The Pulitzer Prize and Women: An Investigation into Three Decades of Winning Plays by Female Dramatists (1981-2009)

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The Pulitzer Prize and Women:
An Investigation into Three Decades of Winning Plays by Female Dramatists (1981-2009)

by

Kathleen Potts

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015
This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

The Pulitzer Prize and Women:

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by

Kathleen Potts

Dramas by women had won the Pulitzer Prize six times in the years spanning from 1921 to 1958, followed by an unexplained absence of female winners from 1959 to 1980. Then in the 1980s three women won and women continued to win up until the present day. Covering three decades – the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s – this dissertation investigates these Pulitzer Prize-winning plays by female dramatists: Crimes of the Heart by Beth Henley; ‘night, Mother by Marsha Norman; The Heidi Chronicles by Wendy Wasserstein; How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel; W;t (a.k.a. Wit) by Margaret Edson; Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks; and Ruined by Lynn Nottage. This study also examines in-depth the social zeitgeist of their times: the peak of Second-Wave Feminism, the “Age of Oprah,” and a new century – the twenty-first – that continues old patterns of violence and oppression both nationally and internationally. These plays take place at the “tipping points” of social change and have become valuable historical records of those changes once assimilated into the American cultural and theatrical canons as winners of the Pulitzer Prize in Drama. Despite its short-comings, the Pulitzer Prize remains a
positive force in the theatrical field and a true honor for the winners. *The Pulitzer Prize and Women: An Investigation into Three Decades of Winning Plays by Female Dramatists (1981-2009)* makes a contribution to the fields of the Pulitzer Prize, dramatic literature by women, and American culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.
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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, G.S.W., who earned her (double) B.A. degree in history and philosophy at age 75.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Sometimes what is missing catches one’s attention more than what is present. This was the case for me when, while exploring which plays by women had won the Pulitzer Prize in Drama since its inception, I discovered “the gap.” Dramas by women had won the prize six times in the years spanning from 1921 to 1958. They included: Miss Lulu Bett\(^1\) by Zona Gale; Alison’s House\(^2\) by Susan Glaspell; The Old Maid\(^3\) by Zoë Akins; Harvey\(^4\) by Mary Chase; The Diary of Anne Frank\(^5\) by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett; and Look Homeward, Angel\(^6\) by Ketti Frings. Then, surprisingly, there was a complete dearth of female winners from 1959 to 1980. In the 1980s three women won and women continued to win up until the present day. From this seeming anomaly I formulated the research question this study is based on, “After no women won the Pulitzer Prize from 1959-1980, why did these plays win the award?” From that point I formulated further inquiries, such as what does this change mean in terms of their individual plays, how are those plays related to the playwright’s work, and what feedback did they receive from critics and the Pulitzer juries and Board? I also needed to establish the parameters of this study; although there was a distinct beginning point – beginning after “the

\(^1\) Zona Gale, Miss Lulu Bett: An American Comedy of Manners (New York: D. Appleton, 1921). Drama’s Pulitzer Prize-winner in 1921.
gap” – until now the point of termination had remained unclear. Due to the fact that the last publicly available report filed by the Pulitzer Prize Drama Jury was for 2011 (a year with no female winner), this dissertation now covers approximately thirty years, spanning the period from 1981 to 2009. This means that I will not be examining the last two plays by women that have won the Pulitzer, *Water by the Spoonful* by Quiara Alegría Hudes, and *The Flick* by Annie Baker.

Awards, such as the Antoinette Perry Awards, the *Village Voice* Off-Broadway Awards, the Drama Desk Awards, and the Drama Critics Circle Awards, bring anticipation, excitement, and even disappointment to the theatrical community every year. They also invigorate conversation, and quite often, as has been the case with the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, ignite controversy. For some theatrical artists, awards are considered an acceptable way of measuring levels of achievement and acclaim within their fields, thereby allowing artists and companies to see whether they are ascending the ladder of success, holding their ground, or disappearing off (or perhaps still not having made a mark upon) the theatrical landscape. William Saroyan, who refused to accept his award for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 1940, joined a long history of artists who have argued that prizes, in general, are corrupting influences and therefore opted out of the giving and receiving of them. But those exceptional instances only reinforce how prevalent is society’s general belief and prevailing interest in performance arts awards. Whether bestowed for the purpose of encouragement within the theatrical community or for raising awareness outside of it, every year the Tonys, Obies, and Pulitzers become a large part of the public and private conversations generated around the theatre.

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Playwrights honored with the Pulitzer Prize for Drama receive national exposure that provides increased name recognition for the recipient, as well as increased capital of various types, including the $10,000 prize. Like their creators, the winning plays also gain national exposure and increased publicity. The Pulitzer Prize can mean the difference between box-office success and failure, as numerous productions on the verge of closing have been extended in the wake of their win or nomination. In addition, in the year following its win, the play is usually performed at regional theatres throughout the country, potentially generating a large amount of income for the playwright. For some productions, the win can propel a transfer to Broadway, which rarely hosts non-musicals originating in the United States. Moving beyond the theatrical landscape, winning the Pulitzer Prize can also result in a movie deal; four of the plays examined in this dissertation have been made into feature films. Finally, the winning plays and playwrights usually become part of the theatrical canon. The editors of anthologies often consider whether or not a play has won any major awards as part of their criteria for inclusion, thereby further solidifying a drama’s presence in theatrical history beyond the original production and award. Anthologizing a play, particularly in more than one collection, makes that drama more accessible, therefore more likely to be taught, and can lead to the controversial process of canonization. And because the process of award-giving, like the process of canonization, helps to define – and also construct – theatre’s very identity in the United States, it is a phenomenon worthy of study and investigation.

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9 The amount of the prize has increased with inflation from $1,000 to $10,000.
10 At a public panel discussion, Paula Vogel spoke of a recent summer retreat that she had held for playwrights whom she has taught and/or mentored over the years. As a means of encouragement, she related to them that she was able to have a summer home in Provincetown because of winning the Pulitzer Prize.
This is a study, not only of the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, but more specifically, one that focuses on female dramatists who have won the award; therefore, it is important to establish why there remains a reason or even a real need to write a “women only” study in the twenty-first century. One might argue that a large amount of literature has already been written on the subjects: women in theatre, women and theatre, and/or women playwrights. This is true and there have been great strides made in theatrical scholarship on women. I argue that mine is not a traditional feminist study of women playwrights, but rather a study of a major cultural institution and its relationship to dramatic literature by women. The literature relating to the Pulitzer Prize in Drama remains a fairly small collection of book-length texts and there is only one other study that focuses specifically on female dramatists who have won the award, *Women Pulitzer Playwrights: Biographical Profiles and Analyses of the Plays* by Carolyn Casey Craig. The other texts that examine the drama prize in the context of American culture are: Toohey’s *A History of the Pulitzer Prize Plays*, Adler’s *Mirror on the Stage: The Pulitzer Plays as an Approach to American Drama*, and Firestone’s *The Pulitzer Prize Plays: The First Fifty Years, 1917-1967, A Dramatic Reflection of American Life*. There is also a recently released book

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11 Among the playwrights included in this dissertation, as of 2015, there are no monographs published on Lynn Nottage or Margaret Edson. Marsha Norman is included in the “Casebooks on Modern Dramatists” series published by Routledge, as are Beth Henley, Wendy Wasserstein, and Suzan-Lori Parks. In addition, Henley, Wasserstein, and Parks each have more than one book written about them and/or their works. Most recently (2014) Michigan Modern Dramatists published Joanna Mansbridge’s *Paula Vogel*.
titled *Outstanding Broadway Dramas and Comedies: Pulitzer Prize Winning Theater Productions* by Heinz-Dietrich Fischer.\(^{16}\) For the most part, these works examine why, thematically, the plays have been chosen. Unfortunately, the Toohey, Adler, and Firestone texts examine too many plays for the authors to conduct a truly thorough analysis of the works included; nevertheless, they remain valuable contributions to the field. My project builds upon the foundation laid by these authors (especially Craig) and will contribute to an improved understanding of the interwoven cultural placement of the Pulitzer Prize, women’s dramatic literature, and American theatrical culture, thereby providing additional insight into the social construction of American culture during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This study incorporates information from three different spheres of influence: the Pulitzer Prize, drama, and U.S. society. The updated citation for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama reads:

> For a distinguished play by an American author, preferably original in its source and dealing with American life, Ten thousand dollars ($10,000).

Inspired by the changing world around them, female dramatists wrote plays in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s that reflected the social zeitgeist of their times. In turn, the Pulitzer Prize Board found these plays to be “distinguished” plays by “American” authors. All had been original

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\(^{16}\) Heinz-Dietrich Fischer, *Outstanding Broadway Dramas and Comedies: Pulitzer Prize Winning Theater Productions* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013). Fischer is heavily invested in the research of the Pulitzer Prizes – of all types – and has released a series of texts under the umbrella “Pulitzer Prize Panorama” through one of Germany’s leading academic publishers, LIT Verlag. Volumes in this series include, but are not limited to: *America’s Top Journalists Analyze Russia* (volume 1), *Picture Coverage of the World* (volume 2), *Political Caricatures on Global Issues* (volume 4), *Main Achievements of American Presidents* (volume 7), and *Foreign Correspondents Report from Africa* (volume 8).
works and most dealt directly with American life, both parts of the provision which are, technically, optional.

The sources drawn upon for this dissertation include: writings about Joseph Pulitzer and the Pulitzer Prizes; the dramatic texts of the plays by women that won; dramatic criticism of these plays (including: Pulitzer Prize Jury Reports, reviews, and scholarly critiques); as well as books and articles that reported on, explained, or critiqued the social issues that the plays address. Using the technique of close reading, combined with extensive research, this dissertation demonstrates the ways in which these plays reflect American society’s tipping points on various social issues. J. Douglas Bates wrote in *The Pulitzer Prize*, that “throughout the seventy-five year history of the Pulitzer competition, it has served as an accurate mirror of mainstream American society and the press that serves it.” This idea extends beyond the journalism awards to those in letters, drama, and music. Thomas P. Adler describes the dramas that win the Pulitzer as mirroring “the playwright and his or her particular point of view, along with expressing society and its values.” This mirror metaphor is shown to be applicable to those Pulitzer-winning plays by women examined in this dissertation. These plays are mirrors of

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17 Gladwell explained, “This possibility of sudden change is at the center of the idea of the Tipping Point and might well be the hardest of all to accept. The expression first came into popular use in the 1970s to describe the flight to the suburbs of whites living in the older cities of the American Northeast. When the number of incoming African Americans in a particular neighborhood reached a certain point – 20 percent, say – sociologists observed that the community would ‘tip’: most of the remaining whites would leave almost immediately. The Tipping Point is the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point.” Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2000), 12.

18 J. Douglas Bates, *The Pulitzer Prize: The Inside Story of America’s Most Prestigious Award* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), 104. This text is an in-depth examination of the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Specialized News Reporting. While structuring the book around the finalists for that prize, Bates gives a critical appraisal of the often secretive processes surrounding the awarding of all of the Pulitzer prizes.

19 Adler, *Mirror on the Stage*, xiii.
their times; consequently, each one becomes a unique contribution to the historical record of United States society in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This introduction focuses on the Pulitzer Prize Board’s historical decision-making in the arena of the drama award. This information helps to contextualize this dissertation’s through-line argument that since Second-Wave Feminism, the Pulitzer Prize Board has bestowed the drama award on plays by women that reflect the social zeitgeist of their times – the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Although the playwrights themselves may have track records as artistic innovators, the prize has generally been awarded to the most readily accessible of their works. The prize-winning plays have often been conservatively structured in a realistic vein, making them artistically palatable to the average Broadway and Off-Broadway theatregoer, generally privileging the commercially viable over the artistically experimental works. These works, instead of bringing problems to light, have reflected American society’s tipping points on important social issues. Looking at the historical record, one sees that the conservative nature of the prize-giving in drama by the Board – including the times that it overrides its expert juries – has forsaken the opportunity to instigate or reward cutting-edge change; nevertheless, the plays chosen do become valuable historical records of social change once they are assimilated into the American cultural and theatrical canons as winners of the Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

In order to begin to understand how and why certain dramas by women have garnered the Pulitzer, it is important to explore the semi-secret and often controversial process of selection by the Pulitzer Prize Board. First, we will begin by reviewing how the prizes came into being. Joseph Pulitzer\textsuperscript{20} (1847-1911) made his fortune in newspaper publishing and was known as one

\textsuperscript{20} As this dissertation focuses on his prizes and not on Joseph Pulitzer, I have included only the briefest of biographical information. James Wyman Barrett, the last City Editor of Pulitzer’s
of the progenitors of sensational journalism. This style of journalism still thrives today, with the
*Daily News* and the *New York Post* rivaling each other in the greater New York area. Their
usage of scare headlines and sharply slanted political coverage were among Pulitzer’s less
noxious tactics. His more abusive tactics included exaggerating the news and publishing
fabricated news stories, which were rampant strategies in the era of Yellow Journalism. Among
his most egregious acts, Pulitzer it is widely thought joined rival newspaper publisher William
Randolph Hearst in an effort to incite the nation into the Spanish-American war. Hearst and
Pulitzer accomplished this by printing “jingoistic stories about the Cuban insurrection and the
sinking of the U.S. Battleship *Maine.*”21 James McGrath Morris describes Pulitzer’s paper, the
*World*, as beginning its coverage “in a more circumspect fashion…but soon its editors sounded
as shrill as Hearst’s: *WORLD’S LATEST DISCOVERIES INDICATE MAINE WAS BLOWN
UP BY SUBMARINE MINE.*”22 David R. Spencer acknowledges that “there is considerable
merit in blaming both Hearst’s *New York Journal* and Pulitzer’s the *World New York* for playing
fast and loose with the truth in their respective attempts to garner larger and larger circulations;”
however, he finds it to be “misleading and erroneous” to “assert that these two journalistic
enterprises were capable of dragging a reluctant nation into battle.”23 So, in fairness one can say
that these two publishers incited unrest and even rallied for war, but they alone are not

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21 Firestone, *The Pulitzer Prize Plays*, xii.
22 James McGrath Morris, *Pulitzer: A Life in Politics Print and Power* (New York:
23 David R. Spencer, *The Yellow Journalism: The Press and America’s Emergence as a World
responsible for a conflict that resulted in the death of five thousand Americans, plus untold numbers of Cubans and Spaniards in 1898. Balancing out his unsavory legacy in Yellow Journalism, Pulitzer is also described as “the first of the crusaders, the champion of modern investigative reporting.” He “drove his staff to aggressively seek out interviews, a relatively new technique in journalism pioneered by his brother, among others.” His mission was to provide “vital information to his readers – who were mainly new immigrants, the poor, the politically underrepresented, and especially women, whom he encouraged to become literate in many editorials.” The newspapers owned by Pulitzer “tirelessly pushed for social reform and fought corruption in government and big business.” According to Morris, “The moneyed class learned to pick up the World with trepidation” because “each day brought a fresh assault on privilege and another revelation of the squalor and oppression under which the new members of the laboring class toiled.” Whether or not his good deeds outweighed his transgressions, there is no question that Pulitzer wished to be remembered as a crusading journalist and moral man through his endowment of the Pulitzer Prizes and his creation of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. According to his 1904 will, upon his death (which took place in 1911) Pulitzer would leave $1.5 million to establish the school and $500,000 to fund the prizes.

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26 Firestone, *The Pulitzer Prize Plays*, xii.
29 It is no coincidence that Alfred Nobel had announced his prizes the year before Pulitzer conceived of his prizes, modeled somewhat on Nobel’s awards, although many aspects differ significantly. William Randolph Hearst also set up his own awards through the Hearst Foundation.
The selection and awarding of the Pulitzer Prizes is a somewhat complicated and very hierarchical process. The awards are administered annually by Columbia University, but at this point are officially bestowed by the Board, which has gone through changes both in name and scope of responsibility during its history. Originally, the Board’s name was the Advisory Board of the Columbia School of Journalism. In 1950, the Advisory Board officially severed its ties with the School of Journalism and became the Advisory Board on the Pulitzer Prizes (a.k.a. the Pulitzer Prize Advisory Board). In 1975, Columbia University’s Trustees withdrew from the Pulitzer Prize awarding process and delegated their authority to Columbia University’s President (who has served on the Board since its inception). Columbia University’s role remains a key component of the administrative process, but with the Trustees’s withdrawal, they are no longer an overwhelming and defining part of the official selection process.

The power of selection now remains in the hands of the Pulitzer Prize Board. The official Pulitzer website explains that the Board has 19 members and consists mainly of journalists, news editors and news executives, as well as “five academics or persons in the arts.” The academics include the President of Columbia University, as well as the Dean of the Graduate School of Journalism, and the Administrator of the Prizes (both of whom are non-voting members). Although there is no compensation for the Board members, it remains a prestigious appointment and one that carries high status in American journalism. The position of the Chair of the Pulitzer Prize Board rotates to the most senior member. All voting members have term limits, as each may serve a maximum of three terms of three years. Nevertheless, the Board is a self-perpetuating body which chooses its own members. And until 1980, these members were all white, male, and senior journalists (primarily editors and publishers), who

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voted in more of the same. The website emphasized in 2008 that “In the selection of the board and of the juries, close attention is given to professional excellence and affiliation, as well as diversity in terms of gender, ethnic background, geographical distribution and size of newspaper.”31 This was not always the case. As Bates wrote, “Of all the facts and figures in Pulitzer Prize history, the most astonishing is that the board did not accept its first woman, first nonwhite, and first nonjournalist until 1980.”32 Although it cannot be proven definitively, the absence of female Board members is very likely to have impacted the awarding of the drama prize and helps to contextualize the inexplicable “gap” of female winners of the Pulitzer Prize in Drama from 1959-1980.

It should be noted that a crucial question has been raised, mostly implicitly, but sometimes explicitly throughout the history of the prizes: What makes the Pulitzer Prize Board, comprised primarily – and at times completely – of those inhabiting the top ranks of journalism and newspaper publishing, qualified to choose awards in arts, music, and letters? The absolutely technical answer would be that they are not qualified, which is why they need to enlist the experts on the juries to provide them with guidance. The Board is comprised of distinguished professionals with valuable opinions, but up until early into the twenty-first century, they did not include any experts in theatre. John Mason Brown explained what he felt were the essential aspects of being an expert in the field of theatrical criticism:

Though, god willing, they don’t take themselves seriously, critics have to take the theater seriously and believe in its importance. Hence, they cannot pass over the

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painful merely because it is painful, and must think as professional observers in terms of careers, craftsmanship, language, ideas, etc.\textsuperscript{33}

What Brown described is a very different way of viewing a play than that of the average, or perhaps in the Board’s case, above average theatregoer; therefore, “this is where the conflict is bound, at times, to arise between the Board and the jurors.”\textsuperscript{34} In the decades following this letter, conflicts did – and still do – continue to arise because of the Board’s ability – and willingness – to override the recommendations of their expert juries.

For the entire field of Pulitzer Prizes there are 102 judges appointed to serve on 20 separate juries. Like Board members, journalism jurors receive no compensation for their contributions. Helen Thomas, former White House bureau chief for United Press International, had been a juror several times and enjoyed the role, even though she called it “‘scut work for the Pulitzer Board.’”\textsuperscript{35} This is a clear acknowledgement that it is the Board itself that makes the final decisions in all categories once the selection has been narrowed down by the jurors. The drama jury, “usually composed of three critics, one academic and one playwright, attends plays both in New York and the regional theaters.”\textsuperscript{36} These jurors, along with those in letters and music “receive honoraria of $2,000, with jury chair getting $2,500.”\textsuperscript{37} Journalism jurors spend a maximum of three days on campus (generally paid for by their employers) judging the entrants


\textsuperscript{34} Hohenberg, \textit{The Pulitzer Prizes}, 265.

\textsuperscript{35} Bates, \textit{The Pulitzer Prize}, 159.


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. This information is according to the website, but may not be as straightforward as it sounds. There is reimbursement possible for some expenses, but non-journalism jurors are not simply “cut a check” or granted a full honoraria. Like journalism jurors, many serve with no compensation except the honor of serving and the wish to contribute to the recognition of those who are exceptional in their fields.
in their category. Drama jurors do not spend any time at Columbia University; instead, they read
the scripts submitted for entry and, if possible, see the plays on Broadway and off, as well as
occasionally travel to see influential regional theatre productions throughout the entire year. It is
important to note that there have been significant changes in the drama juries. This jury’s
current blend of critics, academics, and playwrights allows for the possibility of a three-
dimensional critique – including cultural, scholarly, and creative points of view – of plays
considered for the drama prize. Prior to 1991, there were only three members of this jury; in
some years, there were actually only two members of the drama jury: 1936 (after the extremely
controversial years of 1934 and 1935, only two of the nominated members would agree to serve)
and 1951 to 1963. Administrator of the prizes and secretary of the Pulitzer Prize Board for
twenty-six years, John Hohenberg wrote that in 1951 “all juries were reduced to two persons
each, evidently an economic move.”38 In the year 1997 there were six jurors, although there was
no award given in that year. Five jurors is literally an odd number that allows for the breaking of
a stalemate, but having the breakdown be three journalists, one academic, and one playwright
ensures that any inherent journalistic prejudices will always be carried by the majority.

It is difficult to determine if there are any inherent journalistic prejudices. Bates noted
the potential for “synergistic” influence when he described his vision of how “these three
institutions – Columbia, the Pulitzers, and the [New York] Times – fused over the decades into a
sort of Holy Trinity of journalism, deified and inextricably linked in an oddly synergistic
relationship.”39 With Columbia’s School of Journalism lending its prestige to the prizes, the

38 John Hohenberg, The Pulitzer Diaries: Inside America’s Greatest Prize (Syracuse, NY:
Syracuse University Press, 1997), 202. The first book of Hohenberg’s trilogy, an indispensable
three-volume history of the prizes, all written from the point of view of an insider, is The Pulitzer
prizes conferring more acclaim and admiration for the *New York Times*, and then the *Times* hiring more graduates from Columbia’s J-School, the cycle is a mutually advantageous conjunction of the three entities. This certainly could give the impression of a privileged position – whether true or not – being bestowed upon drama critics who reported for the *New York Times*. As noted by Adler, “Because of the preponderance of daily and weekly reviewers among jury members, the texts likely to be privileged over others tend to be, though not exclusively, the same ones that have gone on to become commercial and popular successes as a result of initially favorable reviews.” Of course not every drama jury has a *New York Times* critic on it, but many have served either on the jury and/or as its Chair. Although in earlier decades, members like Walter Kerr can be seen serving multiple years in a row, in the decades covered by this dissertation a review of the drama jury reports shows jurors generally serving a maximum of two consecutive years. Some jurors are seen resurfacing every few years and one, Linda Winer, served four years in a row from 1998 to 2001. The formal list of jury candidates is submitted for Board members to consider at the annual business meeting in November, and for the sake of continuity about half of the field of 102 jurors in 20 separate categories remains the same. Bates characterized the route to becoming a Pulitzer Prize juror as being “somewhat as mystical and serendipitous as being selected to join an elite, secret society,” with one sure way to get on the juror list is to “become good friends with a member of the board.” For drama, the majority of the playwrights asked to serve have either been Pulitzer winners and/or finalists. The scholars are usually well-known academics at the top of their fields. The jurors most likely to know Board members are those drama critics that are well-respected (and currently employed) at

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40 Adler, *Mirror on the Stage*, xi.
41 In a brief scan of the period I examined, Ben Brantley, Mel Gussow, Charles Isherwood, and Frank Rich had all worked for the *New York Times*.
various journalistic publications across the country. The composition of the Board and its responsibility to choose the jurors who serve under its auspices make it more than likely that some journalistic prejudice will seep through, at least on occasion.

It appears as though journalistic prejudices may have been part of some of the major controversies erupting during the history of the awarding of the Pulitzer Prizes. Many of the controversies included the Board overruling the jury, acceptable according to Pulitzer’s original provisions, but troublesome nonetheless. And in the case of the most notorious Pulitzer scandal, Janet Cooke’s story “Jimmy’s World” in 1981, one may wonder why the paper did not receive any sort of censure for not verifying its own reporter’s work. The New York Times reported that “The Washington Post said today that an article it printed about the life of an 8-year-old heroin addict in the slums of Washington, for which the author won a Pulitzer Prize this week, was a fabrication.”43 By request of the Pulitzer Prize Board, the Washington Post voluntarily returned Cooke’s Feature-Writing Pulitzer and she has been excised from collections such as Who’s Who of Pulitzer Prize Winners.44 Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of the Washington Post seemed to put the blame squarely on the shoulders of Cooke: “The credibility of a newspaper is its most precious asset, and it depends almost entirely on the integrity of its reporters.”45 In addition to punishing Cooke, Bates noted that the paper shared much of the blame, especially for “submitting her work for a Pulitzer Prize even though many people on the Post’s staff, including editors, had growing doubts about the story’s authenticity.”46 In response to that accusation, the

46 Bates, The Pulitzer Prize, 120.
*Times* reported that “Mr. Bradlee said that when doubts were first raised last year, he did not make aggressive efforts to verify the story because the reporter said she had guaranteed anonymity to her source and because she said her life had been threatened by the drug pushers involved.”\(^{47}\) It sounds like a credible reason, although there is strong potential that journalistic prejudice and a “good ol’ boy network” may have been at work. Bradlee, executive editor for the *Washington Post*, had served on the Pulitzer Prize Board throughout the 1970s, which Bates believes contributed to the fact that no punitive action toward the paper was taken (not even a letter of rebuke) even though “a braver, less chummy board would have disqualified the *Post* from future competition – an ‘NCAA suspension,’ if you like – for at least a year.”\(^{48}\) In addition, the Feature-Writing jury, chaired by Judith Crist, had not even nominated the story among their finalists; the story was unilaterally moved to the category by the Board, who ignored the suggestions of the jury and awarded the Prize to Cooke. One change in Pulitzer Prize Board policy that did happen after the Cooke scandal was that the Board increased the time it spent selecting all twenty-one prizes from one day to two days in residence on campus.

