizing the toll Rabbit's emotional unavailability has taken on Nelson, Nelson struggles to be a more attentive father to his own children. When Nelson's son and daughter are young, Nelson finds he has "no trouble loving [his daughter Judy] from the start," but finds that his son Roy has "a touch of the alien invader, the relentless rival demanding space, food, attention" (Remembered 314). Because Nelson hasn't yet separated at this point from Rabbit, his response to his children is quite similar to Rabbit's general response to Nelson and Annabelle: sons are rivals and sites of contention, daughters are object of love and easy reverie. The pattern of fathers being less engaged and less interested in their daughter's lives than in their son's continues as Judy, when we next catch up with her in the late 1990s at age 19, is depicted as being estranged, defiant even, but as needing little help from either parent. As with Annabelle and Rabbit's sister Mim before her, there is the assumption on her parents' part that left to her own devices she will turn out fine. Fourteen-year-old Roy, however, is another story; he is depicted as needing special attention and guidance from his father.
Once Pru and the kids move out, Nelson begins to correspond by email with Roy. There is a lot of careful circling of each other in the beginning, but as the months pass father and son draw closer. Their growing bond is aided by the fact that Nelson seems to have let go of the idea that Roy is a rival. This change in Nelson's consciousness reflects the fact that the socio-economic basis for rivalry between father and son has largely eroded by the late 1990s. Rabbit's philosophy—"[y]ou are not a man in this world until you've got on top of your father"—grows out of the old hierarchical notion of family life which placed the father at the apex of power (Rest 399). As the father loses his status as sole breadwinner, he also loses his position as patriarchal head of the family and a father whose power and status is more equivalent to the other adult members of the family replaces the patriarchal father both in actuality and in the public imagination. Relationships throughout the family undergo change as a result. In the case of fathers and sons, the emerging postpatriarchal father, stripped of his special right to "husband" or, as family members, particularly sons, might see it, bogart the family's resources, no longer offers the son a route through which to succeed to patriarchal status himself. As the incentive for sons to rebel against, overthrow, or otherwise "get on top" of fathers lessens, father-son relationships become less contentious, less charged. Thus the rather steady relationship developing between Nelson and Roy in the final work of the Rabbit series seems almost bland compared to the smoldering mix of emotions punctuated by small explosions that characterized Rabbit and Nelson's relationship.

*Rabbit Remembered* takes as its starting point the discovery of Rabbit's "love child" Annabelle. For Nelson, who has always been closer to his mother than to his father, getting to know Annabelle becomes "a chance to draw closer to [his father]" (*Remembered* 319). His interest in doing so is, on one level, purely personal: Nelson wants to better understand his father
because he is trying to establish a closer relationship to his own son. But his interest in Rabbit is
driven by the historical moment as well. As the emphasis on male breadwinning fades, there is a
relaxation of the old gendered rules and roles and new family constellations and new
conceptualizations of how family and fatherhood relate to the larger society begin to arise.

During this period it becomes much easier to look critically at the figure of the
absent/present father because the existence of alternative ways to structure family life now
makes an examination of this once powerful figure less threatening. Nelson, for example, no
longer has to fear that he will become like Rabbit if he draws too close to him because he is
already well on the way of forging, with Pru, a new model of family and of fatherhood. Nor
does he have to fear that thinking about Rabbit will automatically call up feelings of inadequacy,
because Nelson sees that the changes he has made in his life are working for him. Despite
attempts by the political right during the 1990s to bring the male breadwinner back, economic
changes have made his retrieval impossible. Thus, by the turn into the twenty-first century, as
Updike shows us in the final work of the Rabbit series, the absent/present father can be
remembered without danger of being resurrected.

Rabbit tends to see the stages of individual and family life as tied to the physical body
and its biological rhythms of growth and decay. In middle age, for example, Rabbit recalls "two
glimpses [that] mark the limits of his comfort in this matter of men descending from men": his
aging father's "bare behind, such white buttocks, limp and hairless, mute and helpless flesh . . .
that hung there in the world like linen that hadn't been ironed" and his son Nelson's pubescent
body with "pubic hair . . . and . . . a man-sized prick, heavy and oval . . . looking brutal, and big"
(Rich 197). Such a view of life emphasizes the cyclical and, in its focus on what repeats from
generation to generation, highlights the timeless and the universal: all human beings share or
have shared the broad outlines of this story of "men descending from men." The story of one generation rising and then falling as it makes way for the next generation is reproduced in the overall narrative arc of the Rabbit series where we follow Rabbit's trajectory from youth to old age and death and, at the same time, watch as Nelson grows up, comes of age and eventually takes Rabbit's place as father to the next generation.