Although the Cooke fabrication is quite probably the most scandalous incident in Pulitzer Prize history (not to mention ironic, given Joseph Pulitzer’s past as the father of sensational and mendacious journalism), other controversies have erupted due to the Board’s decisions to override the juries and go with their own choices – or decide not to give an award at all in that year. As Seymour Topping wrote, “The assignment of power to the board was such that it could also overrule the recommendations for awards made by the juries subsequently set up in each of

\(^{48}\) Bates, *The Pulitzer Prize*, 121.
the categories.”\textsuperscript{49} The Board overruled the juries most often in fiction and drama; these controversial decisions have caused numerous public clashes throughout the years.

Pulitzer’s original specifications for his proposed prize in drama read as such: “For the original American play, performed in New York, which shall best represent the educational value and power of the stage in raising the standard of good morals, good taste, and good manners – $1,000.00.”\textsuperscript{50} As Hohenberg noted, “While the terms of the journalism awards were professionally phrased, those for the arts bore the unmistakable imprint of the thinking of Pulitzer’s era – a high-flown sense of morality, a sturdy reliance on the values of a Puritan society, a sense of uplift, and self-sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{51} Among the early controversies specifically related to the drama prize, Lillian Hellman’s \textit{The Children’s Hour} was sacrificed on the altar of Puritan morality when it was not chosen (even as a finalist) for the award in 1935. Burns Mantle speculated, quite correctly as it turns out, that \textit{The Children’s Hour} would not win the Pulitzer and that \textit{The Old Maid} stood a good chance at taking home the prize. Mantle wrote that the jury was “composed, if the Rialto gossips are as right as they frequently are, of William Lyon Phelps, Star Young and John Erskine.”\textsuperscript{52} Even though Mantle said that the choice should be easy because almost everyone agrees that it is the strongest drama produced in 1934-1935, he predicted that “because of the disturbing nature of its motivating theme the judges will not elect to hold \textit{The Children’s Hour} up for all and sundry, including Nicholas Murray Butler [President of Columbia University at the time], to look upon and discuss as a great university’s choice in

\textsuperscript{50} Firestone, \textit{The Pulitzer Prize Plays}, xiii.
\textsuperscript{51} Hohenberg, \textit{The Pulitzer Prizes}, 19.
drama.” He even predicted that *The Old Maid* had a chance, because “Stark Young is on record as an admirer of Zoe Akins’ drama; it is the sort of drama that belongs definitely to Prof. Phelps’ playgoing past and that he instinctively endorses most heartily, and Prof. Erskine could no doubt be easily won over if the vote were close.” As Hohenberg reports, “Thus, when the Advisory Board met on May 3 and voted for Miss Akins’ play and the university Trustees gave it the prize three days later, the critics had plenty of time for the annual foray.”

The “annual foray” meant that critics (often including those who served on the jury) would be publishing and broadcasting their disagreements/rebuttals over the choice for the drama prize. John Chamberlain described the announcement of the Pulitzer awards as “the signal for the more atrabilious columnists and critics to get out their knives and blowguns for a general slaughter.” Clayton Hamilton, Pulitzer Prize jury member for over sixteen years, launched an attack on the Pulitzer’s Advisory Board during an address over an NBC network. The *New York Times* reported Hamilton as saying, “In respect to this prize, the mountain has labored and brought forth a mouse.” In favor of Hellman’s play, he wrote, “And last and most of all have they neglected to observe the singular triumph of the finest American play of this year and of many years, ‘The Children’s Hour’?” Brooks Atkinson wrote that “to the average theatregoer, who looks upon the stage as a booth of enchantments, the award to ‘The Old Maid’ will seem respectable, since Miss Akins is not writing trash,” but “for people who take the theatre seriously

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53 Ibid., 74.
54 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
the award represents a tragic waste of influence.”59 The most telling response was that of Percy Hammond in the New York Herald Tribune who wrote, “I, for instance, believe ‘The Children’s Hour’ to be the best drama of the year. Yet, had I been an occupant of the Pulitzer bench, I would have known better than to vote for it.”60 This response points out the tremendous pressure on jurors to come up with finalists that will be “suitable” to the Board, an implicit mandate that appears to continue even into the present day. The year before (1934) there had been a reversal at the hands of the Advisory Board, who chose Sidney Kingsley’s Men in White over Maxwell Anderson’s Mary of Scotland and, although the jurors did not dispute the Advisory Board’s right to overrule them, they wanted it known that they did not agree with the choice. In response to the controversy, President Butler changed the procedures and “publicly asked all juries to refrain from proposing henceforth a ‘definite recipient’ for the prize but to list instead their recommendations in order of preference.”61 He invited the drama jurors back the following year subject to those conditions, but all three – Clayton Hamilton, Walter Pritchard Eaton, and Austin Strong – refused to return according to a statement in the New York Times.62 Eaton is quoted as saying, “They don’t want dramatic experts any more. They want office boys. No self-respecting, intelligent critic would serve on such a jury.”63 And certainly what happened with the 1935 jury and Lillian Hellman’s The Children’s Hour seemed to prove Eaton right.

60 Percy Hammond, “Award of Pulitzer Prize Starts the Usual Spring Argument,” New York Herald Tribune, 12 May 1935, Section V.
61 Hohenberg, The Pulitzer Prizes, 148. At some point in the future, possibly around 1985, drama juries were constrained even further by being asked to submit a list of finalists in alphabetical order, with no preferences or recommendations attached. A perusal of the reports submitted by drama juries show that, in spite of this constraint, most of the juries in music, arts, and letters still rank their finalists.
Hohenberg noted that “the controversy had one unlooked-for result – the creation of the New York Drama Critics Circle as a rival to the Pulitzer Prize Drama Jury.”

The New York Times article regarding the New York Drama Critics Circle’s formation and announcement of its annual prize claimed that “The terms of the award are not unlike those for the Pulitzer Prize in drama, and, while the critics would not concede it, their action was regarded generally along Broadway as being, at least in part, the outcome of the commotion raised by the last two Pulitzer awards.”

According to Hohenberg, this unexpected result happened again during the next decade; Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie lost to Harvey by Mary Chase in 1945 and within two years the “outraged American theater industry began its own Antoinette Perry (Tony) Awards.”

This may be pure speculation on Hohenberg’s behalf, because unlike the unsigned Times article announcing the formation of the Drama Critics’ Circle Award, the article by Brock Pemberton announcing the formation of the Tony awards does not explicitly or implicitly suggest a connection to the Pulitzer controversy. Instead, it describes the awards ceremony as a “living and self-renewing memorial” to Perry and its aim, in part, to “afford the entertainment world an opportunity of recognizing and rewarding distinguished service, just as Hollywood for years has added to its fame by the distribution of Academy ‘Oscars.’”

These were not the last of the controversies surrounding the drama prize, as one of the most notorious acts by the Pulitzer Board was still to come. Both John Mason Brown and John Gassner whole-heartedly agreed that their one – and only – recommendation for the Pulitzer

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64 Hohenberg, The Pulitzer Prizes, 150.
66 Bates, The Pulitzer Prize, 127. The fiction award, like the drama award, is also quite frequently a point of contention between the juries and the Board. And, according to Bates, in 1950 the book publishing industry followed the theatrical critics and established the National Book Award.
Prize in Drama (1963) was Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* They had been overruled by the Board in 1960, when the Pulitzer Committee not only did not agree with their top choice, *Toys in the Attic* by Lillian Hellman, but chose instead a musical that they had not even mentioned (although Brown is noted as having seen), *Fiorello!* by Jerome Weidman, George Abbott, Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick. Brooks Atkinson wrote in his opening night review that Hellman’s *Toys in the Attic* “is not her best work.” Many critics view *Toys in the Attic* as far from Hellman’s best work, leaving open the possibility that the jurors had wished to grant a prize to Hellman as compensation for the times she was overlooked. If that was the case, perhaps the Board stayed focused on the caveat that the play (in this case, definitely not Hellman’s best) receives the award and not the playwright – regardless of her talents and previously strong work. On the other hand, Atkinson, like Brown and Gassner, felt that the play was “head and shoulders above the level of the season.” Whatever the actual circumstances, Gassner explained that he and Brown proposed that “after we were overruled in 1960, we stipulated that if the trustees overruled us on future occasions and gave the award to a play other than the one we selected, then the trustees would have to announce what our selection was.” According to Hohenberg, the Board did not go along with the proposal, but “[Brown] and Gassner were given assurances that their reports would not in the future be so abruptly disregarded.” Three years later, the Board ignored the only choice put forward by that jury for drama and gave no award that year. The *Times* ran an article highlighting the lack of a drama award:

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69 Ibid., 21.
71 Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes*, 266.
Could Edward Albee’s play have been too gamy for the Pulitzer advisory board? Could this off-beat account of the home life of college faculty members have seemed unacceptable simply because the board met on Columbia’s campus? Whatever the explanation, the decision was so irksome to the two distinguished critics whose advice the board disregarded, that they have resigned as jurors.\footnote{“Pulitzer Prizes, Minus One,” \textit{New York Times}, 7 May 1963, 42.}

Not surprisingly, Gassner is quoted as saying that “this year’s decision seems to be an indirect way of getting around our vote.”\footnote{Ibid.} Board members responded to the jurors. Sevellon Brown III, associate editor of Providence \textit{Journal-Bulletin} claimed that the Board “did not vote against it because it was shocking or controversial.”\footnote{Ibid.} Other Board responses proved the opposite:

W.D. Maxwell, editor of the Chicago \textit{Tribune}, left no doubt of his own position. The Albee work, he said, was a “filthy play.” And Louis B. Seltzer, editor of the Cleveland \textit{Press}, made a general attack on all plays that “reek with obscenity” and “offend good taste.”\footnote{Hohenberg, \textit{The Pulitzer Prizes}, 268.}

Playwright Joseph Hayes directly attacked \textit{Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf} and \textit{Cat on a Hot Tin Roof} in a \textit{New York Times} article, implying that authors Albee and Williams have “sick minds” and consequently warning the public that “we cannot escape the possibility that if we respond positively to these visions, there may be some hidden corruption or sickness in us that would, of course, make these symbols valid.”\footnote{Joseph Hayes, “Distorted Views: Theater Misrepresents Life in America,” \textit{New York Times}, 11 August 1963, 89.} Albee wrote a rebuttal the following week sarcastically imploring that “if the theater must only bring us what we can immediately apprehend or
comfortably relate to, let us stop going to the theater entirely; let us play patty-cake with one another, or sit in our rooms and contemplate our paunchy middles."\(^{77}\) Clearly there was a very public battle waging about whether or not plays like Albee’s corrupt the theatre and consequently endanger national morality.

In addition to the question of whether or not offensive plays should be given the Pulitzer Prize, another major issue surfaced. When Board members were polled after the vote to withhold the award from *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, “it came to the public’s attention that Benjamin M. McKelway of the Washington *Evening Star* had voted against the Albee play without having seen it.”\(^{78}\) Bates described voting blind and its consequences as “an unintended admission of irresponsibility that left critics fuming.”\(^{79}\) And, according to Hohenberg, “When it became known that two board members had voted against the Albee play without having seen it, President Kirk insisted thereafter that plays had to be seen and books had to be read before the honorable members voted on jury reports.”\(^{80}\) This motion was voted into the record and became an “informal” Board rule. The other major change that happened as a result of this controversy was an official change in the provisions of the drama prize. Hohenberg recorded that “over the objections of Chairman Pulitzer, the board also dropped a provision in the drama award requiring a prize contender in that category to demonstrate ‘educational value.’”\(^{81}\) The revised wording is still in use today and reads, “For a distinguished play by an American author, preferably original

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\(^{78}\) Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes*, 268.


\(^{81}\) Ibid.
in its source and dealing with American life, Ten thousand dollars ($10,000).”

Although this change was officially rendered in 1963, the phrase and criteria “educational value” continue to surface in Jury reports from that time forward.

One might ask, “Why do playwrights accept a prize that has been so controversial over the decades of its existence?” Only one playwright – William Saroyan – has publicly rejected the prize, although the Pulitzer Prize organization does not acknowledge rejections or near refusals, treating all awards as accomplished facts and part of the permanent record. A New York Times article quotes the telegram that Saroyan sent acknowledging the award and presenting his rejection of it: “I announced publicly four or five or six or seven weeks ago that in the event my play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize I would have to reject the award inasmuch as I do not believe in prizes or awards in the realm of art, and have always been particularly opposed to material or official patronage of the arts by government, organization, or individual, a naïve and innocent style of behavior which, nevertheless, I believe vitiates and embarrasses art at its source.”

In direct contradiction to his rejection of the Pulitzer Prize, Saroyan accepted the New York Drama Critics’ Circle award for his play, which he termed “a great distinction, which I am very proud to accept.” Bates added more baldly that Saroyan “described the Pulitzer Prize track record as ‘consecration of the mediocre’ and said that he wanted no part of it.” In his case it was not the controversies previously detailed that caused his aversion to the Pulitzer, but a very personal judgment he had formed about the Board’s pattern of prize-giving.

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83 “Columbia Asserts Play Choice Holds: Tells Saroyan Vote is Fact and Becomes Part of the Permanent Record,” New York Times, 8 May 1940, 23.
84 “‘Time of Your Life’ Wins Critics Prize: Saroyan Play Chosen as Best by an American to Appear on Broadway This Season,” New York Times, 4 May 1940, 12.
85 Bates, The Pulitzer Prize, 134.
One way that the prize might be considered in the vein of “consecration of the mediocre” is the Pulitzer Prize Advisory Board’s tendency to award a playwright’s lesser work, rather than a controversial masterpiece, as happened with dramatist Edward Albee. In the jury report for *A Delicate Balance*, Chair Valency wrote that Norton and Watts “were fully agreed that this was a play of real distinction, and that it marked an important step in the author’s development as an American playwright.” Valency did not share his fellow jurors’ enthusiasm, but agreed to a “unanimous decision” for recommendation of the play. Although not on the jury, in his review for the *New York Times* critic Walter Kerr wrote of how T.S. Eliot shows fear and Albee “talks about it and talks about it and talks about it,” but “showing might have done better.” Although a play of distinction, *A Delicate Balance* is not a controversial masterpiece in the vein of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Albee had no comment at the time regarding the controversy over *Virginia Woolf* because, he was quoted as saying, none was proper “on an award that was not given,” but suggested upon receiving the Pulitzer for *A Delicate Balance* that “the Pulitzer Prize is in danger of losing its position of honor, and could, foreseeably, cease to be an honor at all.” In part, he noted, this was because some trustees were not fulfilling their responsibility to familiarize themselves with the works they are to vote on. He mentioned, specifically, that “several of the trustees had rejected ‘Virginia Woolf’ in 1963 without either having seen or read it.”  Although Albee remained critical of the Advisory Board and the Trustees, he did proclaim that he would accept the prize for *A Delicate Balance* for three reasons:

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89 Ibid.
First, because if I were to refuse it out of hand, I wouldn’t feel as free to criticize it as I do accepting it. Second, because I don’t wish to embarrass the other recipients this year by seeming to suggest that they follow my lead. And, finally, because while the Pulitzer Prize is an honor in decline, it is still an honor, a considerable one.\textsuperscript{90}

Albee’s message was clear: “Certainly something should be done to counter the feeling in the arts that the prize is not always given to the best work in any given year,” and “to counter the feeling in that the trustees will, from time to time, pass over a controversial work in favor of one more conventional…or failing that option, choose to make no award at all.”\textsuperscript{91} He graciously, but not uncritically accepted the honor of the Pulitzer Prize for \textit{A Delicate Balance}, simultaneously offering a diagnostic message regarding the ills of the Pulitzer Prize Advisory Board and the Trustees of Columbia University. Unfortunately, these are ills that still plague the Pulitzer Prize Board, although at least now the Trustees are no long part of the equation, having – after decades of controversy – removed themselves from the judging of the Pulitzer Prizes.

Focusing on the Board, its behavior, choices, and the conflicts it initiates goes beyond the entertainment value provided when reading about the “usual Spring argument” that ensues when the Pulitzer Prizes are announced. Yes, the Pulitzer Prize affects the cultural capital of the playwrights it endows with the award, but the types of plays anointed by the Board also effectively determines the nature of the prize and can literally shape the future of theatre. Adler supposes that “the valorization of a work that results from the award of a Pulitzer, however, will probably have a shaping impact upon what other playwrights (except perhaps those of the very

\textsuperscript{90} Quoted in Ibid.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
first rank) come to think of as available and acceptable subjects and styles of commercial
teatre.” Beyond the affect upon playwrights, this valorization has the potential to affect all
students of drama (particularly undergraduates), because of the overwhelming focus on Pulitzer-
winning plays, which consequently become the best known examples of canonical drama and are
widely thought of as the “cream of the crop.” In reality, these developments have had both
positive and negative results. Winning two Pulitzer prizes helped expose August Wilson’s
unique gifts as dramatist and story-teller to wider audiences, rather than leaving him pigeon-
holed in the category of “minority writer.” On the other hand, automatically canonizing Pulitzer
Prize plays can lead to a narrow view of what U.S. drama can – or should – be. Because the
Pulitzer-winning dramas chosen by the Board are often conservative in structure and artistically
accessible, the focus on these traits can lead to the continued marginalization of more cutting-
edge work. This might mean more artistically adventurous writers may be left out of the canon,
or given scant attention in relation to those who have won the Pulitzer Prize. For two female
writers – Lillian Hellman and María Irene Fornés – this appears to have been the case. John
Gassner noted that, “Lillian Hellman, who has written some of our most powerful plays since the
nineteen thirties, has never received a Pulitzer Prize.” Cuban-American writer María Irene
Fornés never received this honor either. Fornés’s And What of the Night? was the jury’s first
choice/number one preference for the 1990 Pulitzer Prize in Drama. According to the report,
“the Wilson play, which was the chairman’s first choice, is accepted as another major work by an
extremely important (and previously honored) playwright” and “the flaws noted, primarily in the

92 Adler, Mirror on the Stage, xi.
ending, may diminish as the play nears Broadway.” The Board chose the jury’s second choice over their first preference, and gave Wilson his second win. Two members of the jury, Kevin Kelly and Linda Winer, had lobbied hard for Fornés, describing the single-evening tetralogy as “the most ambitious undertaking this year.” All the jurors, including Chairman William Henry III, “regard Fornés as a consistent and honorable writer whose decades-long career has significantly inspired an emerging generation of fellow Hispanics, even though she is in no narrow or obvious sense an ethnic writer.” Instead they described her as “an imagist, illusionist and poet, albeit with a keen social sonscience [sic].” Fornés’s works were poetic, illusionistic, and generally structured far differently from conventional dramas. She was also the darling of Off-Off Broadway, far from the commercial theatre. Did the Board overrule the jury’s recommendation because this work was “a single-evening tetralogy” and not a conventional full-length drama? Could the fact that in this same year – 1990 – the Board awarded the first Pulitzer Prize in Fiction to a Cuban-American writer (Oscar Hijuelos, for his The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love) have influenced their choice for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama? Or, perhaps most likely, the Board may have felt that Fornés’s “now-closed” production at Trinity Repertory Theater in Providence did not have the same commercial appeal as Wilson’s play, which the jurors noted was headed to Broadway. Lacking commercial appeal meant that the amount of

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94 Fischer and Fischer, Chronicle of the Pulitzer Prizes for Drama, 368.
95 August Wilson received his initial Pulitzer Prize for Fences in 1987.
96 Fischer and Fischer, Chronicle of the Pulitzer Prizes for Drama, 368.
97 Ibid. It should be noted that Fornés inspired many writers – certainly not just those of Hispanic heritage – through her work at Padua Hills Playwrights’ Workshop. Regardless, it would be another thirteen years before any Hispanic writer would be honored with the Pulitzer Prize in Drama; Cuban-American Nilo Cruz won for Anna in the Tropics in 2003 and in 2012, Puerto Rican/Jewish-American Quiara Alegría Hudes was honored for her play Water by the Spoonful.
98 Ibid.
reciprocal glory would be more limited in scope, if what is true in journalism is true in drama: “Just as the Pulitzer honors these journalists, they in turn ennoble the prize.”

It is not possible to know, because unlike the juries, the Board deliberates in secret and keeps no record of how individual members vote. Bates noted that the hierarchy has “one hidden level: the board’s three-member subcommittees.” Bates’s use of the word “hidden” is at least partially a misnomer, because the subcommittees were documented in Hohenberg’s 1974 book, *The Pulitzer Prizes*. It is the membership of the subcommittees that remains “hidden” – not the existence of the subcommittees themselves. According to Hohenberg, “To make certain of a closer contact with the work of the Letters jurors, the Board gradually developed a system of consultative committees among its own membership, each of which was charged with intensive reading in one category and the responsibility for working with the jurors when differences of opinion developed.” The action was recorded in the secretary’s minutes in 1961, and Hohenberg mentioned that “the system was extended to drama” and later to music, too. There are no subcommittees for the journalism awards, but each of the prizes in music, letters, and drama has one. Most importantly, unlike the members of the juries, whose names are now released when the awards are announced, “the membership of these subcommittees is kept officially secret even after the prizes are given.” Any Board member who has seen or read the plays can vote, but it is these subcommittees that are tasked with overseeing each award. And, unlike the jury reports, which are kept confidential for three years after the award is given but are

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100 Ibid., 193.
102 Ibid.
103 This was not always the case. In the late 1950s, the University finally released all the names of non-journalism jurors who had served on letters, drama, and music juries during the first forty years of the Pulitzer Prizes.
104 Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes*, 255
eventually open to the public (upon request), there are no official reports written by the Board’s subcommittees. This secrecy helps to shield individual members from scrutiny when they choose to ignore the recommendations of their expert juries. If the subcommittees had to claim ownership and explain their actions, they might be less likely to take matters into their own hands, except when they felt it was absolutely necessary. At this point, they get a “free pass” to make their own judgments and not offer a word of explanation. These actions, like keeping donors anonymous, tarnish the prizes somewhat. Bates was absolutely correct when he asked, “But isn’t there something unseemly about bankrolling cash prizes for America’s most distinguished investigative reporting with money contributed from sources that cannot be disclosed?” These actions make it appear as though there is some wrong-doing to hide.

During Bates’s scholarly investigation of the 1990 Pulitzer Prizes, with his focus on the Specialized News Reporting award, he looked for instances of racism, sexism, elitism, regionalism, and cronyism. In that year, he felt that the Board made choices that did not show signs of racism, sexism, elitism, or regionalism. He did feel that the Board, in terms of cronyism, was “vulnerable on that score” because “eight of the fourteen journalism awards” went to “newspapers represented by members of the Board.” In their defense, he wrote that the “winning work of those eight papers appears to be superb”; nevertheless, “their overwhelming link to the powerful board inevitably raises protests that it is a self-congratulatory club of big newspapers, presenting most of the awards to each other and giving what’s left to a few outsiders.”

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106 Ibid., 214.
107 Ibid., 214-215.
Since 1980, the Pulitzer Prize Board began to revise its assumptions about its own composition and admission of the connection between that and the types of awards it makes, as evidenced by its inclusion for the first time of female, non-white, non-journalist members. Since then, it has been able to overcome what can be interpreted as institutional biases in earlier years. This trend of diversification continues, as evidenced by the election in 2014 of Danielle Allen, the first African American woman to chair the Pulitzer Prize Board. John Gassner wrote that “delicacy does not disallow my questioning the competence of an Advisory Board endowed with veto power that doesn’t include a single critic, especially in judging plays produced in New York.” He felt that in the case of the Pulitzer Prizes, “an intelligent start could be made by abolishing the Advisory Board.” This did not happen, but it did become clear – even to itself – that the Board had long been in need of diversification on many fronts, including the “non-journalism” one. Starting in the 1980s, one can see its extremely slow, but steady progress on this front. In an article announcing the 1980 Pulitzer Prizes, the New York Times reported:

This was the first year in which the board included either women or blacks. Mr. Raspberry and Mr. Wilkins were the first black members of the board. Mrs. Gray was the first woman.  