Interwoven into the narrative of generations moving through the cycle of biological time is another story, one that is neither universal nor circular, but which is instead about a specific time and place. This second narrative is a social history of U.S. family life during the latter part of the twentieth century. It, tells, as is the case with all histories, the story not only of what remains the same from generation to generation but also of what is new or distinct. As it registers these changes and places them in their larger context, this second narrative points towards new understandings. Characters in the Rabbit novels do not themselves seem to be consciously aware, except in the most superficial of ways, of how their lives are shaped by historical forces, nor does Updike explicitly draw attention to these forces in the Rabbit novels, perhaps because, as he has explained, "I don’t wish my fiction to be any clearer than life" (“Desperate Weakling” 108). It is certainly true that individuals, prejudiced by their own participation, are generally unable to step back enough to see the larger historical picture into which they fit. We readers, however, armed with the astounding wealth of details about family and work life that Updike has assembled in the Rabbit series, are able to put together that larger perspective: what we can see, if we tend closely to the saga Updike tells of Rabbit and his family, is the passing of an icon of American fatherhood both in life and in letters as, under the pressure of the changes wrought by late capitalism, white, middle-class America begins to say goodbye to the absent/present father.
CONCLUSION

WHAT IS LEFT?

If we forgive our fathers, what is left?
—Dick Lourie "Forgiving Our Fathers"

To work within the capitalist system is to wound oneself, and to forget, not the wound, but how the wound was made.
—Richard Godden Fictions of Capital

I first became interested in studying the figure I call the absent/present father when I noticed that, while he was everywhere in U.S. cultural productions from the nineteenth century on, there seemed to be very little critical interest in him, either in literary or feminist circles. It was as if this omnipresent figure was himself, when it came to his cultural impact and significance, leading a double life: he was full of resonance within each work, but once readers put down the book or viewers left the theater, interest in him, with rare exceptions, seemed to fade. The silence surrounding the absent/present father seemed to signal some intensity of feeling, some trauma perhaps, that society was not ready to confront. In fact, as I began my research, I had the uncomfortable feeling that my plan to explore what cultural work the absent/present father was doing in these texts was going to lead to some embarrassing revelations, though about what I didn't know. In the end, what I found underneath the silence was indeed a trauma—the trauma of being a worker under capitalism. As often happens when knowledge that has been repressed makes its way to the surface, bringing the story of the absent/present father to voice has led not to shameful revelations about the father, but to an appreciation for the struggles and the humanity of the absent/present father and, through better
understanding him, of all human beings forced to live by the rules of an exploitative economic system.

In Sherman Alexie's film *Smoke Signals* (1998) the action starts when Victor, a young Coeur d'Alene man, learns that his father Arnold, who abandoned the family some ten years earlier, has died. Victor and his friend Thomas-Builds-the-Fire take a road trip to retrieve his father's ashes. Victor begins the journey filled with hurt and resentment towards his father who, for the twelve years before he abandoned the family, was an abusive drunk. As he learns more about his father's life, Victor begins to let go of his anger and move towards forgiveness. The film closes with a series of questions asked by Thomas speaking in a voice-over as Victor scatters his father's ashes:

> How do we forgive our fathers? . . . Do we forgive our fathers for leaving us too often or forever when we were little? Maybe for scaring us with unexpected rage or making us nervous because there never seemed to be any rage there at all? . . . Shall we forgive them for . . . shutting doors, speaking through walls, or never speaking, or never being silent? Do we forgive our fathers in our age or in theirs, or in their deaths saying it to them or not saying it? If we forgive our fathers, what is left? ¹

The questions that begin and end Thomas' monologue—"How do we forgive our fathers?" and "If we forgive our fathers, what is left?"—are central to each of the works I studied. As we have seen, there is much to forgive each father for. In the three works I study, the authors guide sons and daughters past the anger they hold for their fathers towards a state of forgiveness. What these grownup children discover about their fathers as they make this journey is that, though their fathers were violent tyrants or, in Rabbit's case, solipsistic and lacking in empathy, they were also extremely fragile people who sought to hide their vulnerabilities for fear of the hostile world surrounding them. Even more important, though, than the discovery of the

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¹ Thomas' monologue is Sherman Alexie's adaptation of a poem by Dick Lourie entitled "Forgiving Our Fathers."
father's feelings of vulnerability is the discovery of the father's wounds and that those wounds are related to his role as family breadwinner.

The trauma these fathers have suffered has to do with their experiences in the work world where, as workers compete against each other, a dog-eat-dog mentality prevails. But the trauma arises not only because fathers have to make their daily way through a landscape where exploitation is normalized. The trauma is also a result of the isolation these men experience as they are left alone to fend for themselves and their families in a hostile and uncaring world. Reflecting the siege mentality this isolation induces, all three fathers pass on a nearly identical life lesson to their children: don't trust anyone. Because these men rarely, if ever, have anyone with whom to process what goes on at work, it is difficult for them to see how the system is rigged against them. The result is they blame themselves for their troubles. The injuries of class society are thus amplified by the fact that the exploited often take responsibility for the violence and degradation inflicted upon them.

Louise DeSalvo reminds us in Writing as a Way of Healing that telling the story of a trauma can lead to healing if a detailed description of the trauma is linked with "feelings—then and now—about what happened" (25). DeSalvo explains that it is not enough to describe the past trauma; one must also find a way to see it with new eyes by putting it into a larger context. Each of the novels I studied does this by telling the story of the trauma of the absent/present father—both the one he inflicts on his children and the one that he himself has suffered. At the same time, each novel re-visions that trauma from a new perspective, one which, because time has intervened, allows not only for the healing of the grown child, but also, if we readers attend closely, to an understanding of the figure of the absent/present father which places his troubled relationship to the economic system front and center. What emerges, as I have argued throughout
this dissertation, is the story of how capitalism affects individual behavior and family relationships, and particularly how it affects the construction and practice of fatherhood.

This story emerges with differing amounts of clarity in the three works I studied. The standpoint of the narrator in terms of his/her race, gender, and class plays a crucial role in the way each story is told as well as in the overall perspective about the absent/present father which emerges. I arranged the chapters of the dissertation so that my analysis moves from the work where the narrator's and the novel's presentation of the story of the absent/present father is the most straightforward to the work where the story becomes the most tangled and difficult to parse.

In Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, where I begin in Chapter Three, the story is presented in chronological time despite the overall frame of the novel as a flashback. The plot—which is compelling and quickly focuses our attention—is confined to a few intense months when the father makes a dramatic decision about the fate of the family farm and the rest of the family reacts to the change in ways that cast light on the deeper workings of the family. Ginny tells the story with clear descriptions of what actually happened, fleshing out her realistic depictions of events with a running account of what she thought and felt about things as they unfolded, as well as what she thinks about them as she looks back from the vantage point of several years later. ²

The stories of the absent/present father presented in *Drown* (Chapter Four) and the Rabbit series (Chapter Five) are more difficult to follow than the one Smiley presents in *A Thousand Acres*. In part this is due to the fact that in Díaz and Updike's works the narrators are male. The less straightforward nature of the story-telling in their works reflects the greater lack

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² The decision to make the novel a retelling of *King Lear* makes the text even easier to follow for those readers who know Shakespeare's play since they are already familiar with its basic outlines.
of trust men in general have in society's ability or desire to take a deeper look at the story of the absent/present father. In telling a story that exposes their own and other men's inner lives, these narrators also have to struggle against their training as men to keep vulnerable feelings and thoughts under wraps. Finally, since male narrators are either fathers or potential fathers, the subject is bound to be fraught for them in a way that it is not for female narrators. Adding to the complex, less straightforward feel of the story of the father that emerges when Yunior and Rabbit tell the tale is the fact that while Smiley's work is narrated throughout by a single female voice, Díaz and Updike's works have sections that are narrated by other characters including, in the Updike series, several from the point of view of Rabbit's wife Janice.  

But though there are points of congruence in the way the narrators in Díaz and Updike's works tell their tales, there are also points of divergence. In *Drown* the narrator is basically reliable, but, unlike Ginny, he is cautious and holds back from telling the story of his father in too open or clear a manner. Instead of the narrative being presented chronologically and focusing closely on one time period and set of circumstances as is the case in *A Thousand Acres*, the narrative in *Drown* is a mixed-up jumble of times and settings. What emerges, once the reader goes back and forth collating and organizing the material, is a rich portrait of Ramón and his family, though there continue to be large gaps in the presentation of the story. It is as if Yunior is testing his readers by pushing them slightly away. You have to earn this story, he seems to be saying to them: if you are willing to do the work required to piece the fragments together into a coherent picture, you will also probably be able to my story in the right spirit.  

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3 Janice is the only female narrator in either Díaz or Updike's work, though like all the other narrators in the Rabbit series, her voice comes to us at something of a remove since it is presented in close third-person narration.