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108 As noted in the article, “Allen, the UPS Foundation Professor of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J., replaces Paul Tash, chairman and CEO of the Times Publishing Company, which publishes the Tampa Bay Times, Florida’s largest newspaper.” So Allen is also not directly connected to journalism, which adds further diversification to this coming year’s Board. Pulitzer Prize Website, http://www.pulitzer.org/allen_chair_release (accessed 7 May 2014).
110 Ibid.
Beyond race and gender diversification, one can also count additions to the Board of members who are not based in journalism. For instance, philosopher and writer Sissela Bok served from 1989-1997. There also seems to be a trend that a historian will serve on the Board consistently in the last couple of decades, such as Doris Kearns Goodwin, who served one three-year term from 1998 to 2001. Perhaps more significantly, Junot Díaz joined the Pulitzer Prize Board in 2010, as the first academic in the creative writing field to serve. Díaz is the Rudge and Nancy Allen Professor of Writing at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and 2008 winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction for his best-selling first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. What is likely to have the greatest effect upon the drama prize in the coming years is the appointment of Quiara Alegría Hudes in 2012, directly following her Pulitzer Prize in Drama for *Water by the Spoonful*. These appointments may help to bridge what Edward Albee describes as the “not in-frequent ‘distance of mind’ between the experts who sit on the Pulitzer juries and those who pass judgment on them.”\(^{112}\) Adding both a creative writing expert and a professional dramatist certainly help the Board’s credibility in choosing non-journalism winners, even though the overwhelming majority of members remain embedded in the newspaper business, just like the man who endowed the prizes.

**A Brief Summary of the Chapters**

What follows is the chapter breakdown for this dissertation, which has been divided into five sections: an introduction, three chapters, each focusing on a decade of Pulitzer prize-winning plays by women, and a conclusion.

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Chapter Two, “Debunking the Nuclear Family Myth,” includes Pulitzer Prize-winning plays from the 1980s: *Crimes of the Heart*, *'night, Mother*, and *The Heidi Chronicles*. After decades in which no female winners were chosen for the Pulitzer Prize, the 1980s saw three female winners: Beth Henley, Marsha Norman, and Wendy Wasserstein. Each of these women has crafted a play that reflects the women’s struggles against the myth of the perfect nuclear family. There had been major changes in the previous decades, all leading up to a distinct social shift regarding the structure of American families; these plays show how women’s roles had been affected by those changes.

Chapter Three examines the idea of “Personal Confession as Cathartic Spectacle in the Age of Oprah,” by looking at two Pulitzer Prize-winning plays in the 1990s: *How I Learned to Drive* and *W;t*. Using Foucault’s claim that “we have since become a singularly confessing society” as a jumping off point, this chapter explores the parallels between the act of confession in Paula Vogel and Margaret Edson’s plays and the ways in which their mass-audience analogue, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, insisted upon an image of total catharsis as it transformed confession from a personal act into a spectacle performed on broadcast television.

Chapter Four, titled “Two Civil Wars,” is an in-depth exploration of the struggle for survival under the shadow of national violence in the Pulitzer Prize-winning plays.

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114 Marsha Norman, *'night, Mother* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).
117 Margaret Edson, *W;t* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999).
"Topdog/Underdog" and "Ruined." Each has used the backdrop of a civil war – in the United States and in the Democratic Republic of Congo – to examine issues of racism, heritage, and gendered violence. Although racism in the United States and civil war and the ensuing sexual violence in the Congo have both been addressed politically and supposedly eradicated, these playwrights – Suzan-Lori Parks and Lynn Nottage – use their dramas to wake the audience members out of the fog of acceptance and complacency and remind them that these problems still exist.

The Conclusion culminates in a prospective look ahead at what may come for women in regards to the Pulitzer Prize in Drama. It discusses how the plays have become part of an instantaneous canon, which includes all the Pulitzer Prize winners in drama. It also documents this study’s limitations and describes future opportunities for scholarly inquiry. Finally, the conclusion ends on a hopeful note, as it is likely that there will be more Pulitzer Prize-winning plays by women than ever before and that these future plays will continue to reflect American society’s tipping points on important social issues, as evidenced by the plays "Water by the Spoonful" and "The Flick."

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Chapter Two

Debunking the Nuclear Family Myth: Henley, Norman, and Wasserstein

Introduction

After decades in which no female winners are chosen for the Pulitzer Prize, the 1980s brings the emergence and recognition of three female Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights, women who craft plays that struggle against the myth of the perfect nuclear family. This group includes Beth Henley and 

*Crimes of the Heart* (1981), Marsha Norman and *'night, Mother* (1983), and Wendy Wasserstein and *The Heidi Chronicles* (1989). Beth Henley was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in Drama in over two decades. What changed in the world between 1958 and 1981 in order to allow this to happen? One change that may have made a difference was the addition of female, non-white, and non-journalist members to the Pulitzer Prize Board starting in 1980. In addition, one could certainly envision that the call for women’s equality during Second-Wave Feminism would have put increased emphasis on the fact that there had not been a female Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist since 1958; indeed, this pressure shows up, albeit subtly, in the jury’s report for *Crimes of the Heart*. In general, plays that are reflective of important changes taking place in society are favored by the Pulitzer juries. In the case of these three plays from the 1980s under consideration in this chapter, there are major changes resulting in a distinct social shift regarding the structure of American families and, specifically, as they affect women’s roles within that structure. Second-Wave Feminism spurred developments that were in direct response to the prescriptive gender roles and structure of the

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121 Although the members of the Pulitzer Prize Board award the prizes, it is the juries for each category who make the recommendations. These recommendations are submitted via a report written by the Chair of the jury, after extensive discussion and voting by the entire jury. These reports are housed in the Pulitzer Prize archives at Columbia University.
nuclear family as constructed in the 1950s and, consequently, during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s this movement played a major role in producing a new social paradigm in which women asked for and often gained greater equality. By examining characters within each of these plays, this chapter explores the way that these works dramatically illustrate the transformation in women’s roles, from traditional roles that resembled those codified in the 1950s to non-traditional roles that could only be inhabited by a woman at the peak of Second-Wave Feminism in the 1980s.

All three plays depict women at various levels of dissatisfaction with traditional roles and varying reactions by others to this dissatisfaction. In Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart*, the group protagonists – three sisters – share a back story that emphasizes their traditional roles, those of caretaker/nurturer, sexy siren, and happy housewife. By the end of that play the roles have been abandoned, although elements of those roles are incorporated into Lenny, Meg, and Babe’s newly chosen roles. This evolution is the only way the three women can survive in what is, effectively, a new world. In Norman’s *‘night, Mother*, Jessie holds traditional roles too, although she is methodically divesting herself of those rights and responsibilities. She refuses to live the same type of meaningless, consumerist, disconnected life that her mother endured. There is little hope for escape, so her choice is to step out of her roles as mother/daughter/wife and simply stop playing the game of life. The third protagonist, Heidi, of Wasserstein’s *The Heidi Chronicles*, appears to have chosen a very self-consciously feminist existence, where she is strongly admired as a working professional and will not change herself to suit a man. This seems, from the outside, like a victory, but for Heidi it is a hollow one. She ends up feeling let down by the
women’s movement. She appears to “have it all” except for a man, but feels isolated and in competition with other women. Unlike Jessie, Heidi still has hope and choice in relation to her life. As an adoptive, single parent she chooses a new role and a new way to construct her own version of family.

In addition to portraying the change in women’s roles, these three plays reflect the playwrights’ struggles against the structure of the nuclear family. In Henley’s play, the three protagonists are basically ruled by the grandfather’s ideals and wishes, after he has taken over the patriarchal role following their father’s abandonment of the family. Through natural and unnatural causes in the play, the playwright effectively kills off the patriarchal figures, causing the three sisters to take charge of their own lives. Norman chose to disrupt and destroy the family unit by having Jessie take her own life, thereby annihilating any chance ever again of her perpetuating the roles of mother/daughter/wife. In her play, Wasserstein decides not to destroy the structure (or any characters), but instead, she has protagonist Heidi design a new family model. The playwrights have constructed three different ways for their protagonists to escape the expectations of women and the structure of the nuclear family: 1) Killing the patriarch; 2) Killing the self; 3) Reimagining the structure and the players. The female protagonists in these three plays successfully transform their traditional roles to non-traditional ones and consequently change the structure of the nuclear family in the process. Ultimately, the playwrights are working through and against traditional roles and structure in order to find alternatives for female existence. In expressing their visions of change through dramatic literature, Henley, Norman,  

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Heidi is not alone in feeling “let down” by the women’s movement. During the Third Wave of Feminism it becomes clear that non-middle-class, non-white women also felt alone and let down by the Women’s Movement. For women of color and lesbians, they were feeling excluded due to the Second Wave’s “essentialist” nature, which allowed for the movement to base its wants and needs on the singular experiences of white, middle-class women, women who happen to be a lot like Heidi.
and Wasserstein end up reflecting the sociological shift away from the nuclear family and the new possibilities for women’s roles outside of that structure.

**Crimes of the Heart**

According to the jury report dated 29 March 1981, the nominating jurors for the 1981 award, Mel Gussow (Jury Chair and reviewer for the *New York Times*), Henry Hewes (drama critic for the *Saturday Review*), and Edith Oliver (critic for *The New Yorker* magazine) “voted unanimously for the prize to be awarded to the play ‘Crimes of the Heart’ by Beth Henley.”

Gussow wrote, “The committee also wishes to note the fact that the recommendation of ‘Crimes of the Heart’ comes at a time when women playwrights, led by Miss Henley, are at their most creative and productive.”

This report was brief and Gussow provides no evidence or addendum to support Henley’s leadership of creative and productive female playwrights, nor does he come right out and note that there has not been a female Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist since 1958. His understatement is likely intentional and fits his usual style, but it can be surmised that the call for women’s equality during Second-Wave Feminism had put increased emphasis on the absence of women being recognized in all fields of endeavor – including playwriting.

Being awarded the prize makes a playwright successful, but often the prize is given to already successful playwrights ensuring a circle of success for all involved. One way that a playwright gains credence and recognition is through awards and reviews, which is, in part, how Henley began to build her reputation. *Crimes of the Heart* was Beth Henley’s second play, but

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124 Ibid.
the first one produced professionally. Written in 1978, the play was a co-winner of the Great American Play Contest of the Actors Theatre of Louisville and consequently it was produced in Louisville’s annual festival of New American Plays. As noted in his memorandum, “RE: Consideration of plays not yet produced in New York” Gussow recalls:

Two years ago in Louisville, I saw a play that would have been, if eligible, a serious candidate for a Pulitzer Prize. That play was Beth Henley’s “Crimes of the Heart,” our choice for this year’s prize – after its New York premiere. It would have been a loss if the play had not opened in New York.125

This passage supports two points, that Crimes was already accumulating a reputation and accolades long before it came to New York and that part of Gussow’s agenda for the 1981 prize was to promote the consideration of plays not produced in New York. This restriction dates back to the proposal for awards that Pulitzer puts forth in his will, where Joseph Pulitzer proposes that the prize goes to a play “performed in New York.” The Chair acknowledges that this was not a committee recommendation when he related that “Edith Oliver feels that all good plays eventually come to New York.”126 The third member of the jury, Henry Hewes had a pro-active “proposal about methods of alerting jurors to prospective plays [from the regions].”127

In addition to awards, the play’s production track record assured the jurors and the Pulitzer Board that the work was a “winner” – a commercial success – having been “nurtured” in American regional theatres. Gussow notes, “In between Louisville and New York, it was also

125 Fischer and Fischer, eds., Chronicle of the Pulitzer, 341.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
staged at regional theaters in St. Louis, Baltimore and Los Gatos, California.” The Manhattan Theatre Club offered Henley her New York premiere in 1980, a limited-engagement run which sold out.

The play’s critical success was cemented by the (then) chief theatre critic of the *New York Times*, Frank Rich, in his review dated 22 December 1980. Rich gave his support to Henley and her production at Manhattan Theatre Club; although quite positive, at times his critique was patronizing at worst and paternalistic at best. Rich pointed out that towards the end of the play, as Henley attempts to resolve all of the issues she has raised, “the sputtering dramatic machinery starts to overwhelm the laughter.” As if she were a child or a naughty girl, Rich remarked, “It’s hard to get angry though. Miss Henley is a beguiling writer.” He added that “She’s also a lucky writer, because her play, which originated at the Actors Theatre in Louisville, Ky., has been given a dream New York production under the wise and woolly direction of Melvin Bernhardt.” Here Bernhardt sounds like a grand old patriarch who delivers the promise held in the work of this beguiling and lucky female writer, even though “at times Miss Henley turns a tad mushy and takes to spelling out her points about the nature of emotional survival.” It is unlikely that any critic ever referred to Eugene O’Neill as “a tad mushy” and his work often dealt with emotional survival and has received the Pulitzer Prize several times.

Another main reason why this play succeeded in the eyes of Rich, the Pulitzer jury, and even the audiences, was that the play is just familiar enough to make the viewer comfortable and

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128 Ibid., 340.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
just different enough to keep one interested. In his review title Rich called the play a “Comedy About 3 Sisters.” Comedies, like musicals, rarely win Pulitzer Prizes in Drama. But according to Rich this playwright was “fearless in her insistence on finding the comedy in the bizarre.” Rich’s praise often appears two-sided, one positive and one at least partially negative, such as in this one: “Miss Henley’s telltale heart belongs to the South – the land of Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty – and her brand of Gothic humor comes quite naturally with the territory.” Henley was positively welcomed by Rich into the Southern company of esteemed female writers Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty (who, like Henley, is from Mississippi), but at the same time her talent was somewhat dismissed in the phrase that it “comes quite naturally with the territory.” Henley’s humor – naturally endowed or not – is strong throughout Crimes, which the Pulitzer jurors describe as work that “deals, sometimes comically, with tragedies in everyday life.” Later descriptions of the play, including one by its publisher, Dramatists Play Service, Inc. described it as a Comedy/Drama. What all of these descriptions have in common is the fact that the play was not “just” a comedy; it was comically entertaining, but serious enough to be considered worthy of a Pulitzer Prize.

*Crimes of the Heart* concerned itself with issues that were foremost in the minds of contemporary women, such as their roles in society. In this way, one can see that the primary influence on Henley’s drama was the well-made play tradition of psychological and social realism, which dates back to the social dramas of Ibsen. The drama was three acts long, a traditional length that was almost out of style in the 1980s, and to Rich it seemed to be “maybe

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134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
an act too many.” The 2008 revival of *Crimes of the Heart* remained quite long with a running time of 2 hours and 20 minutes, but was condensed into two acts.

Henley’s play contains female characters that are recognizable, but each of whom harbors the ability to surprise and the seeds of change. This is where the artistic achievements of Henley best coincide with the strictures of the prize as set forth in Joseph Pulitzer’s original will. The relevant passage reads:

> The drama prize shall be given “Annually, for the original American play, performed in New York, which shall best represent the educational value and power of the stage in raising the standard of good morals, good taste, and good manners, One thousand dollars ($1,000).”

As noted in the jury report generated by Gussow, *Crimes of the Heart* was presented in New York and is “an outstanding family play about the interwoven lives of three eccentric sisters in a small Mississippi town.” *Crimes* was an original work about American life by an American playwright. The drama jury stated that the play transcends being a microscopic look at small town life in Mississippi by beginning with a specific provincial American situation, but then becoming “a play with universal human values.” On behalf of the jury Gussow argued that the play was “enormously theatrical,” which can be interpreted as fulfilling, at least in part, the “power of the stage.” The idea of the play raising “the standard of good morals, good taste, and good manners” is questionable – perhaps more so the “good taste and good manners” stipulation.

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139 Fischer and Fischer, eds., *Chronicle of the Pulitzer*, 340.
140 Ibid.
than the good morals; nonetheless, the drama jury did claim that it was a play with universal human values. This value is related to the struggle engaged in by the three main character; these sisters – group protagonists – struggle against the myth of the perfect nuclear family. And because it is a comedy and a drama, the playwright is given the liberty (within the strictures of traditional playwriting) to give these women a happy ending. It is the characterizations and the writing that make this work entertaining, but it is this examination of their struggle against the myth of the nuclear family that makes this play and the other dramas in this chapter have lasting impact.

In her “Introduction” to Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, Elaine Tyler May wrote that “both the cold war ideology and the domestic revival” can be seen to function “as two sides of the same coin: postwar Americans’ intense need to feel liberated from the past and secure in the future.” 141 She examined public policy and political ideology and brought both to bear on her study of private life, “locating the family within the larger political culture, not outside it.” 142 This pair of ideas functioned, in large part, as May’s thesis. They also highlight a key aspect of this dissertation, the knowledge that in the arena of drama, even when a play appears to focus only on the personal, it exists within – and is influenced by – the larger realm of political and social culture. The sisters in Crimes of the Heart are not political; Henley makes fun of the idea when Meg says to Babe, “I didn’t even know you were a liberal” and Babe replies, “Well, I’m not! I’m not a liberal! I’m a democratic!” 143 And yet, the play deals with interracial relations, domestic abuse, and other socio-political issues. Crimes appears to be a simple “kitchen-sink drama” but when one scratches at the surface of family dynamics and the

142 Ibid.
quest for love, the work reveals more than would normally be expected. Henley is dealing with women who are deeply unhappy with their current situations, but are floating through their lives in an almost unconscious state – until a series of crises brings everything hidden to the surface.

The nuclear family structure was seen as a foundation of social stability after World War II and it took on a particular structure in order to accomplish this ideal: “As the chill of the cold war settled across the nation, Americans looked toward the uncertain future with visions of carefully planned and secure homes, complete with skilled homemakers and successful breadwinners.”\footnote{May, *Homeward Bound*, 90.} Especially in the Atomic Age, gender division provided the basis for roles in the home and on the home front. Traditional ideas of female gender roles at that time meant that women were expected to be chaste outside of marriage, erotic within the marriage, good procreators, and ready to aid in the event of a nuclear war. According to May, “The Federal Civil Defense Administration, created by President Truman in 1950, was actively involved in developing the concept of professionalized homemaking for the atomic age.”\footnote{Ibid., 103.} This included stocking “Grandma’s Pantry” with canned goods, a first aid kit, and other emergency supplies; ideally, this pantry would be in the basement or a homemade bomb shelter.\footnote{The name for “Grandma’s Pantry” is taken from The Federal Civil Defense Administration’s campaign for home bomb shelters; May provides a copy of the illustration. Ibid., 106.} The kitchen, the “heart” of the home and generally considered a woman’s domain, is the single location of Beth Henley’s play, *Crimes of the Heart*. In this space we discover what is needed for the Magrath sisters, Lenny, Meg, and Babe, to permanently restructure their family, because Henley has created a nuclear family structure that has come apart more than once in this play. The Magraths had been a typical nuclear family, with a father, mother, and three children, but the back story shows a history of rejection of family roles. For instance, the mother commits suicide after the
father abandons the family. The father’s abandonment of his family is an outright rejection of his role as the head of the nuclear family. He ceases to be the breadwinner and father figure. The mother also rejects her role as caretaker and nurturer by committing suicide after her husband leaves her and consequently she abandons their children too. This trauma leaves indelible marks on all three of the daughters, as each tries to find a way to deal with her pain and the changes required as the structure of their family shifts. It also leaves a legacy of rejecting the traditional model of the nuclear family. The grandparents take the children in, creating a second form of the nuclear family, with the grandmother taking over the maternal role and the grandfather becoming the reigning patriarch. The crisis that kicks off the third restructuring of the Magrath family, and which is the inciting incident for the play, is Babe’s shooting of her husband, Zackery. Metaphorically, this crisis is like the detonation of a bomb, which leaves everyone scrambling for shelter; however, instead of piling into a bomb shelter that houses “Grandma’s Pantry,” the Magrath sisters converge – literally – on their grandmother’s kitchen. Lenny is the matriarch now, since their grandmother, “Old Grandmama,” passed away. Babe remarks to Meg that Lenny is “turning into Old Grandmama.” Meg replies, “She needs some love in her life. All she does is work out at that brick yard and take care of Old Granddaddy.” After the death of their grandmother, Lenny became overseer of the kitchen and the garden, as well as caretaker to their ailing grandfather, who was recently moved to a hospital facility. At this point in the Magrath family home Lenny is breadwinner (through her work at the brick yard) and homemaker, but their aging and invalid grandfather remains the “patriarch.” In order to break free of the nuclear family structure all three women must learn to reject the patriarchal authority in whatever form it takes in their lives.

147 Henley, Crimes, 22.
148 Ibid.
It is implied that everything has been “fine” in the interim between their mother’s suicide and the fateful moment when Babe shoots Zachery, but that is only the façade. In reality, it seems that as each woman had been fighting at her individual battle station, Lenny as caretaker to Old Granddaddy, Meg as a not-rising Hollywood chanteuse, and Babe as wife to Zachery; the stresses of being perfect representations of the caretaker/nurturer, sexy siren, and happy housewife have taken their toll. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), considered to be the seminal text that inspired Second-Wave Feminism, Betty Friedan interviewed women and recorded her discoveries of just how binding the harness of domesticity could be; women were dissatisfied with their lives, but it was “the problem that has no name.”\(^{149}\) The Magrath women were not happy and not performing well in their respective roles, but they did not speak about their problems either. In the individual interviews Friedan slowly uncovered the dissatisfaction beneath the façades of suburban wives and mothers, only intuiting at first that many of these women may be “afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – ‘Is this all?’ ”\(^{150}\) The Magraths are like the women in Friedan’s book who have consciously or unconsciously embraced the ideals of the nuclear family, as prescribed and reinforced by the government, the educational system, the popular culture channel of women’s magazines, the therapeutic models based on Freud’s theories, and even via advertising agencies; consequently, “In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary culture.”\(^{151}\) This mystique of feminine fulfillment is the concept that a woman can achieve complete happiness living solely for and through her husband and children. She does not need an education or goals or dreams or any independent thoughts at

\(^{149}\) Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 57. “The Problem That Has No Name” is the title and topic of Friedan’s first chapter.

\(^{150}\) Ibid.

\(^{151}\) Ibid., 61.
all. In his novel, *The Stepford Wives*, Ira Levin metaphorically depicted these “perfect” suburban wives and mothers as robots, thereby providing a social critique of the idea that a real “ideal” woman exists to serve and support a husband and children.\(^{152}\) Friedan’s subjects are not fictional and are certainly not perfectly happy. But, like the robotic women in the novel (and subsequent films), they lack an independent identity and sense of self. The gender roles that they are living through have left many of them unfulfilled and depressed. Friedan’s thesis states that “the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity – a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique.”\(^{153}\) Each of Henley’s three sisters suffers from falling short of the feminine ideal. For instance, the oldest sister Lenny is not able to bear children; therefore she is plagued by the idea of biological determination that pervaded the culture during the Cold War, which included the concept that “anatomy is destiny” and therefore every woman is destined to become a mother.

Lenny has been secure in her role as nurturer/caretaker for her grandfather, but now that he is sick and most likely dying, things are coming unraveled. Although taking care of him has taken a toll on her physically and emotionally, she has no vision of herself or her life outside of that role. She confesses, “I’m afraid of being here all by myself. All alone.”\(^{154}\) Lenny is all alone because she has isolated herself based on her perceived inadequacies about being a less-than-whole woman, a perception that has been reinforced by her grandfather. She argues with Meg and claims that she’ll never find love because she cannot have children.


\(^{153}\) Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 133.

\(^{154}\) Henley, *Crimes*, 59.
LENNY: Oh, I don’t care what you believe! It’s so easy for you – you always have men falling in love with you! But I have this underdeveloped ovary and I can’t have children and my hair is falling out in the comb – so what man can love me?! What man’s gonna love me?  

Meg and Babe try to convince her otherwise and point out that Old Granddaddy is “the only one who seems to think otherwise.” Lenny excuses Old Granddaddy’s words by exclaiming, “He doesn’t want to see me hurt! He doesn’t want to see me rejected and humiliated.” She tries to convince her sisters and herself that his words are coming from a place of truth and perhaps even kindness. Meg becomes angry and confronts Lenny, asking her “Just tell me, did you really ask the man from Memphis?” And when Lenny confesses that she didn’t, Meg calls her a “jackass fool” because she did not ask the man from Memphis if he cared that she could not have children. She “just broke it all off ’cause of Old Granddaddy!” Even though Meg is unable to stand up to her grandfather on her own behalf, she certainly tries to get Lenny to see the ridiculousness of his criticism of her.

Out of the three sisters, Meg is the only one who has ventured out on her own, and therefore appears to have escaped complete indoctrination into the patriarchal system wherein the man is always right and the woman should serve only his needs. Meg appears to be a free and independent woman, proving her agency by pursuing a creative career. This agency is a reaction to not wishing to be dominated by a man; in this case, her boyfriend “Doc.” Meg had a chance to make a life with him, but instead she ran away, later claiming to have felt “choked.”