4 The narration of *Drown* is more tentative than that of *A Thousand Acres* partly because Yunior is younger and still very much in flux; Smiley's narrator is older and more settled.
In the Rabbit series the narrator is not at all reliable. The story is presented in clear, chronological fashion, concerns itself with familiar, everyday, easily understood events and issues, and offers readers an abundance of telling details about Rabbit and his world. In the end, however, because the prism through which everything is viewed—Rabbit's mind—is a distorting lens, the portrait of the absent/present father that emerges in these novels, despite their apparent stylistic clarity, is the most contradictory and confusing of all. The narration stays on the surface dashing here, there, and everywhere, seducing itself, and readers as well, into distraction after distraction. There are intimations in the novels of the deeper psychological and socio-economic structures that shape Rabbit's life and world, but readers are left to figure out for themselves what those shapes might be, as the style of narration forecloses more overt access.

Reflective of the differing degree of openness with which the story of the absent/present father is told in these three works, each of the three narrators ends up in quite different physical and/or mental spaces as the novels come to a close. Ginny leaves the farm and her husband behind at the end of *A Thousand Acres* and starts a radically different life, becoming a working-class, breadwinning single mom, supporting and shepherding her two teenaged nieces into adulthood. Yunior's fate is uncertain: either he will remain stuck swimming in repetitive circles as the narrator in the title story "Drown" is doing, or he will make the changes that will help him move on in life, as the narrator in "Negocios" seems to have begun to do. Rabbit is so fused with the status quo that it is impossible for him to break free; while his energy level decreases as he gets older, he remains "glued in" to the same mindset and lifestyle he has always had. Thus his story ends not in change or its possibility, but in death.

The difference in the way the story of the absent/present father is told in the three novels, including the degree of clarity each narrator brings to his/her narration and the changes—or lack
thereof, in Rabbit's case—that each makes as a result of having told their stories, is related to the socio-economic standpoint from which each text "speaks." To complicate things further, the voice of the text is influenced by the narrator's and, behind him or her, the author's reading of what the text's audience is able or ready to hear.

As I point out in Chapter Two, despite the strong critique of capitalism which Smiley layers into *A Thousand Acres*, most critics of the novel focus on the theme of patriarchal oppression; the theme of capitalism is generally only mentioned in passing by critics, if at all.\(^5\) The theme of patriarchy and male domination in Smiley's novel is easier to articulate and thus easier for readers and critics to pick up on than the theme of capitalism partly because, as Susan Faludi points out, it is easier to envision oppression when there is a "clearly defined enemy who is [doing the] oppressing" (604).\(^6\) The existence of male characters like Ginny's father or husband who benefit in one way or another from patriarchy and male domination helps to bring that system of oppression vividly to life for readers. More importantly, since men exist in every social and economic strata of society, patriarchy and male domination exist throughout society as well. As a result there is also widespread knowledge of the feminist critique of male/female relations, causing that aspect of Smiley's story to have widespread resonance among readers. The readiness of the readership to explore the theme of patriarchy makes it easier for the overall story of Larry's absent/present fatherhood to be presented in a straightforward, no-punches-pulled sort of way, even though readers seem to miss the discussion about capitalism also present in the text.

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\(^5\) For an in-depth discussion of the critical reception of *A Thousand Acres* see Chapter Two.

\(^6\) See Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, especially pages 603-08. See also my discussion of Faludi in Chapter One. Faludi locates men's feelings of oppression in the personal sense of betrayal they feel at the downward trajectory of the economy over the last decades of the twentieth century and, more vaguely, in the injuries meted out to them by "consumer culture" (602). She argues that the problem men have in dealing with their oppression is that, unlike for women who can protest against male domination, there is no clearly defined enemy for men to confront. While Faludi's insight is incredibly helpful, she tends to lump all men together, not recognizing differences like race and class, and she doesn't go further and recognize that what oppresses men is not consumer culture but the capitalist system itself.
Critics have largely understood *Drown* as a story of Dominican immigration, subsuming under that category the themes, also present in the novel, of ethnicity and race, poverty, and the effect of the father's absence on the development of the son's masculinity. Left to the side, as in the case of Smiley's novel, is the theme of capitalism and, more particular to Díaz's novel, of U.S. imperialism and colonialism. In addition, perhaps because other social categories that play a large role in the novel, chief among them race and ethnicity, seem more important to investigate, critics have had very little to say about the subject of fatherhood.\(^7\)