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155 Ibid., 48.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
159 Ibid.
MEG: I know, Doc. It was my fault to leave you. I was crazy. I thought I was choking. I felt choked! [...] I don’t know why… ‘Cause I didn’t want to care. I don’t know. I did care though. I did.¹⁶⁰

Running away from Doc may have stopped the choking sensation temporarily, but it does not free her from wanting to live up to male expectations and continuing to try to gain male approval. This is evident in her self-representation to her grandfather; Lenny complains to Babe that Meg sat in the grandfather’s hospital room and told “untrue stories and lies.”¹⁶¹ Here it becomes clear that, even for Meg, Old Granddaddy looms larger than life as a father figure, causing her to fabricate stories that are just as big – an RCA record, an appearance on the “Johnny Carson Show,” and a multi-million dollar movie where she has a “small” leading role. In reality, Meg is a clerk at a dog food company. But reality has many layers and later we learn through her conversation with Doc that things are even worse for her than she first revealed to her sisters:

MEG: I went nuts. I went insane. Ended up in L.A. County Hospital. Psychiatric ward. [...] one afternoon I ran screaming out of the apartment with all my money and jewelry and valuables and tried to stuff it all into one of those March of Dimes collection boxes. That was when they nabbed me. Sad story. Meg goes mad.”¹⁶²

Henley infused comedy into this tragic tale by having Meg’s style of speaking be reminiscent of a celebrity tabloid report or a writer’s pitch for a movie-of-the-week. Her fast-paced rhetoric is

¹⁶⁰ Henley, Crimes, 50.
¹⁶¹ Ibid., 39.
¹⁶² Ibid., 51.
narcissistic, yet self-aware, making its dramatic point with a dash of humor; consequently, Meg remains somewhat detached while sharing her trauma and vulnerability with Doc. It appears as though this is a bonding moment; the first time that they have seen one another since Meg left Doc after Hurricane Camille, when she convinced him to stay in the path of the hurricane with her, despite the risk. He suffered a severe injury to his leg and she left for Hollywood once he was evacuated, rather than staying to help him recover. Then, like now, he plays the “male” role of protector and offers to help her escape – if only for one night – into a romantic, moonlit night. She failed at her career and continues to lie to her family, but he allows her to feel as though she is still captivating and she is willing to momentarily embrace this fiction. She has difficulty escaping her representative role as sexy siren. Like the Sirens of Greek mythology, Meg is representative of a seductress who lured Doc with her enchanting voice and caused him – via the hurricane Camille – to be “shipwrecked.” She appears to have shame and sadness over how she abandoned Doc after the roof caved in and injured his leg – after supposedly convincing him to stay during the storm by promising to marry him; clearly Meg is not capable of being either wife or caretaker. This is painful to her and possibly part of what has caused her incapacity to sing the sad songs any longer. In front of her sister, Lenny, she tries to cover up the hurt with expressions of anger and irritation about Doc marrying a “Yankee” and having two “half-Yankee” children, but this is a bald attempt to gloss over her real hurt and self-disappointment. She has made believe that she is successful and sought after in her career, when in reality she has broken down to the point where she can no longer sing the sad songs – or really function on any level – and has ended up in a psych ward.

Babe’s shooting of her husband is representative of her rejection of both her grandfather’s and her husband’s patriarchal rule over her life. This lineage of rule can be traced
by noting the passing of the bride to the husband by the father in a wedding ceremony. Of course this wedding ritual in the twentieth century United States is meant to be symbolic and not a literal passing of property – the woman – from father to husband; nevertheless, it implies a lack of agency on the woman’s part. In this case, the playwright reveals that Zackery was more the grandfather’s choice (after he stepped into the patriarchal role, following the father’s desertion), than he was Babe’s choice:

LENNY: He remarked how Babe was gonna skyrocket right to the heights of Hazlehurst society. And how Zackery was just the right man for her whether she knew it or not.

Once married, Babe struggled with the expectations stemming from the creation of the nuclear family myth during the Cold War. Her issues reflect how the structure of the nuclear family centered on the issue of sexuality contained within marriage, “where masculine men would be in control with sexually submissive competent homemakers at their side.” Two ingredients were essential in order to build these strong families, “sexual restraint outside marriage and traditional gender roles in marriage.” Even before Babe shot her husband, she had exploded her own nuclear family by rebelling against her traditional gender role as submissive, competent homemaker. Later, she fails to show sexual restraint outside her marriage by taking on a lover. Babe has been put in jail because she shot her husband, who had threatened and attacked her lover, an African American teenager named Willie Jay with whom she had broken taboos of age, class, and race. Babe has answered the call of desire outside the domestic realm and has created another version of family with Willie Jay as lover/object of

163 Henley, Crimes, 16.
164 May, Homeward Bound, 99.
165 Ibid.
desire and the stray “Dog” as a surrogate child. The picture painted by Babe is a highly sexualized one. It started much more innocently than that, with the two of them bonding over the stray dog. First Willie Jay took the dog in, until his family could no longer afford to feed it, then Babe adopted the dog, because as the wife of a lawyer and senator, she was in a higher financial class and could easily afford the extra expense. Both Willie Jay and Babe cared for the animal to the best of their abilities and often spent time with him together, creating their own, unusual family. Babe explains to Meg that, after bonding over the shared guardianship of Dog, “Well, things start up. Like sex. Like that.” And, crossing the boundaries of race, class, and age, Babe and Willie Jay began a sexual relationship. Now Babe is in jail and only has the saxophone to pour her hopes, dreams, and sexual desires into.

In jail things appear as though they will not work out for Babe, but the playwright slowly reveals that Babe’s transgression was also a case of a victim of domestic violence fighting against her oppressor. The audience is given hope, through the efforts of her passionate defense attorney, Barnette Lloyd, that Babe will not be punished for fighting back against her oppressor. After all, it is shown via a photostatic copy of Babe’s medical records over the last four years, that she has suffered numerous injuries. When asked by Meg if Zackery had hurt her, Babe answers yes. Meg wants to know why:

Babe: I don’t know! He started hating me, ‘cause I couldn’t laugh at his jokes. I just started finding it impossible to laugh at his jokes the way I used to. And then the sound of his voice got to where it tired me out awful bad to hear it. I’d fall asleep just listening to him at the dinner table. He’d say, “Hand me some of

166 Henley, Crimes, 30.
that gravy!” Or, “This roast beef is too damn bloody.” And suddenly I’d be out cold like a light.\textsuperscript{167}

Babe breaks the Cold War’s nuclear family rules of being a good wife by not being light and entertaining and willing to laugh at her husband’s jokes. He takes out his frustration on her by physically abusing her. Henley reveals the domestic abuse that Babe suffered when she was no longer able to keep up appearances as a submissive, competent homemaker and obedient and sexually available wife. The revelation of this truth through Babe’s lawyer, Barnette Lloyd, allows the audience to at least partially sympathize with her reasons for being unfaithful and turning to an underage boy for physical and emotional comfort. It also gives the playwright a plausible way to keep Babe from remaining in jail for shooting her husband.

At the end of the play, all three sisters have broken free from their reliance on patriarchal authority. Meg’s rejection of patriarchal rule is less violent than Babe’s, but she also decides that she will no longer “pretend” in order to make her grandfather happy. Earlier in the text she acknowledges the toll that the lying has taken on her:

MEG: […] I hate myself when I lie for that old man. I do. I feel so weak. And then I have to go and do at least three or four things that I know he’d despise just to get even with that miserable, old, bossy man!\textsuperscript{168}

After her night with Doc she has an epiphany of sorts – about her relationship to Doc, to her grandfather, and to herself – and she finds an inner strength that she has not possessed before:

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 42.
MEG: I sang right up into the trees! But not for Old Granddaddy. None of it was to please Old Granddaddy! […] Oh, I know; I know. I told him all those stupid lies. Well, I’m gonna go right over there this morning and tell him the truth. I mean every horrible thing. I don’t care if he wants to hear it or not. He’s just gonna have to take me like I am. And if he can’t take it, if it sends him into a coma, that’s just too damn bad!169

Her sisters find this last exclamation hilarious, because they know that while Meg was out with Doc their Granddaddy did go into a coma. Within the section of text that follows Meg’s exclamation, Lenny and Babe experience uncontrolled laughter, as well as tears. This gallows humor allows the audience to see that the change in their grandfather’s condition brings both sadness and relief to the three women.

The patriarch’s coma suspends his power and the dance that the three granddaughters do to appease him. Lenny may be the one who experiences the most all-encompassing freedom in connection with Old Granddaddy’s demise, because not only does she have the potential to find happiness by being freed from him, but she actively rejects her grandfather’s vision of her. Lenny acts on this opening and decides to take a chance and tell Charlie (the man from Memphis) why she broke up with him, explaining that she has “this ovary problem.”170 Charlie shows himself to be a different type of man than the typical head of the nuclear family when he reveals that he doesn’t need – or even really want – kids and refers to them all as “little snot-nosed pigs.”171 They both laugh and express how they are dying to see one another. Charlie’s rejection of the typical male role and his acceptance of Lenny’s inability to perform the typical

169 Ibid., 57.  
170 Ibid., 67.  
171 Ibid.
female role of mother has allowed both of them to imagine a future together free of the expectations that are associated with those representative roles. Henley emphasizes the potential freedom from the death of patriarchy, carrying its repercussions to all three sisters. This allows Lenny, Meg, and Babe to break free from their roles as caretaker/nurturer, sexy siren, and happy housewife. Whatever their futures turn out to be, they are likely to hold a certain type of freedom that none has possessed before. The Magrath family is reconfigured for the third and final time. They are no longer a nuclear family in any form, but instead they are configured as three independent women who are not alone, because they have each other – three sisters.

‘night, Mother

Unlike Beth Henley, whose characters find their way outside the domestic sphere through the real and metaphorical deaths of their patriarchal figures, Norman’s character escapes via her own death. Jack Kroll, critic for Newsweek wrote, “If there is such a thing as a benign explosion, this play is it: it detonates with startling quietness, showering us with truth, compassion and uncompromising honesty.” There is no such thing as a benign explosion and this play’s ending resonated strongly with audiences, critics, and theatre artists – particularly women. This drama’s Pulitzer win and Mel Gussow’s follow-up article in the New York Times Magazine combined to ignite a burning conversation about women playwrights in contemporary theatre. When Henley won two years earlier, no controversy erupted about women’s voices in the theatre. Perhaps people were simply rejoicing that Chairman Mel Gussow and members Edith

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172 Marsha Norman, ‘night, Mother (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983). This quote is not traceable back to a specific Newsweek article or review by Kroll and appears to only exist as back cover copy to help sell the play.

Oliver and Henry Hewes of the Pulitzer jury for drama that year had convinced the Pulitzer
Board that the time had come for a woman to be recognized for her dramatic writing. Gussow,
as a drama critic for the New York Times, accepted an assignment to follow up with Norman after
her Pulitzer win and the result was the article, “Marsha Norman Savors Pulitzer Prize for
Drama.”\footnote{174} The piece has Norman relate where she was at the time of her Pulitzer win, her
reactions, some biographical material regarding herself and her writing, and ends with her
passing on the advice given to her by John Fetterman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning Louisville
journalist: “He told me, ‘If it’s in you, write it while you still can.’”\footnote{175} None of this material was
controversial, with perhaps the exception of the second to last paragraph where Gussow
explained that “Miss Norman is the second woman in three years to win a Pulitzer Prize for
Drama.”\footnote{176} He noted Beth Henley’s win for Crimes and also the 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning
drama by Charles Fuller, A Soldier’s Play. This idea of two women winning the Pulitzer Prize in
three years seemed to solidify Gussow’s comment in his 1981 Pulitzer report that this is a time
when women playwrights “are at their most creative.”\footnote{177} Following up on this idea, Gussow
authors the Times Magazine article that addressed the concept of “WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS:
New Voices in the Theater.” The idea that women playwrights were new voices in the theatre
set off its own shower of criticism. Gayle Austin explained that, “Reaction to the article in the
theatre community was immediate and intense; especially among women.”\footnote{178} Consequently,
“PAJ invited a number of people to respond to the issues raised in the article, and to pursue other

\footnote{174} Mel Gussow, “Marsha Norman Savors Pulitzer Prize for Drama,” New York Times, April 19,
\footnote{175} Ibid.
\footnote{176} Ibid.
\footnote{177} Fischer and Fischer, eds., Chronicle of the Pulitzer, 340.
Journal 7, no. 3 (1983): 87. It is unclear as to why “THE ‘WOMAN’ PLAYWRIGHT ISSUE”
part of the title is in all capital letters; nevertheless, I am following this convention.
issues related to women in the arts.” The “people” whose responses were published were all women. Were any men asked for their responses or did Austin, who compiled and edited the “Backtalk” section and was on the staff of PAJ, only ask women for their responses? It is likely that many readers would have been interested in what a male playwright, such as Sam Shepard, had to say about women playwrights; particularly because his play, True West, was a contender for the Pulitzer Prize in drama that Norman’s play won. The women chosen, including such important and lasting figures as Julia Miles and Maria Irene Fornes, were qualified to discuss the state of women in theatre, but why write that “people” were invited and not publish the responses of any men? Perhaps an implicit point was being made about gender specificity in language and its limitations.

Gussow’s Times Magazine article was seen by most respondents as written in a positive spirit. Julia Miles stated that her first reaction to Gussow’s article was “‘good for him’ ”; Colette Brooks described it as a “well-intentioned article” and Roberta Sklar wrote that “It’s a nice enough article.” Good intentions resonate throughout this positive, but flawed piece. Claiming that women’s voices are new voices in the theatre implies that there were no women who came before this most recent group of playwrights. Gussow does not say that these are the first playwrights ever – he attempts to give a quick historical overview of some high achieving individuals, such as Hrotsvit and Aphra Behn in earlier centuries and Hellman, Hansberry, and others earlier in this century. Gussow was attempting to make it clear that “There have been isolated individuals, such as Lillian Hellman, Carson McCullers and Lorraine Hansberry, but not

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179 Ibid.
180 Ibid., 93.
181 Ibid., 88.
182 Ibid., 99.
until recently has there been anything approaching a movement.”

Gussow did not seem to recognize the women’s theatre movement that had exploded in the previous decade. Perhaps the excuse was that, as Marjorie Bradley Kellogg suggested, “No piece of journalism can be expected to cover all aspects of its subject matter and still maintain readability.” That may be part of the issue, but it still resulted in a type of invisibility regarding many predecessors of this current group of women. As Sklar noted, “With respect for the women and the work Gussow writes about, it is what he doesn’t write about that disturbs.” And what Gussow did not write about was due to his semi-myopic point of view as a New York Times critic. He saw a great deal of theatre and he was quite well-educated on the topics of theatrical history and dramatic literature, but being a critic for a newspaper that becomes entwined with the commercial theatre through the promotion and advertising of shows would definitely influence his potential objectivity as an observer. As Sklar pointed out, “the Times tells us there are women playwrights as though it were a newborn phenomenon” but she clarified that “it is the acknowledgement which is newborn.” These women were being acknowledged because they were receiving mainstream productions, as well as prizes and grants. There were plenty of women playwrights before, but they did not get recognized by the New York Times’s reviewers or the Pulitzer Prize juries. It is critical to note that the lists of these members – drama critics for the Times and members of the Pulitzer drama juries – often overlap. Gussow was the critic for the Times and on the drama jury that chose Crimes for the Pulitzer. Frank Rich was the chief critic of the Times who reviewed ‘night Mother at Harvard and again when it opened on Broadway, as well being the Chairman of the drama jury that chose ‘night Mother for the 1983 Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

183 Gussow, “WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS,” 5.
185 Ibid., 100.
186 Ibid.
Of course the Pulitzer is a prize based in the ideals and celebration of journalism, so it makes sense that experts in theatre – such as critics for the *New York Times* – would be judging the prize. But it also concentrates the power among a chosen few, especially when the prize is only judged by a jury of two or three critics, as it was at this point in time. In later years the juries were expanded to five members, including a scholar and a playwright, possibly in an effort to disperse some of this concentration of power in the hands of the critics for the *New York Times*.

The Pulitzer’s drama jury was unable to make a unanimous recommendation in 1983, with a majority report favoring *‘Night Mother* and a minority report in favor of *True West*, plus an addendum regarding the consideration of Pulitzer Prize-eligible plays on a national basis. The majority report was provided by Frank Rich (chief critic of the *New York Times* and Chairman of the Pulitzer jury for drama in 1983) and Jack Kroll (writer/critic for *Newsweek* magazine) and “wishes to nominate a single play for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama: ‘‘Night, Mother’’ by Marsha Norman.’”187 The minority report authored by Sean Mitchell (former staff writer for the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* and the *Dallas Times Herald*) wished to nominate a single play also, *True West* by Sam Shepard.

Mitchell made a convincing case regarding the merits of *True West*, describing it as “a play of inventive language, haunting imagery and sardonic humor.”188 He noted how it is a “contest between two opposing value systems, between Austin’s shallow Hollywood respectability and Lee’s unlettered anarchy.”189 This examination of values was (and often still is) a guiding principle for judging the Pulitzer Prize. And the play’s “introduction of a highly original character (Lee) who looms as an archetype of a new class of modern barbarian” helped

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187 Fischer and Fischer, eds., *Chronicle of the Pulitzer*, 346.
188 Ibid., 347.
189 Ibid.
to enlighten the reader to Shepard’s ability to craft original and powerful theatre which is worthy of Pulitzer consideration. Shepard was held to a single Pulitzer (Buried Child, 1979) when the prize was awarded by the Board to Norman, as Rich and Kroll’s Majority Report carried the day.

There was no mention of Marsha Norman being a female playwright in the report, but it did emphasize that Norman’s play “dramatizes the bottomless alienation of two contemporary American women.” Norman wrote about two contemporary American women and Shepard crafted a drama about two contemporary American men. Both plays involved struggle and death and reflected American society’s changing values. In the PAJ response to Gussow’s article and Norman’s play, Karen Malpede claimed that plays that achieve mainstream status at this time are written by women who “write as a man would have her write, think as a man would have her think, and to work for and with men.” Malpede saw these works as being “culturally sanctioned by patriarchy” and bearing markers such as “women suffering and dying, by their own hands or others.” This statement can be interpreted as a straightforward reference to Norman’s character of Jessie committing suicide. If so, it is off the mark. Jessie does not commit suicide in a way that is culturally sanctioned by patriarchy or by anyone else. She makes a decision based on her assessment of the current culture she is subjected to and her own revelation that this is a choice that is ultimately one of power. Rich and Kroll claimed that ‘night, Mother “is not a message play about suicide.” The opposite can also be argued, because it is a message play about suicide, but that message is not a simple one carrying a pro or con recommendation. The message that comes across in ‘night, Mother is a complicated one,

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190 Fischer and Fischer, eds., Chronicle of the Pulitzer, 347.
191 Ibid., 346.
192 Ibid., 346.
193 Ibid.
194 Fischer and Fischer, eds., Chronicle of the Pulitzer, 346.
which manages to encompass the positive aspects of what these critics claimed the play accomplished, while still allowing each audience member to decide if – in his or her own eyes – Jessie made a valid choice in taking her life.

Rich and Kroll explained that the drama was “a clear-eyed, unsentimental portrayal of two mainstream Americans who are struggling to find meaning in lives defined by the normal, but, in our time, increasingly shaky coordinates of work, family, community, commerce and mass culture.” The normal that they appear to be referring to is the nuclear family model of suburban America. In ‘night, Mother, the original nuclear family unit began with Mama, Daddy, Jessie, and her brother Dawson and ends completely blown apart. The children grew up and had families of their own; Dawson is married to Loretta and Jessie married Cecil. Jessie and Cecil created their own nuclear family when they had their son, Ricky. It sounds as if things would progress in the ways that they were supposed to, but they do not and Norman does not allow us to ignore this fact. She walks us into the blast center and makes us bear witness.

MAMA:  Sad about what?

JESSIE:  The way things are.

MAMA:  Not good enough. What things?

JESSIE:  Oh, everything from you and me to Red China.

MAMA:  I think we can leave the Chinese out of this.

195 Ibid.
196 Norman, ‘night, Mother, 30.
Norman does leave the Chinese out of the rest of the play (and completely excises the reference from the updated version when the play’s revival was mounted for Broadway in 2004), but the specter of communism and the nuclear family remain.

Families were reunited after World War II, there was a baby boom, and the economy and the people were both meant to be healed by the growing consumerism during the Cold War. Manufacturing was converted from military application back to the production of consumer goods. Mothers were returned to their “rightful” places as the nurturers and caretakers of the family. The idea of family reigned supreme, with capitalism staying close by in second place.

Jessie is a baby boomer but the nuclear family constructed by her mother and father has dissolved by the time the play begins and consumerism brings misfortune, as Jessie’s son Ricky has taken to stealing other people’s things in order to support his own drug habit. After her father’s death, Jessie is left with her mother, but has little in common with her and feels burdened by the responsibility of looking after her. In reality, the mother could actually look after herself, but has chosen to pass that responsibility on to Jessie in order to give her something to do.

MAMA (Frantically starting to fill pill bottles): You do too much for me. I can fill pill bottles all day, Jessie, and change the shelf paper and wash the floor when I get through. You just watch me. You don’t have to do another thing in this house if you don’t want to. You don’t have to take care of me, Jessie.

JESSIE: I know that. You’ve just been letting me do it so I’ll have something to do, haven’t you?197

197 Ibid., 32
Jessie and her mother both know that this is the truth – Mama has “needed” help so that Jessie could feel needed. Jessie’s husband has left and she is unable to support herself financially, so she has to move in with her mother. Her mother wants for everything to be normal, but Jessie refuses to pretend that it could be:

MAMA (Badly frightened by those words): You could get a job!

JESSIE: I took that telephone sales job and I didn’t even make enough money to pay the phone bill, and I tried to work at the gift shop at the hospital and they said I made people real uncomfortable smiling at them the way I did. [...] You know I couldn’t work. I can’t do anything. I’ve never been around people my whole life except when I went to the hospital. I could have a seizure any time. What good would a job do? The kind of job I could get would make me feel worse.\textsuperscript{198}

Mama was looking to provide refuge for Jessie within what was left of the family. And Jessie has taken on the role of obedient and helpful daughter, up until now. As they are speaking, Mama realizes, perhaps for the first time, how disengaged from life Jessie has become. She blames Jessie and treats her like a child, saying:

MAMA (Interrupting): You’re acting like some little brat, Jessie. You’re mad and everybody’s boring and you don’t have anything to do and you don’t like me and you don’t like going out and you don’t like staying in and you never talk on the phone and you don’t watch TV and you’re miserable and it’s your own sweet fault.\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 34-35.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 34.
Jessie’s response is “And it’s time I did something about it.”\textsuperscript{200} This is the response of an adult who has decided to take action, but it is not the action that Mama wanted. Mama protests, “Not something like killing yourself.”\textsuperscript{201} Jessie is willing to rearrange the furniture and do her mother’s weekly manicure, but she won’t give up on the idea of killing herself. Contrary to her mother’s wishes, instead of engagement, Jessie has chosen escape. She has made a conscious decision to take her own life and plans on carrying it through deliberately.

There are literary precedents for a woman’s suicide as a form of escape. One fruitful comparison might be made between Marsha Norman’s drama ‘\textit{night Mother}’ and Kate Chopin’s seminal novel \textit{The Awakening} (1899).\textsuperscript{202} How does the character of Jessie relate to Chopin’s character Edna Pontellier in \textit{The Awakening}? Both of these characters use suicide to express their freedom of choice; each woman committing suicide in order to seize the only power she has left to control her destiny. The naturalistic styles of both works help the reader and/or audience to see the everyday lifestyles and social norms that push these two characters to the brink. In Kate Chopin’s novel Edna has an awakening to the realities of what it means to be a wife and mother at the end of the nineteenth century and how stifling and unfulfilling this reality is for her. Her desire for something different than caring for her husband Leonce, his estate, and raising their two sons, Etienne and Raoul, is so out of the ordinary that her husband calls on a doctor to diagnose her illness. Although Robert’s final abandonment of her does appear to be the catalyst for her suicidal decision, and she returns to the place where they first met – Grand Isle – to commit suicide, one cannot exactly say that Edna’s love for Robert and his decision to leave again causes her tragic demise. If it were only about Robert, then she would not have had the

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{200} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{201} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{202} Kate Chopin, \textit{The Awakening} (Mineola, New York: Dover Books, [1899] 1994). This information is for the Dover Thrift Edition.
\end{footnotes}
affair with Alcée Arobin. Yes, she returns to Grand Isle, but this is also the place where she was on vacation with her family and a vacation, by its very nature, is a vacating of every day routines and responsibilities. Although she was traveling with her family, it was outside of the normal societal orbit and perhaps she returned to Grand Isle because it stood out to her as a place of freedom from the everyday proscription of her duties as a woman, wife, and mother. Edna appears to be making a conscious choice in rejecting the everyday banalities and the proscriptive social norms, much like Jessie does in *night, Mother*.

The reasons for Jessie’s imminent suicide are many and they are complicated. But one reason is that she is disillusioned by contemporary life. This is the type of life hyped as a right and a responsibility of the American post-war nuclear family. Jessie does not get any joy out of the consumer-driven American lifestyle. Jessie is without hope and, even though she lives with her mother, she feels completely alone. This is a family pattern that seems to continue repeating. Looking back, it is clear that the father’s and mother’s roles in marriage were also frustrating and fraught with contradiction at the core level. Thelma complains to Jessie that he “wanted a plain country woman and that’s what he married, and then he held it against me the rest of my life like I was supposed to change and surprise him somehow.” In her role of helpmate, Jessie’s mother felt like a failure because her husband did not want her or anything she had to offer. She measures her ability to love him by her ability to serve him in a capacity that should have been, in a nuclear family with traditional roles, useful to her husband. Mama remarked that she “didn’t have a thing he wanted.” The two drifted apart in silence, essentially cohabitating, but not really interacting. Instead of working to improve communication and connection between the live, human members of the family, the father crafted a family from pipe cleaners. Mama

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203 Norman, *night, Mother*, 46.
204 Ibid.
described how “he’d come back from fishing and all he’d have to show for it was…a whole pipe-cleaner family – chickens, pigs, a dog with a bad leg – it was creepy strange.” It is evident by his actions that, like Jessie, even the patriarch wished to escape his nuclear family. The pipe cleaners functioned as a replacement for his own family and another way to disconnect and disappear into his own reality; however, Jessie seems to have experienced the pipe cleaner figures as connections between her and her father.

JESSIE: Or make me a boyfriend out of pipe cleaners and sit back and smile like the stick man was about to dance and wasn’t I going to get a kick out of that. Or sit up with a sick cow all night and leave me a chain of sleepy stick elephants on my bed in the morning.

The playwright has constructed an alternative family in this scenario. The family is made of “bendy” playful materials as “toys” for the father’s little girl. Mama was jealous of the bond that Jessie and her father had; however, she also believed that they shared a common problem, one which the mother believed was passed on by the father, which was epilepsy.

For Jessie, the epilepsy is a physical manifestation of her inability to perform a role in the economic world – as well as being unable to perform her role in the domestic realm. It is a bold choice for playwright Marsha Norman to write what could have been a simple “kitchen-sink drama” about a mother and daughter’s conflicted relationship and instead craft a tragedy about a young woman with a debilitating, but non-lethal illness, who decides to commit suicide. Frank Rich, in his review on ’night, Mother for the New York Times proclaimed that this drama is “not a sentimental problem drama about suicide or a stirring paean to man’s right to die with

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205 Ibid., 49.
206 Ibid., 47.
dignity.” But looking closely at the broader social contexts of this time period, including legislative battles concerning physician-assisted suicide and the E.R.A., one can interpret the play as helping to foster national dialogues that would influence an audience’s reaction to a play in 1983 that deals frankly with the subject of a daughter’s suicide.

A timeline published by PBS’s investigative journalism show, *FRONTLINE*, notes that in the 1980s, Dr. Jack Kevorkian published a series of articles for the obscure German medical journal *Medicine and Law* that discussed the ethics of euthanasia. Although Norman does not dramatize physician-assisted suicide, and this play was written before the explosion of the national debate on the idea of assisted suicide, the ethics about a person’s right-to-die were being discussed; this is especially true for persons suffering from debilitating illnesses in the way that Jessie is in the play. In its own small way, I would argue that Norman’s work helped to fuel that growing national debate.

Unlike most women who attempt suicide, Jessie chooses to end her own life through violent means rather than a passive, more failure-prone means like intentional overdosing.

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On 30 June 1982 the Equal Rights Amendment\textsuperscript{210} was defeated for the “final” time. Although women were unable to gain their basic rights, one could argue that Norman was advocating the stance through her character of Jessie that a woman’s last right is the right to take her own life. Norman makes certain that the audience is clear that Jessie is making a choice when she agrees with her mother that epilepsy is a non-lethal illness. Jessie explains, “It won’t kill me. (A pause) If it would, I wouldn’t have to.”\textsuperscript{211} Mama makes it about herself and says that “I won’t let you!” kill yourself; Jessie clearly responds, “It’s not up to you.”\textsuperscript{212} Thelma believes that because Jessie is her daughter, everything that Jessie does is directly connected to her. Jessie tries to explain that it has nothing to do with her mother, but then changes tactics and begins theorizing with “what if” and connecting the idea of suicide and the idea of escaping one’s life.

\textbf{JESSIE:} Then what if it does! What if it has everything to do with you! What if you are all I have and you’re not enough? What if I could take all the rest of it if only I didn’t have you here? What if the only way I can get away from you for good is to kill myself? What if it is? I can \textit{still} do it\textsuperscript{213}

Jessie circumvents her mother’s tactic of claiming that killing herself is the same as killing her mother. Mama speaks as if the umbilical cord had never been cut and that the two of them are still literally connected. Jessie asserts the fact that her suicide is a choice and that it is her choice, regardless of how it affects her mother.

\textsuperscript{210} Equal Rights Amendment Website, http://www.equalrightsamendment.org (accessed 23 October 2011). Originally written by Alice Paul in 1923, the E.R.A. was last defeated in 1982, when only 35 of the 38 states needed for ratification had ratified it by the extended deadline.

\textsuperscript{211} Norman, \textit{’night, Mother}, 27.

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 72.
In his original review’s closing paragraph, Rich wrote that “Miss Norman sends us crashing into one of life’s horrible, unpreventable accidents, then leaves us helplessly contemplating the casualty list.” This was not the case. It was not an unpreventable accident; that is the message about suicide that Rich does not understand. It is not an accident – Jessie’s actions are purposeful and guided by the need to choose her own life’s path. When interviewed by Gussow, Norman explained that “Jessie thinks she cannot have any of the other things she wants from her life, so what she will have is control, and she will have the courage to take that control.” For Jessie, suicide is not a last-ditch effort or a blind attempt at escape, it is actually the next thing she is going to try in order to take control of herself. And she feels that this thing will work.

JESSIE: I’m not giving up! This is the other thing I’m trying. And I’m sure there are some other things that might work, but might work isn’t good enough anymore. I need something that will work. This will work. That’s why I picked it.

Jessie’s suicide is something that she has been thinking about, “Off and on, ten years. On all the time, since Christmas.” Now Jessie is ready to follow through on those thoughts. She has tried before to make things better, but to no avail.

JESSIE (Quietly): And I can’t do anything either, about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it. Shut it down, turn it off like the radio when there’s nothing on I want

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214 Rich, “‘Night, Mother at Harvard’,” C15.
216 Norman, ‘night, Mother, 75.
217 Ibid., 29.
to listen to. It’s all I really have that belongs to me and I’m going to say what happens to it. And it’s going to stop. And I’m going to stop it. So. Let’s just have a good time.\(^{218}\)

It is almost as if the despair disappears in this moment of clarity. She wants to have a good time with her mother, to talk honestly, drink hot cocoa, and give her a manicure. Then she wants to quietly say, “’night, Mother,” walk into her room, lock the door, and follow through on her plan. If the despair has not disappeared, then it has become completely encapsulated in Jessie’s being and allows her to choose when and how and where she will die. Committing suicide on her terms allows Jessie to orchestrate her own “happy ending” or at least her own narrative closure. This was not a popular vision, as evidenced by the fact that after over 100 assisted suicides and numerous trials where he was acquitted, Dr. Jack Kevorkian was finally sentenced to prison in 1999 for helping others achieve this same goal – death on their own terms.

Part of this play’s appeal to Frank Rich and the other critics was its traditional structure and its “dramatic format that seems as inexorable as classic tragedy.”\(^{219}\) Norman’s play contains a great deal of naturalistic elements, including its setting, the fact that it takes place in “real” time, and how it reflects the period, the geographic setting, and the social norms of the characters. The audience (or reader) is shown – up close – the specifics of Jessie’s failed attempts at everyday survival and self-inflicted exit from this “normal” world in which she feels quite alien. The conflict continues throughout the drama, with increasingly desperate attempts by Jessie’s mother to “do the right thing” and intervene in Jessie’s suicide. That is “the right thing” for this character to do, just as some may see that Jessie makes the right choice in leaving

\(^{218}\) Ibid., 36.
\(^{219}\) Rich, “’Night, Mother at Harvard’,” C15.
behind a life that is, in Rich’s words, “as sterile as a K-Mart, as lonely as an Edward Hopper painting.” In hostage negotiations, the negotiator is trained to help personalize the situation by saying the person’s name; Jessie’s mother does this over and over in an attempt to ground Jessie, to snap her out of her suicidal state. The problem is that Jessie is grounded, as reflected in how well she has been and how much she is remembering. And, according to Jessie, “If I’d ever had a year like this, to think straight and all, before now, I’d be gone already.” Whether metaphorically, or literally, Jessie has lost everything. She cannot hold a job, she has no circle of friends, she no longer feels beholden to her mother and she has lost her father, her husband, and her son. In killing herself, Jessie chooses her own fate. When Jessie disappears into her bedroom and locks the door, it is as if she has taken herself hostage. She is going to kill her hostage – herself – in order to kill off all the roles and responsibilities that she has been locked into as a daughter, mother, and wife. Escape is achieved through eradication. In killing herself, Jessie also symbolically kills all vestiges of the nuclear family and any desire that she (as daughter or as mother) might have had to recreate it. In ‘night, Mother, playwright Marsha Norman has crafted a powerful rejection of the structure of the traditional family. In addition, she has made the audience/reader bear witness to the exploding and eradication of the nuclear family through a highly controversial act – the suicide of the protagonist.

*The Heidi Chronicles*

In 1988 Wendy Wasserstein wrote her sixth play, the one for which she is both most famous and most infamous: *The Heidi Chronicles.* Proclaimed by some as a feminist

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220 Ibid.
221 Norman, ‘night, Mother, 68.
manuscript and seen by others as anti-feminist, *The Heidi Chronicles* was critically acclaimed by the mainstream establishment, but set off a firestorm of criticism by feminist scholars and critics of the time. The cascade of mainstream awards Wasserstein received for *The Heidi Chronicles* included: Outer Critics Circle Award, Drama Desk Award, Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Tony Award (for Best Play), and most relevant to this investigation – the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The Pulitzer Report written on 13 March 1989 by Chair Edith Oliver (on behalf of jury members Henry Hewes, executive secretary, American Theatre Critics Association and Dan Sullivan, drama critic for the *Los Angeles Times*) described the drama:

> In telling the story, scene by scene, of her heroine, an art historian, Miss Wasserstein encompasses a whole generation of independent, aspiring, and ultimately disappointed women, over the past twenty years. The lines are invariably witty, never masquerading the depth of emotion underneath.\(^{223}\)

Unlike earlier years, where the nominating jury picked a clear favorite, or submitted majority and minority reports that alternately argued for one play or another, this year’s panel presented three equal nominations, strictly in alphabetical order by author, with none prevailing over the others. The other two 1989 Pulitzer Prize finalists for drama were *M. Butterfly*, by David Henry Hwang and *The Piano Lesson*, by August Wilson. Wilson was the third African American male to receive the Pulitzer Prize for drama two years earlier, for his play *Fences* (1987), following Charles Gordone’s *No Place to be Somebody* (1970), and Charles Fuller’s win for *A Soldier’s Play* in 1982. Although Wasserstein took the prize in 1989, *The Piano Lesson* retained eligibility and was again nominated and consequently awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama in

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\(^{223}\) Fischer and Fischer, eds., *Chronicle of the Pulitzer*, 364.
1990. David Henry Hwang was a finalist again in 2008, for his drama *Yellow Face*. Although 1989 marked the third win by a female dramatist in this decade, not everyone considered this a win for feminists or for theatre. The mixed feelings about the work’s feminist viability led to an extended discussion in both mainstream and academic presses about feminist theatrical representation, critical scholarship, and women’s roles in the profession of theatre in general.

The *New York Times* was, as is often the case with Pulitzer winners in drama, highly supportive of Wendy Wasserstein and her play. A “pre-opening” article by Mervyn Rothstein was run on 11 December 1988 – the day of the opening night for *The Heidi Chronicles* at Playwrights Horizons. It was a very friendly chat with the playwright and Tony Award-winning actress Joan Allen, who played Heidi Holland, setting the stage for audiences to understand and embrace this new play. The *Times*’s theatre review by Mel Gussow, published the following day, was equally positive and helped situate *The Heidi Chronicles* as a serious contender for the Pulitzer in drama. Even though the play was critically acclaimed by the *New York Times* and had an extended run, eventually replacing actress Joan Allen with Christine Lahti, the play was not beloved by all audience members or all women – especially academic feminists – who found fault in numerous aspects of Wasserstein’s work. Alisa Solomon, in her

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224 As of 2014, no American writer (male or female) of East Asian descent had won the Pulitzer Prize in Drama. Born in New York, American writer Ayad Akhtar was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 2013 for *Disgraced*, “a moving play that depicts a successful corporate lawyer painfully forced to consider why he has for so long camouflaged his Pakistani Muslim heritage.” http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2013-Drama (accessed 8 January 2014). Akhtar does not describe himself as “Pakistani American” on his website bio, http://www.ayadakhtar/main.html (accessed 8 January 2014). The incomplete Wikipedia article on Akhtar states that he was born to “Pakistani parents.” http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayad_Akhtar (accessed 8 January 2014).


Village Voice review, was an early and vocal detractor of Wasserstein’s play. According to Solomon, as the title of her review “feminism-something” suggests, it was Wasserstein’s portrayal of feminism that was the main issue. Alluding to the contemporary television series thirtysomething in her review title, Solomon suggests that all Wasserstein has to offer is a glossy, “unbearably clever” popular culture portrayal of a generation of Second-Wave feminists.227 Solomon stated that Wasserstein’s work, including Uncommon Women and Others, Isn’t it Romantic, and The Heidi Chronicles, looks “wittily at intelligent, educated women, and assures us that they are funny for the same, traditional reasons women have always been funny: they hate their bodies, can’t find a man, and don’t believe in themselves.”228 This was an apt criticism because Heidi and Wasserstein’s other characters do struggle with these issues. And it was frustrating for many audience members to see Heidi (a professor at Columbia with a successful book) continue to struggle with a life so full of privilege and the markers of success. Solomon criticized Wasserstein for her lack of “a serious critique of bourgeois feminism” and claimed that if the play had been written as a satire instead of a comedy with drama, then she would have felt “a sisterly sympathy for Heidi’s disillusionment.”229 Solomon could apparently relate, at least somewhat, to the character’s disillusionment, but she did not like the manner in which it was presented. The Pulitzer Prize in drama has rarely gone to a satire, just as it has rarely gone to a musical, and it is the earnestness of Wasserstein’s portrayal of Heidi’s dilemma that may well have helped the play win the prize. Wasserstein’s social critique was seemingly more palatable than the satirical vision that Solomon yearned to see on the stage.

227 Alisa Solomon, “feminism-something,” Village Voice 33, no. 51 (20 December 1988): 121. Solomon chose not to capitalize her essay title in order to enforce the parallels she is drawing with the television show, thirtysomething, which also uses all lower case letters for its title. I am following this convention.
228 Ibid.
229 Ibid.
After *The Heidi Chronicles* won the Tony award (which is the first time a play written by a woman captured the Best Play award), another critic of the play, Laurie Stone, argued in a *Village Voice* article that “The key to Wasserstein’s ignorance of and alienation from feminism is her silence throughout the play about abortion, an omission, in light of the Washington march, screams of the work’s inauthenticity.”

This play has nothing to do with abortion and everything to do with how a woman can restructure the idea of family to make it work for her. Once again, it seemed that Wasserstein was being berated for not writing someone else’s vision of feminism, instead of her own. Whereas Solomon alluded to pop culture TV show *thirtysomething*, Stone made the connection clearly, writing that “What *The Heidi Chronicles* is to feminism, *thirtysomething* is to the counter-culture as a whole.”

She explained how “rock music and ironic banter” signaled that the characters were “questioning, although their views aren’t oppositional.” Wasserstein did have Heidi question whether or not she’s a feminist; she decided that she identified more strongly as humanist. This identification turns out to be an oppositional view – not within the play – but to critics Solomon and Stone. Solomon noted that Heidi “refuses the f-word and insists on being called a ‘humanist’,” while Stone claimed that “none of the choices Heidi makes connects up with feminism.” Wasserstein reflected on Heidi’s feeling of being stranded and asked, “What happened to this feeling of a generation together?”

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230 Laurie Stone, “THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT CARRIED OFF MY BABY IN A FLYING SAUCER,” *Village Voice* 34, no. 24 (13 June 1989): 36. Stone chose to write her title in all capital letters, presumably to make a statement about the hysterical and tabloid-esque nature of the material she was covering. I am following this convention.

231 Ibid.

232 Ibid.


traitor to her generation and the Women’s Movement for asking those types of questions. But Wasserstein was not just commenting on the Women’s Movement, whether consciously or not she was also commenting on what the 1970s had become known for – the “me” generation – a generation that abandoned the ideals of the 1960s and focused on personal fulfillment. Scoop, Heidi, Peter, and Susan (various characters in the play) were all a part of that generation, and Scoop is a perfect example of this evolution, as he pursues a personal agenda that mainly benefits himself, including going to Central Park to mourn the death of John Lennon (an icon of 1960s ideals) with his girlfriend, while his wife is at home having her baby shower. As a fervent advocate for feminism and its ideals, Stone did make some persuasive arguments in this article titled “THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT CARRIED OFF MY BABY IN A FLYING SAUCER.” And yes, some of the women in The Heidi Chronicles were presented as “careerist, self-interested girl yuppies”, but Wasserstein did not say that this is feminism’s legacy. The men are equally careerist, self-interested boy yuppies. Wasserstein was being humanist in her equal critique of the choices and views of Scoop, Heidi, Peter, and Susan. Stone clearly connected how the neo-traditional movement, once rationalized by the existence of AIDS, becomes “advanced for its own sake” and that “the exploitation of AIDS by Reagan/Bush has always dovetailed with alarms that are always ambient.” There was a backlash against feminism, as well as against other forms of 60s radicalism when they “arouse these anxieties because, militating for change, they insist on the mutability of values, traditions, images of the self.” When viewed in the context of the age of Reagan/Bush, perhaps “it is no wonder,” as Stone

236 Stone, “THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT,” 36.
237 Ibid.
238 Ibid.
claimed, “that The Heidi Chronicles has won its prizes.”\(^{239}\) One cannot disagree easily with this juxtaposition, and yet, there are radical acts in this play – especially that of Heidi becoming a single mother by choice. Heidi’s radical acts were overlooked by a number of feminist critics because the project as a whole was harshly criticized and generally dismissed at the time as a liberal feminist work.

Jill Dolan led the academic condemnation of Wasserstein’s work and decimated The Heidi Chronicles in her opening chapter of Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance. Dolan’s critique was comprehensive, astute, and articulate, pointing out many of the weaknesses of Wasserstein’s text and the Broadway production starring Joan Allen. Dolan wrote that Heidi was “a cipher, who never gives voice to an incisive or adequate political or artistic analysis.”\(^{240}\) It is true that Wasserstein has Heidi react to what is happening around her and that she appears sad and confused about how the feminist movement and her life are both turning out; however, Heidi does act upon her desires for a career and family without sacrificing her independence for a sense of heteronormativity in the way that Scoop’s wife, Lisa does. It is this rejection of the nuclear family ideal that is one of Heidi’s most radical acts.

The Heidi Chronicles, unlike Crimes of the Heart or 'night, Mother, does not focus on the exploding of a particular nuclear family. As the play unfolds, it is clear that these characters in this time period – which spans from the middle to the late twentieth century – have difficulty pretending that the traditional nuclear family can exist in real life. Heidi and Peter both know it is not possible for them; only Scoop tries to hold onto that ideal – and this is most likely because, as a white, heterosexual, upper-middle class male, he profits most from that arrangement of

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\(^{239}\) Ibid.

family. But this is Heidi’s story, so instead Wasserstein shows that in the absence of the traditional nuclear family, Heidi Holland ends up creating a radical new family unit with herself as a single, female head of household who receives a mainstay of emotional support from Peter, her gay-male best friend. The epic structure of this play highlights Heidi’s maturation process, from her single woman status of the sixties to her single mother by choice status of the eighties. Dolan commented on the preference towards conventionality favored by prize committees, which often leads to higher rates of publication and production for those plays “most conservative in content and form.”\(^\text{241}\) *The Heidi Chronicles* barely pushed the envelope by employing an episodic structure, which allowed Wasserstein an opportunity to attempt to historicize Heidi’s life. Dolan argued that Wasserstein presented a distorted history, which “trivializes radical feminist gains, suppresses feminist rage, and acquiesces to the dominant culture’s reading of the end of feminism.”\(^\text{242}\) It is clear in the text that Wasserstein chooses the comic moments over more serious ones, such as when she writes the consciousness-raising group scene and has all the women “superficial and foolish as they encounter one another’s lives” rather than dramatizing the “painful exchanges of the stories the women had never before told.”\(^\text{243}\) This dramaturgical choice to choose tone and pacing over truth and less offensive characterizations does short-change the depths that the playwright reaches in this scene, as well as in others. Within the parameters of Wasserstein’s fast-paced, highly comedic writing, she barely has time to show Heidi embracing feminism, growing disillusioned with the movement, reassessing her role and contributions, and finally finding her own way to be hopeful for her future and that of the next generation, which – not incidentally – appears to be the same path that

\(^{241}\) Ibid., 44.  
\(^{242}\) Ibid., 49.  
\(^{243}\) Ibid., 51.
Wasserstein trod in her lifetime. Unlike ‘night, Mother where the woman’s role dies with the daughter, in The Heidi Chronicles the alternative family that Heidi creates by adopting a daughter carries hope for new forms of family and male/female relationships.

Although Dolan was correct in many of her assessments of Wasserstein’s work, she committed the same invidious act that she criticizes Wasserstein for when she “pits two marginalized positions against each other in competition for audience sympathies.”244 Whereas Wasserstein pitted two political movements – AIDS activism and women’s liberation – against one another, Dolan pitted a liberal feminist work against a radical feminist work. Dolan explained how “feminist theater criticism in the 1980s began commenting on feminist and women’s theater in an effort to distinguish ideological viewpoints within work by women.”245 In her work pitting Wasserstein’s The Heidi Chronicles against Spiderwoman Theatre’s Winnetou’s Snake-Oil Show from Wigwam City, Dolan went beyond distinguishing viewpoints to proclaiming the absolute higher status of materialism over liberalism. While simultaneously proclaiming and ignoring the strength and potential of liberal feminist works to reform from within U.S. systems toward women’s equality, Dolan claimed that Wasserstein’s play held a “safe position in a costly Broadway theater.”246 She did not go beyond that to envision what this might mean for future women playwrights who wish to have a career in the professional theatre. Instead, she engaged in the exclusive commendation of groups like Spiderwoman because only they will likely achieve her agenda of transforming “feminist theater once again into a site of radical political action for the 1990s.”247

244 Ibid., 52.
245 Ibid., 47.
246 Ibid., 44.
247 Ibid., 64.
Jill Dolan was not the only feminist scholar who commented on *The Heidi Chronicles* and especially on its controversial ending. Jan Balakian’s article in the *South Atlantic Review*, “*The Heidi Chronicles: The Big Chill of Feminism*” provided an overview of the various critiques which had been published several years earlier about the play (in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 60,) as well as what appears to be an attempt at the rehabilitation of the play’s critical reputation.248 The beginning of that article also quoted Mimi Kramer’s “Portrait of a Lady” essay in the *New Yorker*, which referenced the criticism about the ending scene in particular:

> WHEN WENDY WASSERSTEIN’S PLAY, *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988), won the Pulitzer Prize, many feminist critics assaulted it, insisting that it is not really a feminist play because Heidi “sells out” in the end by adopting a baby. They argued that “this unmotivated conclusion compromised Heidi’s antecedent values,” and that the true cause of her depression was her “manlessness.”249

For those audience members who went to see the play, for many it appears that the last scene was perhaps the most difficult to accept at the time.

In the final scene of Act Two, Scoop resurfaces and the play’s denouement is also very much like its climax. Heidi has made a bold move, perhaps inspired in part by Peter helping her expand her concept of family, and, as a single mother, she has adopted a baby from Panama. In the “Foreward” to *The Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays*, Andre Bishop referenced his audience observations during the run of *The Heidi Chronicles*: “I have seen women storm angrily out of

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*The Heidi Chronicles* when the curtain falls, while others remain in their seats unable to move because they can’t stop crying.⁵²⁰ Gayle Austin, in her review of the play for *Theatre Journal* wrote:

> The closure of the play is based on her substitution of one bond for another: mother for lover. Her work and women friends are absent. No wonder the play has been received less than enthusiastically by many feminists.⁵²¹

There are good reasons for being angry at the end of the play and feeling that this ending is false, both from a dramaturgical point of view and a materialist one. Essentially, Wasserstein dramaturgically produces a *deus ex machina* when she bestows an adopted child on Heidi with no foreshadowing for the audience. Wasserstein most likely perceived it as a twist that would surprise the audience, but it is also a twist that allows the protagonist to achieve the ultimate status of mother. Setting aside the possibility of dramaturgical flaws for a moment, there is likely anger from some feminists, because they felt that this scene was stereotypical and showed that Heidi needed a child to complete her. Wasserstein attempted to pre-empt this criticism by having Heidi argue “I am not some empty vessel” that needs to be filled (symbolically, for adoption obviously does not fill the womb) in order to become fulfilled.⁵²² And yet, the argument rings false, because she has been unhappy the entire play, even though she is a healthy and intelligent woman with a great career and the ability to take care of herself. This is clearly

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⁵²⁰ Wasserstein, *The Heidi Chronicles*, x.
⁵²² Wasserstein, *The Heidi Chronicles*, 245.
not enough for her. Scoop asks if she is happy and Heidi replies, “Well, I have a daughter.”