The story of the absent/present father emerges with more hedging and hesitation in *Drown* than it does in *A Thousand Acres* because it is part of a larger story about oppression and the construction of identity that is being told. The presence of the important themes of race and ethnicity complicates the telling of the story of the absent/present father largely because American society is less sure of itself and its motivations when it comes to the question of race and ethnicity than when it comes to the question of patriarchy and male domination. This lack of confidence leads to one of two outcomes: either there is a focus on the subject of race and ethnicity in such a way that other subjects become less visible, or questions of race and ethnicity are avoided. Combating both tendencies, Díaz's text complicates the question of how identity, including how both racial or ethnic identity and fatherhood are constructed, by exploring how several types of oppression intersect to operate on individuals and communities. It was much more common in the mid-1990s when the novel was published to view socially-assigned categories of identity in isolation from each other. In addition, it was the general practice—and perhaps still is—to view each aspect of identity as part of a binary so that "Black" is always opposed to "white," for example, and "man" to "woman." In contrast, *Drown*’s characters are depicted as being positioned within a nexus of oppressive social forces—male domination,

\(^7\)For a more in-depth discussion of the critical reception of *Drown*, see my Chapter Two.
racism, ethnic discrimination, poverty, nativism, and homophobia to name the most prominent of them. This makes the question of oppression, including what to do about it, far more complicated than in Ginny's all-white, all native-born, middle-class world. In Ginny's world it is possible to concentrate on men as men because whiteness and other social categories have been so normalized that they seem to vanish from view even though they are still present and exercising their influence. In Yunior's world men are never just men but are an admixture of a number of socially-constructed identities, including their status vis-à-vis race, ethnicity and class position. As a few of Drown's critics have pointed out, the novel takes a nuanced approach to the question of oppression, exploring the tensions about class and race that exist within the Dominican-American community, for example, rather than papering over these differences and discontents in order to concentrate instead on the relationship between the Dominican community and the dominant white, native-born culture surrounding it. 

In this and other ways, the novel challenges both Dominican and other readers by presenting a counter-narrative to the status quo notion of how social identity works. As if sensing the shoals over which his story travels, Yunior tells his tale cautiously, showing us the salient bits and pieces of what happens in such a way that conclusions can be drawn, but keeping his own thoughts or insights about the events he describes somewhat close to the vest. While the less than straightforward manner in which Yunior narrates Drown reflects the complexity of the tale he has to tell about the influence of social forces on the formation of individuals, families and communities, Yunior's style of narration also reflects the fact that he speaks from a marginalized position: being Dominican and an immigrant automatically sets Yunior and his family apart from

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8 See, for example, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez's article "Movin' on up and out: Lowercase Latino/a Realism in the Works of Junot Díaz and Angie Cruz." See also my discussion in Chapter Two about the ways in which Díaz complicates the portrait of Ramón by taking into account the numerous forces that act upon and shape him.
the mainstream American reading public in a way that Ginny and her family are not. Speaking to an American audience that may have trouble "getting" his meaning because it is largely unfamiliar with the experiences he describes adds another layer of remove to Yunior's narration as he, unconsciously perhaps, works to tailor his presentation to match what his audience can hear.

One thing that *A Thousand Acres* and *Drown* have in common is that both novels place the question of oppression at the center of their works and both chart their narrators' course towards a more liberatory state. In this way they seem to inhabit the quintessential American plot which involves throwing off whatever obstacles to rising stand in an individual's way. Where that plot begins to deviate in both novels from the standard telling of the American Dream is that even though the immediate oppressive conditions keeping them down have been lifted by novel's end, in neither case does the narrator actually rise. Moreover, it is not clear that either Yunior or Ginny are better off emotionally or physically for their struggle against oppression, which has been traumatic and taken an enormous toll. In refusing an ending that involves their main characters' rising, these two novels point towards a fundamental contradiction in the standard American Dream story, one that often goes unnoticed: individuals can only "rise" if the hierarchy that positions other individuals below them remains in place. In other words, the idea of rising depends upon the acceptance of a permanent stratification of society where people with little or no power and money occupy the bottom rungs and people with an over-abundance of power and wealth take up position at the top. In the traditional telling of the American Dream quest, the challenge fictional characters face is how to rise out of the oppressive conditions they themselves are in; their quest is not to analyze and overcome the overall system of oppression and inequality that makes such rising necessary in the first place.
In the Rabbit series the story of the absent/present father is the least clearly told of all three works, partly because it is told from the standpoint of a white, native-born, middle-class male. Rabbit is already at the top of the hierarchy where race and gender are concerned and, even though he is not in the top one percent economically, he is well-off enough by the time he is in his forties to feel like he "basks above [the working-class world of his parents] rich, at rest" (Rich 63). Rabbit's standpoint makes it almost impossible for him to view society with a critical eye. First of all, its precepts are so deeply embedded in him that he can hardly see them. The fact that U.S. society is based upon a system of permanent social and economic inequality, for example, is so taken for granted by Rabbit and his circle that it recedes into the background, becoming part of the unexamined backdrop to their lives. The result is that Rabbit mainly feels satisfaction when he thinks of the poor and the working-classes far below him; feelings of concern or solidarity for those who have been left behind don't enter his mind, nor do questions about the kind of society which would feed on such stratification and inequality.