Heidi needs to have a daughter, in order to imagine a better future than she felt that she experienced. And, clearly, a huge part of Heidi’s improved future is an improved relationship between the male and female proxies for her and Scoop, which are imagined to be his son, Pierre and her daughter, Judy. Heidi sees roles between men and women as evolutionary versus simply combining to create a happy new family. Obviously this combination will not happen because there has been no fairy-tale wedding for Heidi and Scoop and neither is pursuing a physical relationship with the other. Their friendship assumedly continues, as Scoop mentions that he may announce that he will run for Congress and he asks for Heidi’s support. Like Heidi, he believes that all people deserve to fulfill their potential. His potential is to be a “hero” for the ninetees by becoming a Congressman. Heidi’s potential is fulfilled by her becoming a mother. It appears as though Heidi cannot escape the cultural stamping from the 1950s. Her only recompense is her fantasy that her daughter may become a heroine someday.

**HEIDI takes JUDY out of the carriage and lifts her up:** A heroine for the twenty-first!

In case any audience members are gravely disappointed that with all that Heidi has achieved, she is only happy when she is fantasizing about her daughter’s achievement and better male/female relationships, Wasserstein leaves us with an “image” of Heidi’s dual-achievement: “The final image of the play, as the audience exits, is a slide of HEIDI triumphantly holding Judy in front of a museum banner for a Georgia O’Keefe retrospective.”

Was this enough to appease critics who saw the play as falling short of being a true feminist statement? No, because in the eyes of

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253 Ibid., 246.
254 Ibid., 248.
255 Ibid., 249.
many people, including feminist critics, Heidi is only able to achieve happiness by achieving the state of motherhood and that message is very traditional. Also, Alisa Solomon noted in response to whether or not Heidi “has it all” at the end of the play, “Who are they kidding?” But some critics, such as Balakian, attempted to rehabilitate the critical vision of the play by explaining that “Heidi’s adoption of a baby certainly subverts the traditional family structure because she remains a single woman supporting herself as a professional.” In addition, there is also the non-traditional aspect of Wasserstein’s configuration of what constitutes a family. The author stops short of making Peter a co-parent with Heidi and describes his contribution to the situation only vaguely, with this off-hand statement to Scoop: “And anyway, I wasn’t alone against the wilderness. Peter helped me.” Peter is living with the anesthesiologist, Ray, in Bucks County, information which insures that the audience is clear that Heidi is a single mother. Indeed Heidi’s adoption of a baby can be framed as a victory, instead of as a compensatory act for the emptiness she appears to feel. Heidi can – and does – create a family without a man. She becomes a “single mother by choice” and this choosing by women to have children as single mothers becomes an entire social movement in the decade following this play. Fictional Heidi can be seen as being part of the vanguard of a new way of creating a family. It is therefore not a reversion to tradition, but rather another step forward and a way that Wasserstein, through the character of Heidi, helped to inspire women to break away from old forms. In her case, Heidi

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256 Solomon, “feminism-something,” 122.
257 Balakian, “The Heidi Chronicles,” 100.
258 Wasserstein, The Heidi Chronicles, 246.
creates a radical new family unit with a female head of household and a gay-male best friend who provides emotional support.

The materialist concerns – both within\textsuperscript{260} the story of the play and concerning its production\textsuperscript{261} – were valid and addressing them has made for fruitful conversations amongst scholars and critics, as well as theatre makers and their audiences. It is not the discussion, per se, but the harsh and exclusionary conclusions that were drawn in the end that leave much to be desired. In her 2008 article, “Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein,” Dolan recalls her own harsh criticism at the time in relation to the materialist aspects of Wasserstein’s play and its production: “Its form – realist comedy – and its context – Broadway and subsequently American regional theatres – meant a priori that the play was ideologically corrupt and had nothing useful to say to or about feminism.”\textsuperscript{262} Looking back after Wasserstein’s death and her own ensuing “evolution as a feminist performance scholar and critic,” Dolan admitted, “I regret the exclusivity of these claims and how surprisingly dogmatic they sometimes became.”\textsuperscript{263} Dolan did make it clear that at this point she would not “repudiate my arguments with \textit{The Heidi Chronicles}.”\textsuperscript{264} Others may or may not regret some of their former writings or conclusions as critics and scholars, but Dolan made a bold confession about

\textsuperscript{260} Austin, “The Heidi Chronicles,” 108. An example of a lack of “materialist” awareness in Wasserstein’s play is noted by Austin in her review when she points out that the frame of realism that the play employs “makes invisible the real difficulties a woman in Heidi’s position encounters, such as the cost of the transactions in the play.” She cites the costs of adoption, as well as the financial and career ramifications of Heidi’s decision to remain in New York.\textsuperscript{261} Dolan, \textit{Presence & Desire}, 47. As Dolan notes in general, materialist feminism is concerned with “the entire apparatus that frames and creates these images and their connection not just to social roles but also to the structure of culture and its division of power.” In Wasserstein’s case, an important part of the apparatus is the play’s location within a Broadway theatre.\textsuperscript{262} Jill Dolan, “Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein,” \textit{Theatre Journal} 60, no. 3 (October 2008): 433.\textsuperscript{263} Ibid., 438.\textsuperscript{264} Ibid., 434.
the narrowness of her vision at that time, when she said that “it became déclassé to be a liberal feminist critic and scholar, or to look at mainstream, commercial theatre for what it might say about women’s lives and their work and the contributions it might make to a widespread conversation about women in American culture.”

Looking back at this play, one can see – in retrospect – that the play should never have been disavowed wholesale by critics with high visibility and credibility on the basis that it had nothing to offer feminists or feminism as a movement. Heidi’s choice to adopt a child may have been possible only because of her privileged position as a white, heterosexual, professional scholar, it is true. And Wasserstein’s “race and class privilege positioned her to enter mainstream opinion with approbation” as Dolan points out. But neither of these materialist concerns meant that the playwright and her play were bereft of value to contribute to the conversation about women’s lives and place within American culture. On the contrary, as Dolan explains with hindsight, Wasserstein makes her characters “available to public examination, identification, and empathy on Broadway” and that is a “liberal feminist achievement in the debate about the status of women in American democracy.”

Wasserstein’s characterization of Heidi’s choice at the end of the play is bold, because it contains a very uneasy balance of the traditional and the radical when she creates a family by adopting a baby as a single mother by choice.

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265 Ibid., 438.
266 Ibid., 436.
267 Ibid., 449.
Conclusion

The Heidi Chronicles, like the two other Pulitzer Prize-winning plays discussed in this chapter, broke new ground by exploding the traditional idea of the nuclear family and exploring women’s roles as they evolved during Second-Wave Feminism. Beth Henley, in Crimes of the Heart, met the challenge by reimagining women’s roles within the familial structure and allowing her group protagonists to find new ways of relating to men and to each other. In ‘night, Mother Marsha Norman radically imagined a rejection of both the roles of women and the structure of the nuclear family through Jessie’s tragic journey. Finally, Wasserstein provided an alternative path to motherhood as she chronicled Heidi’s journey to self-fulfillment. All three playwrights faced the same task, one of exploring the evolution of women’s identities as the prescribed roles within the nuclear family structure gave way to changes inspired and supported by the ideas and struggles of Second-Wave Feminism. It is this exploration of a major societal change that I believe led the juries – and ultimately the Board – to consider these plays worthy of the Pulitzer Prize after previous decades of no recognition for women. The positive mainstream press generated in response to these plays helped to secure them successful Broadway runs and led to the mainstreaming of feminism in theatre. These plays will always carry the legacy of having revealed a growing rift between mainstream and academic feminists, igniting a blistering national conversation regarding the role of women’s theatre as a feminist endeavor.
Chapter Three

Personal Confession as Cathartic Spectacle in the Age of Oprah: Vogel and Edson

We have since become a singularly confessing society. ²⁶⁸

Michel Foucault

Introduction

In the 1990s, two plays featuring non-realistic, first-person confessional narratives by female characters won Pulitzer Prizes in Drama: How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel (1998) and W;t by Margaret Edson (1999). In the opening scene of How I Learned to Drive, the central character, Li’l Bit, makes a shocking revelation – that her Uncle Peck is having an incestuous relationship with her. Graley Herren describes it as “a memory play, refracted through the perspective of a survivor of sexual abuse.” ²⁶⁹ Ben Brantley compares it to one of the most famous memory plays when he writes, “The play is told from the perspective of the unfortunately nicknamed Li’l Bit (Ms. Parker), a lyrical, ambivalent narrator of her own memories in the tradition of Tom in ‘The Glass Menagerie.’” ²⁷⁰ One of the ways that playwright Paula Vogel weaves these memories into a confessional narrative is by having Li’l Bit deliver her monologues in a presentational style. As the stage directions note, “Li’l Bit steps into a

²⁶⁹ Graley Herren, “Narrating, Witnessing, and Healing Trauma in Paula Vogel’s How I Learned to Drive,” Modern Drama 53, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 103.
spotlight on the stage.” Instantly we know that this will not be a realistic stage with an immovable fourth wall; we have immediate and intimate connection with our protagonist. She begins her first monologue and we find out that she will have something secret “to confess” – but not just yet.

Peter Marks describes W;t as “the chilling chronicle of a professor dying an agonizing death in a teaching hospital.” The word chronicle describes the actual forward-moving events as they occur regarding Bearing’s eight-month cancer treatment, but does not take into account the flashbacks which alternatively draw us back in time as Bearing makes her parallel emotional journey. Jacqueline Vanhoutte notes that “Like Miller’s Death of a Salesman, W;t eschews the linear structure of classical tragedy in favor of a series of flashbacks that connect Vivian’s past decisions to her present suffering.” Layering flashbacks onto the chronicled aspects of Bearing’s illness effectively turns W;t’s structure into a combination chronicle/memory play. The confessional aspects come through in what Vanhoutte terms as Bearing’s “drawn-out process of evaluative retrospection.”

In the “Age of Oprah” – a phrase coined in Newsweek magazine – the act of personal confession was transformed into a form of cathartic spectacle. Both of these memory plays – How I Learned to Drive and W;t – feature confessional stories by female characters on journeys

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273 Jacqueline Vanhoutte, “Cancer and the Common Woman in Margaret Edson’s W;t,” Comparative Drama 36, no.3, 4 (Fall/Winter 2002-3): 396.
274 Ibid., 397.
leading to personal enlightenment and transcendence, joining the growing trend unapologetically displayed on talk-show television. In the previous two decades, during Second-Wave feminism, women had gathered together in Consciousness Raising, or CR groups, in order to share their problems with one another and seek solutions. By the 1980s this concept of women confessing their problems and sharing their triumphs was shaped by the medium of television into a mass-media spectacle. No longer gathering together primarily in small groups, in basements, churches, or private homes, to talk and share experiences in person, instead, women were listening to other women via radio and television broadcasts, such as The Oprah Winfrey Show. In the case of personal narrative becoming cathartic spectacle, I would argue that this was happening before Oprah Winfrey came along, but her show can be seen as the “tipping point” for the genre.

**Oprah Winfrey and Her Show**

It is very likely that the woman known simply as “Oprah” needs no introduction. There are many ways to describe Ms. Oprah Winfrey, as a journalist, an actress, a talk-show host, a media mogul, a billionaire, and as the nation’s “Confessor General.” Winfrey’s biography, which is both self-representational and self-promotional, reports this rapid rise:

In January [of] 1984, she was invited to Chicago to host a faltering half-hour morning program on WLS-TV. In less than a year, she turned *AM Chicago* into

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276 Malcolm Gladwell explains, “This possibility of sudden change is at the center of the idea of the Tipping Point and might well be the hardest of all to accept. The expression first came into popular use in the 1970s to describe the flight to the suburbs of whites living in the older cities of the American Northeast. When the number of incoming African Americans in a particular neighborhood reached a certain point – 20 percent, say – sociologists observed that the community would ‘tip’: most of the remaining whites would leave almost immediately. The Tipping Point is the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point.” Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, 12.
the hottest show in town. The format was soon expanded to an hour, and in September 1985 it was renamed *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. A year later, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was broadcast nationally, and quickly became the number one talk show in syndication.277

One reason for Winfrey’s success is that she moved into the subgenre of television talk show that best suited her skills and personality. Bernard M. Timberg has placed the television talk show in historical perspective, while simultaneously doing a thorough cultural analysis of the genre in his book, *Television Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show*.278 In his first chapter, Timberg describes three major subgenres of television talk shows: “the late-night entertainment talk show (modeled on *The Tonight Show* of Steve Allen and Jack Paar, 1954-1961), the daytime audience-participation talk show (modeled on *The Phil Donahue show*, 1967-1995), and the morning magazine-format show (modeled on the first *Today* show of Dave Garroway, 1952-1959).”279

As noted in her biographical press release, Winfrey segued from the morning-magazine format show to the daytime audience-participation talk show. Although it would seem that Winfrey’s journalistic background would have led her to continue doing a morning magazine-format show like *AM Chicago*, her empathetic personality was actually better suited to more audience interaction. In his unauthorized biography on Winfrey, Norman King describes her in this way, “She really wanted to be an actress – a person whose job it was to show emotion and to live a story. She never really wanted to be outside things that were happening, an observer equipped

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278 Bernard M. Timberg, *Television Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002). Timberg defines the genre in his first chapter, then goes on to trace it through five “cycles” dating from 1948 to 2000. The book also includes “A Guide to Television Talk” by Robert J. Erler, which has encyclopedic-type entries on major figures and shows of this genre, including *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.
279 Ibid., 6-7.
with cold-blooded objectivity.”

Of course, apart from her role as television moderator, she did literally act professionally in TV movies, a television miniseries, and the feature film *The Color Purple*, for which she received major awards. The acting can be seen as a separate issue, but the idea that she wanted to be a person whose job it was to “show emotion and live a story” becomes particularly important in relation to the type of talk show host she became. According to Timberg, Winfrey was able to find distinction while emerging between waves of talk show hosts, including women such as Dinah Shore, Sally Jessy Raphaël, and Winfrey’s role model, Barbara Walters, as well as men like Mike Douglas, Merv Griffin, Geraldo Rivera, and, perhaps most significantly, Phil Donahue.

One of the key aspects of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is that Winfrey is not just sympathetic – she’s empathetic. For instance, when doing a show about “weight loss,” Winfrey is sharing information that will help her audience and herself. The show is not structured with Winfrey as a moderator or objective observer – she is almost always a hands-on leader as well as an empathetic participant. Oprah has said, “I’m just a girl with a microphone” and further conflates her role with the audience by describing herself as “just a viewer with a microphone.”

Viewers get the sense that Winfrey is their friend on the journey of life. This is accomplished through the vision of Winfrey and the execution of her producing team. Newcomb notes how vital teamwork is in shaping these programs and their hosts: “The efforts of these teams are specifically focused on shaping the all-important host persona, adjusting, framing,

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281 *The Color Purple*, dir. Steven Spielberg, 152 min., Warner Home Video, 2007, DVD. The original theatrical release was in 1985 and was based on the novel by Alice Walker. Winfrey received an Oscar nomination, plus a Golden Globe award for best supporting actress as Sofia.

rewriting until all these efforts disappear in a mask of casual intimacy.” Winfrey achieved the effect of casual intimacy on a level greater than any other talk show host by willingly confessing private details of her life, including her struggles with weight issues and the sexual abuse she suffered as a child. Eva Illouz, in her book *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture*, points out that “the three or four milestones of Oprah’s career took place through revelations that she made about herself – her difficulties going on a diet, her history of sexual abuse, her miscarriage at the age of fourteen, her problems with self-esteem – that have had a tremendous impact on the popularity of her show.”

Other shows had loyal viewers, but Winfrey’s popularity was outsized and phenomenal. If Winfrey discussed something on her show, then that something – be it a social issue, a book, or a product – suddenly became the “it” issue for millions of American women. And, eventually, her influence spread worldwide. Newcomb points out that only a few of these television talk show hosts and their programs succeed, and that their successes “remind us more than anything that the talk show, like all television, must exceed its commodity status even as it confirms it.”

Winfrey began to realize that “the show was more than a show” when a woman confessed to her in the grocery store that, because of watching *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, she no longer beat her kids. Winfrey describes the conversation as life-changing, because “you really are affecting the way people see themselves and have an opportunity to do that every time somebody turns on the TV.” After that, Winfrey worked to exceed her status as a commodity and identifying herself with selected commodities, by endeavoring to lobby for transforming her audience’s

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285 Ibid.
286 “I Used to Beat My Child,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, disc 2, segment 1: *Aha!*
287 Ibid.
moral values and interpersonal conduct on a mass scale. As the seasons went on, the focus on commodities remained (often literally, for example, Winfrey loved to talk about and even give away to the studio audience her “favorite things”\textsuperscript{288}), but the overall emphasis of the show slowly shifted. Winfrey relates an epiphany she had in 1989:

We’d been following Rudine over a period of time and suddenly one day I realized we are following her as a news story. We’re following her as, you know, a voyeur looking into this anorexic life. We need to help her! She needs help! Like, Oh My God we’re just covering the story. This girl is going to die if we don’t do something.\textsuperscript{289}

The show slowly progressed from being an advertising-generated portal offering a voyeuristic look into people’s lives to a (still advertising-generated) life classroom which provided educational tools to help people self-diagnose their problems and achieve what she considered positive changes in their lives. Illouz cautions that any analysis of what she deems “the Oprah Winfrey phenomenon” must be executed “within the tension between understanding and critique.”\textsuperscript{290} This tension balances Winfrey’s representation of “one of the most decisively democratic cultural forms to date in the medium of television” with Winfrey’s commodification of the medium through her perfection of “an uncanny talent” regarding the “exploitation of


\textsuperscript{289} “Rudine,” The Oprah Winfrey Show, disc 2, segment 1: Aha! Rudine was a young woman originally interviewed about her anorexia nervosa and eventually became a recurring guest. At first the show simply charted her progress, but after this “epiphany” Winfrey attempted an intervention on air and tried to help Rudine recover. In the end, Rudine succumbed to her disease.

\textsuperscript{290} Illouz, Oprah Winfrey, 13.
private sorrow for television profits” and her willingness to override “the prohibition mixing the private realm of sentiments with the market.” Winfrey does exploit private sorrow for television profits, but this does not preclude the possibility of her being sincere about doing this in order to change – and hopefully improve – the lives of those participating in the making and consumption of her product. As Illouz writes, “Oprah Winfrey shows us how to cope with chaos by offering a rationalized view of the self, inspired by the language of therapy, to manage and change the self.” Using the language of therapy and desiring to manage and change the self are all concepts linked to the rise of the recovery movement, which had the seeds of its beginning decades earlier, but shows great growth and influence in the 1980s and especially the 1990s. Elayne Rapping explains that “television, specifically daytime talk shows and prime-time docudramas,” provides the most “common and prominent avenues by which most of us – those who are not personally involved or concerned with matters of addiction and recovery – ingest, almost by osmosis, the movement’s messages and theories and terminology.” As Rapping notes, “You can listen to Oprah Winfrey or Sally Jesse Raphael interview ‘love addicts’ and ‘sex addicts’ and lead them, by hour’s end, to the teachings of 12 step gurus like Robin Norwood or

291 Ibid., 13.
292 Ibid., 5.
293 Elayne Rapping, The Culture of Recovery (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 12. Rapping’s text is a cultural/social history and analysis of the recovery movement and covers a wide range of arenas in which recovery thought and method are constructed. These arenas include television, institutions, 12 Step groups, self-help books, and political movements. Rapping claims no desire to denigrate the movement, as she sees how it fills a void and addresses real problems of women. Nevertheless, she does encourage her readers to not ignore what she sees as its major issue: “For this is the ultimate danger the recovery movement represents: in its focus on changing ourselves as a means of defusing our problems, recovery leads us farther and farther away from the social root causes of these problems – as feminists originally understood and addressed them – so far away that we are in danger of lapsing into chronic political myopia and self-absorption.” Ibid. In this essay I do not focus on the social root causes of the problems addressed on Oprah and in these Pulitzer Prize-winning plays, but wish to acknowledge their existence and hope that others continue to research and analyze these connections.
Ann Wilson Schaef.”294 Whether implicit or explicit, the recovery movement can be claimed as a key aspect of daytime talk shows like The Oprah Winfrey Show.

The formula for many of Winfrey’s “life-changing” shows consisted of the following: each would focus on a corrosive social issue, most often discussed from a given woman’s point of view and using a woman’s confessional narrative, then regularly adding experts (psychologists, nutritionists, etc.) to diagnose the problems and suggest forms of treatment, which then culminates with the confessor/participant, studio audience, the viewing audience, and presumably Winfrey herself, achieving a form of catharsis.

Catharsis: Part One

It had long been assumed that scholars and students of theatre history knew what catharsis meant, but recent theories have undermined and amplified those assumptions. R. Darren Gobert describes catharsis as “the most vexed term in Aristotle’s vexing Poetics, the foundation of Western dramatic theory.”295 This is largely because, as argued by Paige duBois, that “to read fifth-century tragedy, one of the most significant cultural artifacts of classical Athenian democracy, through Aristotle, a fourth-century philosopher from a distant city, is to make the river of time flow backward; it is to misrecognize the fact that Aristotle is himself engaging in significant cultural discursive work, choosing not to write dramas about Oedipus but to write about dramas about Oedipus – to write about katharsis.”296 Aristotle most likely did not engage in a process of investigating and defining terms historiographically, but while modern

294 Rapping, Culture of Recovery, 23.
theorists often do. Their conclusions, however, may be dubious due to a dearth of extant material on which to base them; nevertheless, they do appear to narrow the field to three competing theories: purgation, purification/cleansing, and clarification/learning. The purgation theory is often attributed to S.H. Butcher, who characterizes the function of tragedy in the early 1920s as “through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.”\(^{297}\) In the late 1960s, Leon Golden and Gerald Else each put forth his own translation and accompanying theory, which have become among the most widely accepted and disseminated theories in the late twentieth century. Else writes that “the arousing of pity and fear is an integral part of the work of tragedy, at least, and something about that production is such that those feelings are, or can be made beneficent rather than hurtful.”\(^{298}\) Golden also addresses catharsis when he translated Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, which “achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents.”\(^{299}\) As O.B. Hardison, Jr. writes in his commentary to Golden’s text, “Unfortunately, no text can be called definitive, simply because many of the textual problems presented by the Poetics cannot be solved on the basis of present knowledge.”\(^{300}\) He points out that “Aristotle’s Greek is ambiguous” and that Golden’s translation is “one of several possible renditions.”\(^{301}\) Each of these renditions is related “to a theory of what catharsis means.”\(^{302}\) Golden and Hardison reject, at least in part, relating catharsis to the psychology of the spectator, but instead read the Poetics


\(^{300}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{301}\) Ibid., 114.

\(^{302}\) Ibid.
as a “techne – a technical treatise concerned with the nature of tragedy, not the response of the audience.”

Hardison attributes first proposal of the “clarification theory” of catharsis to Golden and its effect on the audience is described as thus: “When the spectator has witnessed a tragedy of this type, he will have learned something – the incidents will be clarified in the sense that their relation in terms of universals will have become manifest – and the act of learning, says Aristotle, will be enjoyable.”

A decade later, in the 1970s, Noreen Kruse summed up the three competing theories when she writes that “the multitude of speculations about catharsis can be divided into three basic categories: clarification, purgation, and cleansing.” She also points out that “furthermore, for some inexplicable reason, the choice of one interpretation has seemed to necessitate a complete rejection of any other notion relating to catharsis.”

Although I believe that all three major theories of catharsis have merit, Else’s theory of cleansing/purification, wherein something about the arousing of pity and fear can help make those feelings beneficent, rather than hurtful, is the one most directly applicable to the cathartic spectacles performed on The Oprah Winfrey Show and in the dramas How I Learned to Drive and W;t. I will explore this territory by cross-examining The Oprah Winfrey Show and the two Pulitzer Prize-winning dramas by women in the 1990s.

A parallel can be drawn between the ideals espoused by Oprah Winfrey and those of the purveyors of the Pulitzer Prize. Live Your Best Life is a collection of articles from O, The Oprah Magazine. The collection’s introduction, “Here We Go by Oprah” shares one of her

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303 Ibid., 116.
304 Ibid., 116-117.
306 Ibid.
philosophies behind the work that she produces: “My wish for you is the same as my wish for myself: to keep growing, learning, and getting better.”

For decades, the Pulitzer also claimed to award dramas for helping to educate and make American society better. Pulitzer’s original specifications for his proposed prize in drama read as such: “Annually, for the original American play, performed in New York, which shall best represent the educational value and power of the stage in raising the standard of good morals, good taste, and good manners, One thousand dollars ($1,000).”

Although this is the original citation and not the updated one, the jurors and Pulitzer Board appear to continue to favor plays with these qualities as finalists and winners. It is no coincidence that the two plays by women that win the Pulitzer Prize at the end of the twentieth-century – How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel and W;t by Margaret Edson – have these aspirational ideals of self-improvement and transcendence embedded within their themes and that both are examples of personal confession as cathartic spectacle. Authors Vogel and Edson do not claim that these are “real” women’s stories, but like the guests on Winfrey’s shows, the plays’ two central protagonists tell stories of their individual experiences, which stand in for the stories of many women’s experiences. One survives her ordeal and one does not, but both of their stories contain personal enlightenment and healing within the confessional narratives. These narratives are constructed to induce catharsis for their audiences, just as the stories told on the contemporaneous Oprah show are meant to induce catharsis for Winfrey, her studio audience (including participants), and the television audience.

308 Ibid., 6.
Confession

Personal confession is a time-honored ritual, an opportunity to share what is on a person’s mind and in his (or her) heart. Oprah Winfrey and the theatrical protagonists Li’l Bit and Vivian Bearing share painful and private information, as well as heretofore unknown revelations. Some confessions fall under the category of formal rituals, such as confessing one’s sins to a priest and asking for penance and absolution. Others are much more informal, such as sharing secrets with a close friend. In the “Age of Oprah,” such confession becomes spectacle, occurring as it does before a mass-media audience. 310 Foucault writes in his first volume of The History of Sexuality:

On the face of it at least, our civilization possesses no ars erotica. In return, it is undoubtedly the only civilization to practice a scientia sexualis; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession. 311

It was in the late 1970s when Foucault’s claim that “we have since become a singularly confessing society” was published. 312 With the rise of the television talk show this concept was expanded even further (not to mention the rise of the World Wide Web), so that confession has completely saturated the public arenas of Western cultures throughout the world. He explains

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310 Harold L. Vogel, Economic Industry Economics: A Guide for Financial Analysis, 6th ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 420. The mass audience available in the medium of television is far larger in size and scope to that of a theatre audience, even those for Broadway theatres. According to Harold Vogel, “The potential widespread appeals of live performances notwithstanding, there are severe time and financial constraints that limit audience size and scope.”

311 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 58.

312 Ibid., 59.
that it “plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell.” And, although this confession can be “private” or even privileged, such as a confession to one’s doctor, lawyer, or priest, many are extremely public, like those taking place on television. On *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, confession can appear to be extremely intimate, if not private, regardless of the large scale audience, because often on stage (and directly in front of the cameras) there are only two people at the center of this ritual: Winfrey and the confessor. Winfrey explains how there are moments when an interview “is transcendent of television because it becomes so personal. That it’s really about me and the person I am talking to.” Nevertheless, the effects of this ritual widen to include the audience within the studio, as well as the television audience throughout the viewing area, all of whom become witnesses to the ritual. It is important to remember that, as Foucault writes, “The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile.” During her interviews Winfrey is the authoritative partner and she is actively attempting to “produce intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it.” Adrian Jones argues that Oprah’s confessional catch phrase – “the truth will set you free” – implies the functional presence of a power “so deeply ingrained” that

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313 Ibid.
314 “Jacqui Saburido,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, disc 1, segment 2: *Heartprints*.
316 Ibid., 62.
the speaking subject does not perceive its personal disclosures as an effect of a listening power; the subject speaks simply to be “set free.” The sharing of and perceived eventual overcoming of the negative effects of tragic events is orchestrated by Winfrey and her production team and becomes a spectacle that is marketed as a confessional event that all persons viewing can “benefit” from through lessons learned and shared catharsis.

Although Winfrey is most often seen as the one to whom a guest confesses, in a surprising turn of events, she became the confessor. On her show Winfrey admitted that she was the victim and survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Had she planned on making that shocking revelation? Or was it a spur of the moment confession of empathy? Illouz refers to the episode: “the first show that electrified the nation was in 1986, a memorable performance in which she turned herself into one of her confessing guests by revealing, in what seemed to be a spontaneous and unprepared act of self-exposure, that she had been sexually abused.”

By sharing what was at that time a shocking secret, Winfrey aroused the empathy of many women who had also been abused, as well as the sympathy of many who were lucky enough not to suffer that fate. Although childhood sexual abuse has happened to many girls and boys, very few people had been willing to publicly acknowledge that reality. Through her public confession, Winfrey

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318 Illouz, Oprah Winfrey, 37.

319 Wendy Maltz and Beverly Holman, Incest and Sexuality: A Guide to Understanding and Healing (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987), 2. According to statistics gathered for their book, Maltz and Holman report that “studies show that a range of 9 to 52 percent of adult women and 3 to 9 percent of adult men report having been sexually abused as children by either family members or strangers.” They were referencing D. Finklehor, “How widespread is child abuse?” Children Today 3, no. 4 (July-August 1984): 2.
literally opened a dialogue with the women (and many men, too) of America and multitudes joined her in it. In a later interview Winfrey maps out her continuing motivation to help audiences learn about and avoid becoming a victim to sexual abuse:

I’m not done with sexual abuse, which is really sexual seduction in this country. I think the title is misleading because people think the word abuse means I’m in pain and physical pain and torture. They get them confused. We put a dent in the subject, but we’re nowhere close to getting people to fully realize the devastating impact of sexual seduction on children in this country. What it does to destroy them.\(^\text{320}\)

*How I Learned to Drive* can be seen as a theatrical contribution to that dialogue. Winfrey aired a conversation between convicted sex offenders in order to teach parents that “most molesters are people your child and you probably know; people that you know, people that you trust, and maybe even love.”\(^\text{321}\) These men spoke of being in love with their victims and manipulating their own minds as well as those of the children. Winfrey does not show the faces of the abusers, but notes that “you could see their outlines and their movements and hear their voices talking about how they manipulated and calculated and purposely strategized to seduce their victims.”\(^\text{322}\) Vogel’s portrait of a molester – Uncle Peck – also unveiled his strategies for seducing Li’l Bit, while never taking away from the reality that he loved her and supported her emotionally as she was growing up. Ben Brantley aptly describes the playwright’s handling of the complexity of this abusive, yet loving relationship: “Ms. Vogel is too intelligent to present this simply as a study in victim versus villain or to fail to acknowledge that what’s happening is, in some

\(^{320}\) “Sexual Seduction,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, disc 2, segment 1: *Aha!*

\(^{321}\) Ibid.

\(^{322}\) Ibid.
appalling way, a real love story.” The protagonist, Li’il Bit, becomes empowered, in part, through the act of telling her own story.

Winfrey, many of her talk show’s confessional guests, and the protagonists of these two plays, How I Learned to Drive and W;t, embody the concept that telling one’s story via a confessional narrative can be a healing event. Josef Breuer spoke of “the talking cure” at the end of the nineteenth century and Freud adopted this term and popularized it in the early twentieth century to describe the fundamental work of psychoanalysis. In her book, Healing from Post-Traumatic Stress, psychotherapist Monique Lang writes that “an important part of the healing process is the opportunity to tell your story, to remember and express how it was for you.” There is power in the telling of the narrative and there is strength gathered from those who are witnessing the rituals. The narrator/confessor’s “expression of feelings, thoughts, and physical sensations in a safe, unstructured, nonjudgmental setting serves as a tool to process events.”

One-on-one therapy can provide a safe, unstructured, and nonjudgmental setting. Lang’s workbook provides an individual (who wishes to work on his or her own, or in conjunction with a therapist) an opportunity to write or draw or collage about the traumatic events. Art therapy has been both helpful and popular to many, as evidenced by Louise M. Wisechild’s edited collection of art and essays produced by adult female survivors of incest called She Who Was Lost is Remembered: Healing from Incest through Creativity. There are also other settings,

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324 Monique Lang, Healing from Post-Traumatic Stress: A Workbook for Recovery (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 30. Lang’s biography on the book’s back cover states, “Monique Lang, LCSW, is a psychotherapist and faculty member at the Trauma Studies Center of the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy. She has served on the faculties of Columbia University, SUNY, and Mercy College and is in private practice in New York City.”
325 Ibid.
some more structured than that done by an individual on her own, where the telling of stories can be one tool for the survivor to process traumatic events. This often happens in group therapy, or in recovery programs such as the seminal Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) founded in 1935 by Bill W[ilson] and Dr. Bob [Smith]. Winfrey and others have attempted to replicate the therapeutic model by having women tell their stories on national television. Wherever and in whatever form it takes place, telling deepens and anchors the experience, as well as provides a base which will allow the one who talks to transform the effect of the experience. Lang describes this process as a “catharsis” that “also serves to enhance your perspective and to decrease your feelings of fear, depression, and anger” with the goal being to “knit back together the emotional pieces of your life.”

Sharing our stories opens up our vision to a larger panoramic view, a view which may include the stories of many people within the community. And in turn, it allows the community – even those not directly affected – to see the event from an enlarged perspective.

In the beginning, Vivian Bearing in W;t appears not to have any fear, anger, or depression. She is quite without emotion as she informs the audience that “I think I die at the end. They’ve given me less than two hours.” It is not until she begins to tell an abbreviated version of her life in flashbacks that the audience sees a shift in her demeanor. She changes from

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327 Lang, Healing, 30.
328 Franny Nudelman, “Beyond the Talking Cure: Listening to Female Testimony on The Oprah Winfrey Show,” in Inventing the Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America, eds. Joel Pfister and Nancy Schnog (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 306. Although I do not disagree with all of her arguments, I take the opposite viewpoint from Nudelman when she writes: “While foregrounding women talking about their problems, The Oprah Winfrey Show rejects both a therapeutic commitment to a talking cure that refers female speech to the process of recovery and the more radical account of female testimony as consciousness-raising in which the revelation of personal experience founds a community with common grievances and aims.” I believe that Winfrey embraces both of these ideals and – regardless of the “pop-psychology” nature of her work – is occasionally successful in achieving some form of healing through her television show.
329 Margaret Edson, W;t, (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999), 6.
a confident professor who has resolved to learn what she can about the cancer she has, to someone who questions her previous life choices. Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. could easily have existed exactly as she was for another twenty or thirty years, had it not been for the cancer that was slowly taking over her body. Her students seemed to be somewhat “tolerated” as a small part of her duties as a researcher and senior scholar. Amid the furious pace of her academic work, for instance, she produced the Sonnets volume “in the remarkably short span of three years.”330 From the apparent lack of an ongoing love relationship, children, or even friends (Susie notes that no one visits Bearing in the hospital and according to the intake interview at the hospital she is not having sexual relations at the moment, and she has never been pregnant), it can be surmised that her professional life was extremely successful and her love of examining texts took up the majority of her time and interests. Her personal life appeared extremely distant, and could even be described as disconnected from other people. Unlike Li’l Bit, who – according to the Oprah-promoted hierarchy of correct behavior – needed to learn independence and how to separate from the wants and needs of others, Vivian Bearing knew these lessons all too well. It appears that the lesson she needed to learn as she transitioned towards death was how to be less independent and how to accept the kindness and nurturing of others.

The Trope of Teaching

Playwrights Vogel and Edson use the trope of teaching in their plays, which allows them to enrich their stories structurally and metaphorically. In addition, it provides the set up to teach the characters and the audience “life lessons.” Winfrey, too, structures many of her episodes around teaching a lesson. This is evidenced in *The Oprah Winfrey Show: 20th Anniversary Collection* of DVDs, which includes a section (among others) titled *Aha!* (a.k.a. Life Lessons),

330 Ibid., 19.
advertising itself as: “Twenty years of lessons. Oprah’s light bulb moments.” Winfrey often says that she loves learning and has exclaimed that “I live for those moments when somebody has never thought of a thing that way before.” Winfrey has drawn extensively on her personal life in order to produce topics for her show that she felt would teach valuable lessons to her audience. Some lessons were ones that she was still learning for herself, including those having to do with child abuse and health/weight concerns. The two playwrights examined here also drew from their personal lives in order to write stories that would help audiences understand pressing topics, including childhood sexual abuse and a life-threatening cancer diagnosis and treatment. In his interview with Paula Vogel in The Playwright’s Voice, David Savran asks the playwright, “Do your plays function as a kind of autobiography for you?” Vogel responds, “In the same way actors give their bodies over, I’m giving over my memory and my history to the different characters I write.” Edson told interviewer Jim Lehrer on the PBS Newshour that she had been the unit clerk on “the cancer and AIDS inpatient unit of a research hospital. And so that’s where the medical part comes from.” She went on to say that she had no personal experience with John Donne, only learning about him and his poetry as she worked on the play. She chose Donne to reflect Bearing’s mental capabilities, in part because she remembered her

331 The Oprah Winfrey Show: 20th Anniversary Collection, disc 2, segment 1: Aha! (Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2005), DVD. The liner notes for the DVD set list the contents of every section on all six discs.
332 “I Used to Beat My Child,” The Oprah Winfrey Show, disc 2, segment 1: Aha! Introduction.
333 David Savran, The Playwright’s Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing and the Politics of Culture (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999), 278. Vogel also points out strong literary, stage, and filmic influences on How I Learned to Drive, including “not only Lolita, but also Michel Tremblay’s Bonjour, La, Bonjour and Louis Malle’s Murmur of the Heart.” Ibid., 273.
334 Ibid.
college classmates “saying that they thought John Donne was the most difficult poet that they had to study.”

Margaret Edson’s protagonist is a professor of seventeenth-century English poetry specializing in the Holy Sonnets of John Donne. As Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. explains the lessons she has learned from studying Donne, she teaches the audience lessons about her own experiences with death and dying. *W;t* is the journey of a woman who comes to self-awareness just before she comes to death. The family theme is decidedly different in this play than in many of the others. Bearing finds herself completely alone in the world at age 50. In her “regular” life, this arrangement is fine. She is happy with the focus and solitude of being a senior scholar in her field. But when it is discovered that she has cancer – specifically stage four metastatic ovarian cancer – she begins an eight-month journey of self-awareness and revelation. Bearing explains with her trademark irony, “One thing can be said for an eight-month course of cancer treatment: it is highly educational.” In the case of this play, it becomes highly educational for the protagonist and for the audience, all of whom are given a window into the physical and emotional effects of the entire cycle of treatment. There are numerous things that she learns about herself, about cancer, and about being human during this period, but first she must be pulled from her place of self-sufficiency and comfort. As Bearing says, “I am learning to suffer.” This journey takes her from a place of confidence, through a mine-field of doubt and regret, to a place of acceptance.

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336 Ibid.
338 Ibid., 31.
339 Ibid.
Paula Vogel’s protagonist, Li’l Bit, begins her story as the pupil, a young girl learning how to drive. Her opening lines are: “Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson. We’re going to start our lesson tonight on an early, warm summer evening.” In *How I Learned to Drive*, the subject and secret is incest. The play centers on two characters, Li’l Bit and her Uncle Peck. Vogel adapts the classical concept of a “Greek Chorus” to the post-modern stage, by using three actors, a male, a female, and a teenage girl to play all the auxiliary roles. Li’l Bit’s family is highly dysfunctional, which is very funny at times and very sad at others. Growing up in rural Maryland, there is seemingly only one person who “gets” Li’l Bit and that is her Uncle Peck. He always listens to her, encourages her to get a college education, and even teaches her how to drive. He is a sympathetic father-figure and male role-model. But when Li’l turns eleven years old Uncle Peck initiates her into a sexual relationship; eventually she essentially replaces his wife as confidante and lover to Peck. He sees nothing wrong with the arrangement because they are related by marriage and not by blood. According to Maltz and Holman, in their book *Incest and Sexuality*, “We define incest as any sexual contact between a child or adolescent and a person who is closely related or perceived to be related, including stepparents and live-in partners of parents.” This includes “sexual activity initiated by siblings, cousins, mothers, uncles, aunts, or grandparents.” So, by this generally accepted definition, Peck justifies his actions based on self-delusion. In any case, Li’l Bit, when he first seduces her, is an underage child by any definition. As Li’l Bit is indoctrinated further and further into his self-delusion, she finds herself feeling ambivalent, craving the attention of an adult male and also feeling awful about deceiving her aunt. The story is about Li’l Bit growing.

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341 Maltz and Holman, *Incest and Sexuality*, 3.
342 Ibid., 4.
up, deciding whether to separate herself from Peck or to completely commit to a relationship with him as his wife and lover, and finally learning how to live with her past.

Alternating between acting as teachers and pupils, Winfrey and the protagonists Li’l Bit and Vivian Bearing all learn their own life lessons while simultaneously enlightening the audiences about their complex circumstances and exemplifying ways to become better human beings – better in ways that Winfrey would approve.

Bearing does not have any children of her own, but as a teacher ends up influencing many young people and having an impact on their thought processes and life choices. Up until her diagnosis, she had always been sure that her tough approach towards exacting scholarship would benefit the generations of students that she taught. As she started to look back and examine her life, she began to have some doubts that this was the best approach; this attitude is reflected in her introduction to a scene involving a class full of students. She addresses the audience with “Now I suppose we shall see, through a series of flashbacks, how the senior scholar ruthlessly denied her simpering students the touch of human kindness she now seeks.”

It is a disassociated form of confession because Bearing is seemingly not even aware of the ramifications of her own storytelling. She is particularly harsh on a student who wants her to bend her “no late papers” rule because his grandmother died and he has to go home. She replies coldly, “Do what you will, but the paper is due when it is due.” She says to the audience – and perhaps as much to herself: “I don’t know. I feel so much – what is the word? I look back, I see these scenes, and I…” The stage directions describe a long silence, plus Vivian walking around the stage absently, trying to think of something. She gives up and goes back to bed. This

343 Edson, W;t, 59.
344 Ibid., 63.
345 Ibid.
moment reveals two things: Bearing is having difficulty acknowledging what appears to be “remorse” and that she is only slowly beginning to understand her own life. As Winfrey said in response to an interview with Christine McFadden, “I know that many times when people are telling their stories that the story they’re telling for themselves that they may not even get” and that they also “may not get the fullness and depth of what their words mean to the life of somebody else.”

Both Bearing and Li’l Bit appear to discover themselves through the telling of their stories. Bearing does not realize that Winfrey’s team of professional recovery experts would want her to abandon her independence and work toward connection. As she interacts with Kelekian, she gets a sense of collegiality and a sense of “co-parenting” these adult “children” – students that have studied under herself and Dr. Kelekian. In particular, their shared “parenting” of Jason Posner, Dr. Kelekian’s clinical fellow in the medical oncology branch, allows them to temporarily build a sort of family unit. It turns out that Jason took Professor Bearing’s course in seventeenth-century poetry as an undergraduate. And the fact that he is so much like Bearing allows her to see her weaknesses and her strengths reflected through this “child.” She notes that “the young doctor, like the senior scholar, prefers research to humanity.”

His weakness is that he sees learning good “bedside manner” with patients as a “colossal waste of time for researchers.” His strengths include his willingness to challenge himself; he tells Professor Bearing and Susie that “I made a bet with myself that I could get an A in the three hardest courses on campus” and he did in fact receive an A minus in Bearing’s course. He appears to have honed another of his strengths while taking her course, his ability to look at “things in

346 “Your Story Will Save Lives,” Oprah Winfrey Show, disc 2, segment 1.
347 Edson, W;t, 58.
348 Ibid., 55.
349 Ibid., 21.
350 Bearing, with her feet in stirrups awaiting a pelvic exam by her former student, finds herself wishing that she had given him an A in the course.
increasing levels of complexity.” He notes that it comes in handy in his research, which “when it comes right down to it, research is just trying to quantify the complications of the puzzle.” Jason’s description of Donne’s work is:

So you write these screwed-up sonnets. Everything is brilliantly convoluted. Really tricky stuff. Bouncing off the walls. Like a game, to make the puzzle so complicated.

It is Bearing’s critical and detailed approach to Donne’s sonnets that allowed Jason to nurture his capacity for solving puzzles and now he is working on solving the puzzle of his patient’s cancer. He may not have liked Professor Bearing, but he “had a lot of respect for her, which is more than I can say for the entire biochemistry department.” And though he is at the beginning of his career, the audience can hope that he will make great contributions in the fight to cure cancer. Part of this can be attributed to Bearing and her pain-staking, take-no-prisoners, style of teaching. As Jason explains:

She gave a hell of a lecture. No notes, not a word out of place. It was pretty impressive. A lot of students hated her, though. […] she wasn’t exactly a cupcake.

Jason acts as a mirror for Bearing, wherein she can see her strengths and weaknesses as a teacher and human being reflected back to her.

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351 Edson, W't, 76.
352 Ibid., 77.
353 Ibid., 76.
354 Ibid., 74.
355 Ibid., 74-75.
Jason Posner may be the behavioral doppelgänger for Vivian Bearing but he is not the one to whom she confesses. Bearing makes the majority of her spoken confessions to Susie Monahan, R.N., but it is the scholar’s former professor and mentor, E.M. Ashford, Ph.D., who provides the insight that helps Bearing interpret her journey from life to death. When these two characters’ actions combine, they end up functioning in a very Oprah-esque way, leading Bearing from confession to catharsis.

In crafting the character of Susie, Edson has created a wonderful counterpoint to her protagonist Vivian Bearing. Susie is not the antagonist, because the antagonist in this play is cancer. But Susie’s personality and positive qualities do provide a counter-balance to those of Bearing. Whereas Bearing is extremely intelligent and a very academically oriented person with a no-nonsense attitude, Susie is less intelligent, but overflowing with compassion. “Susie’s [brain] was never very sharp to begin with,” Bearing said, but as her emotional defenses start to lower, she becomes more and more open to the great gifts of kindness and compassion and even companionship that Susie has to offer. Professor Bearing has defined herself by her life’s work, so everything surrounding that is very important, but none of these accoutrements have any value in the place she finds herself in at present. Her title, Doctor, is extremely important to her – it reflects the achievement of an expert-level of knowledge in her field. In the hospital, as in numerous other places in this world, the title of doctor is often treated as irrelevant if it is not a medical doctor; therefore, Vivian’s Ph.D. is ignored in this sea of M.D.s. As she loses her clothes and has to be attired in two hospital gowns for her treatment, her sense of dignity is lost to a point, although not her sense of irony. She says that she is a scholar, “or I was when I had

356 Ibid., 69.
shoes, when I had eyebrows.”

Once Bearing is stripped of many of the outer-trappings that she had as a senior scholar, she begins to open up to Susie’s comfort and nurturing. A major hurdle is cleared when Bearing allows Susie to call her sweetheart: “Do not think for a minute that anyone calls me ‘Sweetheart.’ But then…I allowed it.”

The transition from independence to allowed dependence is nearly complete when she “manufactures” a small crisis to get the attention she wants from Susie by pinching her own IV tubing, making the pump alarm beep. The incident is not dramatic, but the fact that this generally stoic professor reveals to her nurse that she is having doubts and is scared is quite extraordinary. Bearing confesses:

VIVIAN:  I don’t feel sure of myself anymore.

SUSIE:  And you used to feel sure.

VIVIAN:  (Crying) Oh, yes, I used to feel sure.

Susie does not offer any insight, but instead offers a popsicle, which Bearing breaks in half and shares with Susie. She is reduced to a child-like status as her sophisticated marks of adulthood go by the board, exemplified by the rudimentary popsicle. They sit eating popsicles, and finally, Bearing’s trust in Susie and her willingness to let go are exemplified in the discussion that Susie has with her about her “code status.” Her choices are Code Blue and Do Not Resuscitate or DNR. Susie explains that fellows like Jason always “want to know more things.” As a scholar, Bearing says that she also always wants more knowledge. Susie replies, “Well, okay then. You’ll be full code. That’s fine.”

Susie is willing to put in a Code Blue order, but Bearing finally has learned the lessons she needed to learn in this life and is ready to let go. She makes a

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357 Ibid., 68.
358 Ibid., 64.
359 Ibid., 65.
360 Ibid., 68.
conscientious decision to stop striving for more knowledge (and to stop allowing others to glean knowledge from her) and chooses a DNR code status. She is willing to “let it go” and let her heart stop. She is truly open and ready to transition from life to death. The last thing Bearing asks Susie at the end of the conversation is “You’re still going to take care of me, aren’t you?” Susie answers, “’Course, sweetheart. Don’t you worry.” Bearing desires connection throughout her dying process and ironically, she is finally reduced to a weakened enough status to find the mental strength to ask for it.

In their earliest encounter about John Donne, while Bearing was still in school studying under the esteemed E.M. Ashford, she is informed by her professor that the edition she chose allows meaning to be sacrificed to hysterical punctuation: “And Death – capital D – shall be no more – semicolon! Death – capital D – comma – thou shalt die – exclamation point!” The “hysterical” punctuation includes the use of the semicolon and the exclamation point. How and why should it be punctuated differently? Ashford explains:

And death shall be no more, comma, Death thou shalt die. Nothing but a breath – a comma – separates life from life everlasting. It is very simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on a stage, with exclamation points. It’s a comma, a pause. […] Life, death. Soul, God. Past, Present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma.