Because he is able to see his way only as far as the usual societal tendency to pit individuals or groups against each other, Rabbit is unable to find a satisfactory way to address the deep feelings of oppression that contribute to his being an absent/present father. In contrast to the situation that women, or people of color, or the abject poor find themselves in, there exists no "clearly defined enemy" opposing and oppressing white, middle-class men (Faludi 604). Rabbit's attempts to feel better by lashing out at women, Blacks and other minorities, the poor, the rich, and even his own son don't succeed because none of the groups or individuals he chooses to attack are responsible for the kind of alienation he feels. What is—the exploitative economic system he lives under—is much harder for him to see because the general tendency in the U.S. to eschew the subject of how economics shapes society makes capitalism appear to be a
remote, theoretical construct having very little to do with actual people or everyday life. Without the kind of perspective which comes either from experiencing and/or actively opposing racism, say, or some other manifestation of the social inequity upon which capitalism as a whole is based, Rabbit can't get outside the status quo mindset enough to view his life through a critical lens. Overwhelmed by feelings of confusion and helplessness because he is unable to see a way out of his troubles, Rabbit remains stuck, his paralysis partly a result of the fact that he is able to feel the wound but not, as Richard Godden puts it, "how the wound was made" (58).

The fact that Rabbit changes very little about himself or his world is related to his socio-economic position in one other way: knowing, on some level, that he has special privileges because of his race, gender, and class position that many others in his society do not have, he is reluctant to make or support any change which might cause him to lose the advantages he has. Of the three narrators, Rabbit has the most to lose by confronting the status quo, or at least he thinks he does.

Taking these three works together, it becomes clear that in order to understand the forces acting upon and shaping the absent/present breadwinning father, neither the story of patriarchy and gender oppression, nor the story of racism, nativism, and extreme poverty are, in and of themselves, enough. Ginny is not liberated at the end of *A Thousand Acres* even though she has overthrown the patriarchal figures in her life and created an all-female household. In fact, she is living a rather alienated existence, working in a chain restaurant where there is minimal interaction with staff or customers and living in a sterile apartment complex where there is very little community or contact with nature. Yunior's position at the end of the novel is less clear, but there is the sense that even if he or one of the other young men who are on the verge of drowning can instead perform the miraculous feat of pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps, there
would still be the sinking awareness that no one put out a hand to help, that the system is not only stacked against poor people and people of color but that it is fundamentally indifferent to the plight of the many human beings caught in its grip. Even when, in *Rabbit is Rich*, Rabbit does "make it," he finds that his feelings of alienation and purposelessness continue unabated, that his life still has a large, hollow place at its core.

The part that goes missing in the telling of the story of the absent/present father is the role played by the alienation that comes from living under capitalism. What Smiley, Díaz, and Updike's novels do, speaking from different standpoints and with varying degrees of urgency and resistance, is raise the story of class into view so that readers can begin to see how the absent/present father's wounds were made.

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I have titled my dissertation "On the Threshold" not only because the breadwinning father is positioned on the threshold between home and work in these texts but because these novels and others like them are themselves positioned on the threshold of a very important historical transition: they appear at a moment when male breadwinning and the economic prospects for most Americans are in decline and, at the same time, when new formulations of fatherhood and economic life are beginning to come into view. Though they take place largely "off-stage," there are intimations in all three novels that the sons and daughters of absent/present fathers, coming from families where the father was so large that he dwarfed the landscape or took up all the air in a room, are moving on to form new kinds of families in which fathers play a very different role. Ginny, for example, forms a non-traditional family when, after her sister
Rose's death, she brings Rose's daughters back to the city with her and raises them by herself. A new way of relating to the work of producing food also hovers around the edges of *A Thousand Acres* in the form of a nearby organic farm Ginny hears about but doesn't visit and the community gardens and food coop that Jess has helped to run in Vancouver. Though his future is far less certain, the Yunior we meet in "Negocios" also seems poised on the verge of creating a different relationship to family and work. We get the fullest portrait of the next generation in *Rabbit Remembered* where the entire novella is devoted to exploring the legacy Rabbit's son Nelson has been given and what he is making of it. I analyze Nelson's changes in the last section of Chapter Five entitled "Saying Goodbye to the Absent/ Present Father."

At the same time that these novels investigate the ways in which the individual father has been wounded by capitalism, they also pair that investigation with a more generalized trauma going on in society, one related to globalization and late capitalism. Thus *A Thousand Acres*, set in Iowa, plots the dramatic fall of Larry from his position of power in the family where he has been the undisputed head of household, but it also charts the demise of the biggest, most prosperous farm in the county as it is gobbled up by an agricultural corporation. In the end, Ginny and her ex-husband Ty join the throngs of people being pushed off the land they once owned to become low-wage workers either in corporate farming operations or in service sector jobs. *Drown* charts the story, during the same years, of Ramón, a man much closer to the bottom when we first meet him than Larry. Ramón's life has already been negatively affected by a set of circumstances in the Dominican Republic which are similar to the ones confronting Larry in Iowa. In the Dominican Republic the forces of U.S. imperialism and neocolonialism have placed the country's wealth into the hands of corporations, large landowners, and the native elite with the result that ordinary people, stripped of their land and resources, become a source of cheap
industrial or menial labor either for the new agribusinesses and factories springing up on the island or for businesses on the U.S. mainland where Ramón and many of his compatriots emigrate in the hopes of finding a better future. Against these tales of displacement, migration, and the general decline of aspirations and living standards, Updike's Rabbit series looks decidedly settled as it details the history of a medium-sized city and its suburbs in Pennsylvania through several generations. Despite the sense that life for the inhabitants of this all-American town is fairly stable, it becomes apparent, as the years go by, however, that history has not at all forgotten them. Though the changes aren't as abrupt, the socio-economic story Updike's epic-sized set of novels traces is a slow-motion version of the uprooting and accompanying trauma of dislocation and decline that Smiley and Díaz trace but this time focusing on the rise and fall of the white working and middle class as American society transitions from an industrial to a postindustrial economy over the course of the second half of the twentieth century.

While men's sense of dignity as workers, and their ability to provide for their families are all on the decline in these three very different novels, female characters begin to enter the workforce and assume a great degree of responsibility for the family breadwinning, either by choice or out of dire necessity. As mothers and daughters enter the work force, they begin to exhibit some of the same tendencies towards absenting themselves from family life as have the men. Ginny's waitressing job, for example, supports her two teenage nieces who come to live with her after their mother dies, but the work itself leaves her feeling anesthetized, a sensation she seems at times to welcome as it helps her block out the trauma she endured both at the hands of her father and during the dissolution of her life on the farm. Yunior's mother, who goes to work in a chocolate factory in order to keep the family from starving after Ramón moves to the U.S., comes home each night to her two young sons so exhausted mentally and physically that
she is barely able to relate to them.9 Her inability to be present as a parent because she is now the family's breadwinner points forwards, as more and more women become breadwinners, towards the specter of mothers joining fathers as absent presences in the home.

Adding to the complexity, paid work and careers bring with them new pleasures as they release women from the role of always being the empathetic, supportive parent, allowing them instead to experience a new kind of power both within and without the home. After Rabbit is hospitalized with heart problems, for example, Janice, who is training at the time to become a real estate agent, is forced to take on more responsibility for tough decisions about both Nelson and the family finances, decisions she would normally have left to Rabbit as the parent more able to detach himself and set limits. She discovers that in confronting Nelson, who has been embezzling from the family company, there is a "stoniness" in her for which she takes "a weary pride." Noticing with some pleasure how her head is "numb but clear" she thinks, "[t]his numbness . . . must be the power her women's group in Florida talks about, the power men have always had" (Rest 261). Sociologist Arlie Hochschild, analyzing the dynamics of two-income U.S. families in the late 1990s in The Time Bind draws attention to some of these same trends, and asks with urgency, what will happen to the children if, as women move into the work sphere, mothers join fathers in becoming either so exhausted by or so engaged in work that there is little time or energy left over for the raising and nurturing of children.

The texts I study look back over the socio-economic changes of the second half of the twentieth century from the vantage point of the early 1990s: Díaz and Smiley set their stories, in the main, as flashbacks to the earlier decades while the last novel which Rabbit narrates in the

9 Yunior reports, "We could never get Mami to do anything after work, even cook dinner, if she didn't first sit awhile . . . . She didn't want to hear nothing about our problems, the scratches we'd put into our knees, who said what" (73). See my Chapter Four for more on the effect working has on Mami's ability to be present as a parent.
Rabbit series is set in 1989 and is replete with musings about events which took place in the earlier Rabbit novels. Because of this narrative strategy, there is a degree of distance that opens up in each work which allows both narrators and readers to place the past into a larger context. In this way all three novels follow Louise DeSalvo's prescriptive steps for healing trauma through story-telling. For readers who pay close attention, what is left when the fog of pain, anger, and regret begin to lift off, is a clearer view of the economic substructure.

As so often happens, literature, having its ear to the ground, picks up on trends and on hidden features long before these things become generally visible to society. From the vantage point of 2015, it is clear that the works I study have done just that. The critique of capitalism that these novels point to using the language of fiction suddenly achieves widespread public attention in the late 1990s when, using the language of political science and sociology, the U.S. economic system begins to be discussed and critiqued more openly in the media and elsewhere than at any point since the 1930s. The event which brings the topic of capitalist exploitation out into the open comes in 1999 when tens of thousands of demonstrators converge on a meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, Washington and thoroughly disrupt it. The "Battle of Seattle," as this event comes to be called, is so dramatic that the major media outlets are forced to break through, as Ginny would put it, "the unbroken surface of the unsaid," and report on the negative effects of globalization. As a result, the word "anti-globalization" enters the public's lexicon and ordinary people begin to hear, for the first time, about the traumas that capitalism is inflicting upon people and populations both in the U.S. and around the world. Not long after, in 2001, the first World Social Forum, an annual international gathering of progressive intellectuals and activists under the slogan “another world is possible,” is held.

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10 See my discussion in Chapter One about the silence which has, until very recently, surrounded the subject of capitalism in the U.S.
These forums offering a radical critique of capitalism have been held every year since.\textsuperscript{11} A regional forum, the U.S. Social Forum, first held in 2007, has allowed people to gather to discuss the specifics of building an anti-capitalist movement in the United States. By the time Occupy Wall Street rolls around in the fall of 2011, demonstrators, openly critiquing capitalism and chanting "We Are the 99\%," are able in a few short weeks to change the national discussion from bailing out the banks to the growing problem of wealth inequality and the need to "bail out the people." With astounding rapidity, Occupy demonstrations spring up around the country, causing Republican presidential frontrunner Mitt Romney to worry in the fall of 2011 that "class warfare" had arrived in the U.S. (Boxer). And today, in the late summer of 2015, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who proudly identifies himself as a socialist, has, according to the latest polls, garnered the support of 30\% of Iowan Democrats in his campaign to be that party's nominee for president (de Vries).

The novel is an invention of the middle class and in general traces the story that the middle class feels a need to tell about itself in a given historical period. The novels that I look at in this dissertation, influenced by a growing need on the part of the middle class to critically examine the workings of capitalism, feel compelled to dissect the story of the absent/present father and in particular the wounds he receives and carries by virtue of his position as breadwinner. They show how these injuries, engendered by the socio-economic system, turn the father both in upon himself and out upon those around him, most particularly upon his children who suffer from his unpredictable rages and withdrawals. At the same time, these novels trace the decline of the phenomenon of the absent/present father as the economy changes and the

\textsuperscript{11} In March of 2015 the World Social Forum was held in Tunisia where upwards of 70,000 people from 128 countries representing more than 4,000 groups, communities or movements converged to discuss, among other things, the problem of the growing inequality of wealth in the world employing the metaphor of the 1\% and the 99\% first used during the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations (El Amraoui; Byanyima).
father is forced to give up his patriarchal privileges, a decline that, as the oversized patriarch is put to rest, opens up space for new kinds of fathers who now take their place alongside other family members rather than above them as the family's "head." As the breadwinning father loses his gargantuan size and power, it becomes possible for readers and characters alike to see the father more clearly and, as well, to see with much better definition the economic world beyond him from which not only he but all members of society and all families take their shape.

What is left, when the sons and daughters of the novels I study in this dissertation forgive their fathers and their anger and resentment start to lift off, is a new understanding of both their fathers and the society which so deeply cut its mark into them all. Peering over the characters' shoulders, we can see that the fathers' failures were not only their own but were shaped by the hungry forces swirling about them. In the same moment, we see that the frustration, anger, and fear these fathers directed at sons and daughters weren't primarily meant for them but were pointed instead towards something beyond: an economic system which, though the fathers themselves could barely see or name it, was slowly squeezing the life out of them.
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