“Death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die” places death as the briefest of pauses in the transition from life to life everlasting. Life everlasting, also known as eternal life, refers to life

361 Ibid., 69.
362 Ibid.
363 Ibid., 14.
364 Ibid., 14-15.
after death according to Christian eschatology (the study of “end things” in the Bible). Spoken by many denominations as part of their liturgy, the Apostles’ Creed proclaims that Christians believe in “the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to life everlasting.”

At the point that young Vivian Bearing learned her key lesson about punctuation from Ashford, she launched a lifetime of inquisition regarding John Donne’s exploration of mortality. She learned it – she understood it – she taught it. But it was not until her illness made her mortality real that she began to see the eerie parallels between her point of view and Donne’s.

Li’l Bit’s vehicle for learning her life lessons is literally a car. While Uncle Peck is teaching her how to drive, Li’l Bit is simultaneously teaching the audience what childhood sexual abuse looks like and how a woman attempts to heal from this series of traumatic events. The character of Li’l Bit is a complex figure, both Oprah-like figure and guest, all-in-one. Li’l Bit’s split characterization comes from her ongoing duality: she is the young girl in the past making the confessions and she is the thirty-four year-old woman in the present, revealing her interpretation of the events and the insights she has gained. In order to eventually break free from the grasp of her Uncle, young Li’l Bit must learn how to be independent, which is intricately tied in with her learning to drive. It is more complex than learning traffic rules and the parts of a car, because the vehicle of her escape to independence has also been the site of numerous instances of her abuse. The playwright begins in a non-realistic vein. The stage directions read:

(Lights up on two chairs facing front – or a Buick Riviera, if you will. Waiting patiently, with a smile on his face, Peck sits sniffing the night air. Li’l Bit climbs

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in beside him, seventeen years old and tense. Throughout the following, the two sit facing directly front. They do not touch. Their bodies remain passive. Only their facial expressions emote.)

There is no “realistic” replica of a car; only two chairs facing front. And throughout the scene, their bodies never touch. This is certainly part of Vogel’s strategy to engage us; making it too realistic might make some audience members so uncomfortable that they would distance themselves. Vogel allows us to feel, but to also, in a Brechtian way, not get lost in the feelings; through the use of the “Greek chorus” and having Li’l Bit narrate her story, she employs the Verfremdungseffekt or alienation effect described by Brecht as part of his concept of epic theatre. So, in this scene we are not focusing on the actual illicit touching, but are made aware of the “act” of illicit touching by the description of it as opposed to the acting out of it. The way that the audience remains in a feeling mode is through the actors’ facial expressions, which shifts into representations of touching rather than actual touching. The bodies do not touch, remaining passive through the entire scene, but gradually the characters and their bodies begin to take on some of the emotion that only their facial expressions convey in the beginning. This happens as more of the sexual nature of their relationship is revealed; the stage directions read:

(Peck bows his head as if praying. But he is kissing her nipple. Li’l Bit, eyes still closed, rears her head on the leather Buick car seat.)

Throughout the scene there is a “visual confession” of the physical/sexual nature of their relationship, but it is not until the end of the scene – after several pages of dialogue – that we hear the confession that it is incest:

367 Ibid., 12.
Li’l Bit: Uncle Peck – we’ve got to go. I’ve got graduation rehearsal at school tomorrow morning. And you should get on home to Aunt Mary –

For those who were unfamiliar with the theme or plot of this play, this comes as a shocking revelation. In the highly sexualized era of the late twentieth century, a contemporary audience may be likely to “accept” that a seventeen-year-old girl is having a relationship with an older, married man. But there are few people who do not cringe when it is revealed that the married man is Li’l Bit’s Uncle Peck. Vogel leaves the audience with that feeling of shock, by ending the scene quickly after that revelation. There is no blackout between scenes, only a smooth flow which highlights the theatricality of the production. After Li’l Bit says, “I’ll drive” – a last line that falsely implies that she is in control – the stage directions read:

(A Voice cuts in with:)

Idling in the Neutral Gear.

(Sound of car revving cuts off the sacred music; Li’l Bit, now an adult, rises out of the car and comes to us.)

These transitions throughout the play emphasize the main visual metaphor, which is driving, and keep it foremost in the audience’s mind. As Savran states, “In How I Learned to Drive, Vogel turns the theatre itself into a vehicle for memory, using first gear to move forward in time and reverse to move backwards.” This is important because driving is a major theme for the play;

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368 Ibid., 12.
369 Ibid., 13.
370 Ibid., 14.
371 Savran, Playwright’s Voice, 264.
driving represents many, many things in the American psyche, including escape, freedom, independence, and power, which are also themes paralleled within the play.

The use of the metaphor of learning to drive/driving brings more of an iconic American cultural reference to bear upon the play than audiences are consciously aware of. America is a driving culture; Henry Ford made sure of that when he first invented the assembly line in order to mass produce the Model T car. Mass production made cars available to people on a scale never before seen and those who could afford cars happily began to use them instead of the alternatives. “Sunday drives” became a family pastime; learning to drive became a rite of passage for teenagers. By the 1950s cars were ubiquitous. After diverting all manufacturing resources during World War II for defense, America was turning out appliances and cars at an astounding rate. Because of the roads built for national defense by President Eisenhower linking the U.S. – interstate highways – it was now possible to use roads to cross the country. That sort of dream – wanderlust, if you will – was epitomized in novels such as Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. This sort of adventurous spirit was a gendered ideal; certainly young women did not take to the road in the same way as young men did. Peck points out the difference between male and female drivers in a monologue about learning to drive. He notes that men are taught to

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372 This system of roads is officially called the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways and was authorized by the Federal Highway Act of 1956. The first roads constructed from government funds in the United States were authorized by the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916.

373 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Viking Press, 1957). The novel was completed in 1951, but Kerouac was unable to find a publisher until 1957, at which time the manuscript was forced to undergo major revisions. In 2007, Viking Press released two new editions: *On the Road: The 50th Anniversary Edition* and *On the Road: The Original Scroll*. The latter version is a transcription of Kerouac’s original draft typed on a scroll of paper and has restored the original names of his characters (named after real-life friends) and the more sexually explicit language than was allowed to be published in 1957.
drive confidently and aggressively; “the road belongs to them.”

On the contrary, “Women tend to be polite – to hesitate. And that can be fatal.”

Li’l Bit promises to take the lessons seriously and asks Uncle Peck to teach her how to drive. He tells her that “before the next four weeks are over, you’re going to know this baby inside and out” and that she must “treat her with respect.”

Cars were referred to as “she” and were driven by males. In this way, Vogel allows the protagonist to slowly usurp the power of the male antagonist. Li’l Bit learns to drive and then starts on her own odyssey, driving far away from the family. Even though she is no longer in the company of her relatives, Li’l Bit confesses her need for continued escape, which borders on total self-destruction. She got kicked out of school: “Some say I got caught with a man in my room. Some say as a kid on scholarship I fooled around with a rich man’s daughter.”

Drank to extremes: “Canadian V.O. A fifth a day.”

Drove constantly, cruising the Beltway and the back roads of Maryland: “Racing in a 1965 Mustang.”

Plus dreamed of committing suicide: “Fully tanked, I would speed past the churches and the trees on the bend, thinking just one notch of the steering wheel would be all it would take.”

Li’l Bit’s combination of bisexuality, drinking, driving, and potential suicide by car conjures up a vague connection with 1950s troubled American icon and possible bisexual James Dean. Whether suicide or not, James Dean’s crash was fatal and denied him the possibility of ever confessing; nevertheless, his early death and the accompanying mystery only served to increase his iconic status as a “Rebel

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375 Ibid.
376 Ibid., 51.
377 Ibid., 21.
378 Ibid.
379 Ibid.
380 Ibid.
Without A Cause” and a misunderstood youth. Although his crash was fatal, he still inspired young men all over the United States to get behind the wheel and drive fast, as a form of rebellion and a form of freedom. Li’l Bit was unusual, because it was rarely young women who embraced driving in this way in the 1960s and 1970s, unlike now when Danica Patrick and other women are becoming renown for being able to control a car at high speeds and compete against male drivers at Nascar and the Indy 500. In the time period that Li’l Bit is racing on the back roads women are supposed to be “accessories” to the car, not in control of it. This is shown in the following scene titled, “You and the Reverse Gear.”

Vogel’s stage directions read, “In the following section, it would be nice to have slides of erotic photographs of women and cars: women posed over the hood; women draped along the sideboards; women with water hoses spraying the car; and the actress playing Li’l Bit with a Bel Air or any 1950s car one can find for the finale.”

Li’l Bit’s embrace of driving means that she stops being the sexual accessory in the car – for Uncle Peck or for any man – and becomes the operator of the vehicle. Somehow both Li’l Bit and James Dean share a slightly androgynous quality and do not completely conform to gender stereotypes when it comes to their behavior. During the driving lessons Peck explains the “female nature” of the car and, as if stepping into his shoes, Li’l Bit takes control of the car and chooses to call her “she” also. It is a subtle confession and effective on two levels: 1) Li’l Bit becomes the handler of the car, exuding the power of the male who usually drives and therefore the car takes the “submissive” female role; 2) Li’l Bit exerts her own sexual power by choosing to introduce a homoerotic subtext as she decides that she will engage with another female – the

381 Ibid., 46.
382 Ibid.
car.\textsuperscript{383} It can be argued that the power and freedom gained in this defining moment enable Li’l Bit to decline Peck’s marriage proposal once she turns eighteen. Vogel’s play is both painful and uplifting and Uncle Peck is the catalyst for both of these versions. On one hand, it’s an American nightmare, where a young girl is taken advantage of sexually by a male family member, while the rest of her family remains in denial or worse, complicit. On the other, it is the story of a young woman following the American dream, learning to drive and gaining freedom and independence behind the wheel.

**Catharsis: Part Two**

When it comes to catharsis achieved through confession, there is a kind of purification in \textit{W;t} that does not exactly happen in \textit{How I Learned to Drive}. Confession can lead to instances of purification, as it seems to with Vivian Bearing, but it is not that pure, nor that complete in the case of Li’l Bit.

Before Bearing reaches her “comma” – the moment after she has taken her last breath and she pauses ever so briefly in death (as described by Donne), she must face her own “Salvation Anxiety.” Salvation Anxiety is a term that Professor Bearing’s former student Jason Posner coined for a paper on John Donne in her class on seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry. He describes Donne as a “brilliant guy, I mean, brilliant – this guy makes Shakespeare sound like a Hallmark card.”\textsuperscript{384} He says that Donne knows he’s a sinner and “there’s this

\textsuperscript{383} This is a subtlety easily lost on the audience, depending on the actress’ interpretation of the lines. During a performance in New York, Molly Ringwald chose to make the line a “throwaway” moment, by giving it a “\textit{whatever}” type of reading, whereas Deirdre Lovejoy (Understudy for Ringwald in the role of Li’l Bit) offered a completely different interpretation of the line by emphasizing the sexual possibilities inferred by Li’l Bit’s choice of deciding to keep the car a “\textit{she}.”

\textsuperscript{384} Edson, \textit{W;t}, 76.
promise of salvation, the whole religious thing.”³⁸⁵ But Donne “just can’t deal with it” because “it just doesn’t stand up to scrutiny.”³⁸⁶ The problem is that “you can’t face life without it either,” so “you write these screwed-up sonnets.”³⁸⁷ Part of Bearing’s mental preparation for dying included her heretofore unlikely acceptance that she was a sinner and that God’s forgiveness was available to her. As Bearing notes, “The speaker of the sonnet has a brilliant mind, and he plays the part convincingly; but in the end he finds God’s forgiveness hard to believe, so he crawls under a rock to hide.”³⁸⁸ She is finding the process of dying very difficult and at a point late in her illness she confesses that she is vulnerable in the same way:

(Searchingly) I thought being extremely smart would take care of it. But I see that I have been found out. Ooohhh. I’m scared. Oh, God. I want…I want…No. I want to hide. I just want to curl up in a little ball. (She dives under the covers.)³⁸⁹

Like the sinner in Donne’s sonnet, Bearing finds God’s forgiveness hard to believe. And if there is no forgiveness, then there is no likelihood of eternal life. This puts both the sonnet’s speaker and Vivian Bearing in a precarious position regarding death. Death will be a “semicolon” – a full stop – if there is not transition to life everlasting. Like Donne, Bearing seems to want more than an abrupt and permanent end to life. Whether or not she realized it at the time, Bearing is describing herself when she states:

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 76.
³⁸⁶ Ibid.
³⁸⁷ Ibid.
³⁸⁸ Ibid., 49.
³⁸⁹ Ibid., 70.
Doctrine assures us that no sinner is denied *forgiveness*, not even one whose sins are overweening *intellect* or overwrought *dramatics*. The speaker does not need to hide from God’s *judgment*, only to accept God’s *forgiveness*. It is very simple. Suspiciously simple.\(^{390}\)

Towards the end of the play, when Bearing can hardly speak coherently any longer, she moves from desiring complexity – as epitomized by John Donne’s Holy Sonnets and the ideas contained within them – toward accepting simplicity; this is symbolically reflected in the visit from Ashford. Her former mentor slips off her shoes and climbs into the hospital bed next to Bearing, then begins to read *The Runaway Bunny*. The scene is quite maternal, as Ashford comforts Bearing as best as she can while the latter is in such terrible pain. Perhaps most importantly, Ashford plays an Oprah-like role and shares the insight that the story is not just a sweet children’s book, but also a wonderful allegory of the soul: “Look at that. A little allegory of the soul. No matter where it hides, God will find it. See, Vivian?”\(^{391}\) Moving from Donne’s work to Margaret Wise Brown’s *The Runaway Bunny* text parallels Bearing’s move from complexity to simplicity. Many audience members and readers of the play believe that the visit from Ashford is not real, but only takes place in the protagonist’s mind. Marks suggests that it is “perhaps a delusion of Vivian’s confabulating mind” when Ashford “kicks off her shoes, climbs into the hospital bed and reads to her dying acolyte from the tender children’s classic ‘The Runaway Bunny.’”\(^{392}\) I believe that Ashford is really there, but even if she were only in Bearing’s mind, she would still be functioning as a spiritual guide for the journey from life to death. Bearing has greatly admired Ashford and therefore because it is Ashford reading

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\(^{390}\) Ibid., 50.
\(^{391}\) Ibid., 80.
\(^{392}\) Marks, “Science and Poetry Face Death in a Hospital Room,” E3.
Runaway Bunny and not Susie, the audience might note that she would give the moment more credence. But Marks points out that when “Vivian at last wants only to be enfolded in the arms of another caring being,” there are actually two, “embodied in Ms. Edson’s play by one representative of the medical world, her nurse Susie Monahan (Paula Pizzi), and one from the academic, her mentor, the professor E. M. Ashford (Helen Stenborg).” Indeed, perhaps Bearing is beyond the possibility of reasoning, but she is not beyond the need for comforting. The soul cannot hide from God and Vivian Bearing cannot hide from death. She stands in for every human being, as we are stripped of the trappings of this life in much the same way “Everyman” is stripped of all worldly possessions, ties, and attributes in the anonymous medieval allegory of the same name. Nestled into Ashford as she reads her The Runaway Bunny, Bearing falls fast asleep; Ashford slowly gets down off the hospital bed, gathers her belongings, and then leans over and kisses her: “It’s time to go. And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” Ashford quotes Horatio’s words to Hamlet; Shakespeare’s two previous lines are “Now cracks a noble heart” and “Good night sweet prince.” Professor Bearing should have been heir to Ashford’s throne, but instead the senior scholar will die before her elder mentor. Ashford would see Bearing’s as a noble heart because her commitment to the profession never wavered; steadfast in the face of all obstacles and consistently striving for human truths.

Bearing had claimed that: “Donne’s wit is...a way to see how good you really are. After twenty years, I can say with confidence, no one is quite as good as I.” After twenty years of studying Donne, the scholar had gleaned all of the insight and information that she possibly

393 Ibid.
394 Edson, W;t, 80.
396 Edson, W;t, 20.
could from John Donne’s exploration of life, death, and eternal life. After twenty years and the achievement of expertise on the abstract scholarship wherein Donne applied his “capacious, agile wit to the larger aspects of the human experience: life, death, and God,” the time had finally come for Bearing to live the lessons. She explains Donne’s agile wit at work as “not so much resolving the issues of life and God as reveling in their complexity.” Bearing has reveled in the complexity of everything, too. But at this point in her life, she is truly ready to embrace simplicity – and kindness – and trust that God will find her soul. The playwright symbolizes this moment in the final stage directions after Bearing’s heart has stopped:

(SUSIE lifts the blanket. VIVIAN steps out of the bed. She walks away from the scene, toward a little light. She is now attentive and eager, moving slowly toward the light. She takes off her cap and lets it drop. She slips off her bracelet. She loosens the ties and the top gown slides to the floor. She lets the second gown fall. The instant she is naked, and beautiful, reaching for the light – Lights out.)

Edson uses the symbolism of “going toward the light” to let the audience and readers of the play come to the conclusion that Bearing’s death was like the “comma” – a brief pause between her life and life everlasting. “Going toward the light” became a well-known symbol of heading toward “heaven,” the Christian interpretation of the kingdom of God. There continue to be numerous memoirs published detailing the near-death experiences of people who claim to have seen a “white light” and then somehow have awoken to find themselves on Earth and still (or once again) alive. One popular memoir at that time was After the Light: The Spiritual Path to

397 Ibid., 48.
398 Ibid., 59-61.
399 Ibid., 85.
Purpose, first released in 1995, then reprinted in 1996. The Near-Death Experience: A Reader was also published in 1996. The playwright uses the iconic “white light” imagery in her stage directions in order to symbolize that Bearing achieved complete physical and spiritual catharsis. No longer reveling in abstract ideas about eternal life, Edson shows in that final moment that the character of Vivian Bearing, like the runaway bunny, is experiencing her soul being found by God.

Li’l Bit does not achieve such a complete and wholly positive form of catharsis in the same way that Vivian Bearing does. She does achieve some measure of healing and transformation during her journey, but Vogel’s story – and its ending – remain too complex to replicate the simplistic type of catharsis that is presumably achieved during a one-hour episode of The Oprah Winfrey Show. I say “presumably” achieved, because that is the impression given when someone on Oprah confesses and is put on the path of healing all in the space of one hour or less. Winfrey conveys an image of success at the end of the episode, because she has received the confession and has provided tools to improve the situation. The studio audience leaves feeling good, because they are envisioning further healing for that person according to the proposed treatment plan and therefore they project in their minds a future “happy ending” for the troubled guest. I have no doubt that many have been helped in the course of this process and have made good use of the services provided (and paid for) by the producers of The Oprah Winfrey Show. But, in reality, trauma can be dealt with in positive ways that lead to healing, but it can never be erased from the person’s past or their consciousness; therefore, it can never be completely healed or “gotten over.”

Forgiveness is the key to the culmination of Li’l Bit’s transformation, which encapsulates healing, as well as continued struggle regarding her abuse and its far-reaching effects. Vogel’s denouement, titled “Driving in Today’s World” is a monologue spoken by older Li’l Bit in the “present” and reveals that the character of Li’l Bit has not only survived years of an inappropriate incestuous relationship, but she has also reached a state of forgiveness. This is revealed through Li’l Bit’s words:

And now that seems like a long, long time ago. When we [she and Uncle Peck] were both very young. And before you know it, I’ll be thirty-five. That’s getting up there for a woman. And I find myself believing in things that a younger self vowed never to believe in. Things like family and forgiveness.402

Li’l Bit has moved on after her Uncle Peck’s death and has forgiven him, saying that she finds herself believing in family and forgiveness.

Winfrey categorizes the act of forgiveness as an act of supreme humanity. After an interview with drunk-driving accident victim Jacqui Saburido (who literally had her face and fingers burned off in the crash), Winfrey describes a “calmness of strength” inside Saburido that was “so dynamic and powerful” as she listened to the mother of the drunk driver break down crying while attempting to convey how much she and her family cared about Saburido – and that she was constantly praying and thanking God for Saburido’s healing.403 Winfrey described how Saburido reaches out “with her burned, gnarled hand” and touched the mother (later actually hugging the mother and rubbing her back in a comforting gesture with the same hand), telling the

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402 Paula Vogel, *Mammary Plays*, 92
403 “Jacqui Saburido,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, disc 1, segment 2: *Heartprints*. 
mother that “It’s alright, it’s alright, it’s okay, you’ll be okay.” Winfrey exclaims, “Oh my God; that was one of the greatest lessons in humanity that I’ve ever experienced.” The purification of emotions is achieved through the confessions of Saburido and of the perpetrator’s mother, Jean Stephey. At the end of the episode, it appears as though a certain level of catharsis has been experienced and that Saburido and Stephey are then able to move on from the incident as changed individuals.

Li’l Bit achieves a certain level of catharsis, too, when she finds that she has forgiven her Uncle Peck for molesting her all of those years. Forgiveness is likely possible for a number of reasons, including issues of love and loyalty, as well as an implication that part of Peck’s abusive behavior may stem from his own issues of PTSD (also known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). Li’l Bit had the type of abusive relationship with Peck “where the offender was the primary, only nurturing, caring adult in their lives” and consequently she developed “an intense protective loyalty” towards him. The playwright does claim in the final scene that Li’l Bit believes in forgiveness, presumably in relation to Uncle Peck. Maltz and Holman write that “if forgiveness can be defined in a way that emphasizes understanding a person’s humanness, limitations, and history, then it may be very beneficial.” Li’l Bit may be able to forgive, in part, because it is implied within the text of the play that Peck is likely suffering from some form

404 Ibid.
405 Ibid.
406 The driver was Reginald Stephey Jr., a high school senior at the time of the crash in 1999. He was released in 2008 after serving seven years in prison for two counts of intoxication manslaughter. His mother, Jean Stephey, agreed to go on The Oprah Winfrey Show to meet with crash victim Jacqui Saburido in 2003.
408 Maltz and Holman, Incest and Sexuality, 27.
409 Ibid., 31.
of PTSD, which may or may not have been connected with his military service. Peck was a Marine and never specifically mentions any of his war experiences, claiming that “it’s really nothing interesting to talk about.”\textsuperscript{410} What the audience does see is how Peck suffers silently over something painful that he is unable to disclose, except in vague terms to Li’l Bit. The stage directions show that Peck is not his usual self, saying “He’s in a mood we haven’t seen” which is “quiet, brooding.”\textsuperscript{411} It’s unclear as to what is really bothering him. It could be “old” demons, or it could be his inability to completely have Li’l Bit to himself. Either way, it is clear that Peck is drinking to excess in order to try to drown his feelings. Li’l Bit asks him why he drinks so much. Peck answers, “I have a fire in my heart. And sometimes the drinking helps.”\textsuperscript{412} Peck does not say what people who have a “fire in their heart” become. Is that because he has become a pedophile? Li’l Bit feels this fire or at least the effects of it. And although she wants to keep herself distanced, she is so emotionally entwined with her Uncle Peck that she feels responsible to help him “heal” from his pain, even if she does not completely understand its root cause or realize until later its full impact on her. Another reason Peck may be suffering from PTSD is that Peck could have been sexually abused by his own mother. At one point in the play Peck says to Li’l Bit about his mother: “Well, missy, she wanted me to do – to be everything my father was not.”\textsuperscript{413} Abusive behavior is considered a cyclical issue, wherein the abuse one suffered as a child is then inflicted by the victim onto someone else. Regardless of his claim of having fallen in love with Li’l Bit when she was first born, Peck confesses that he has attempted to seduce Cousin Bobby during their fishing trip. I believe that Li’l Bit is attempting to engineer her own break from the self-perpetuating circle of abuse, but it is not entirely clear if she did,

\textsuperscript{410} Paula Vogel, \textit{Mammary Plays}, 26.
\textsuperscript{411} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{412} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{413} Ibid., 28.
because she finds herself on ethically shaky ground when, as an adult, she “allows” the high school student to bed her. 414

By the end of the play Li’l Bit has somehow found a way to forgive her now deceased Uncle for the abuse, while embracing the positive aspects of their former relationship: the listening; the validation of her interest in school; the gift of independence she was granted when he taught her how to drive. Vogel uses the central visual metaphor of driving to end the play.

I adjust my seat. Fasten my seat belt. Then I check the right side mirror – check the left side. (She does) Finally, I adjust the rearview mirror. (As Li’l Bit adjusts the rearview mirror, a faint light strikes the spirit of Uncle Peck, who is sitting in the back seat of the car. She sees him in the mirror. She smiles at him, and he nods at her. They are happy to be going for a long drive together. Li’l Bit slips the car into first gear; to the audience:) And then – I floor it. (Sound of a car taking off. Blackout.) End of Play 415

It is a complex metaphor, encapsulating the good and the bad of her relationship with Uncle Peck, while also including the iconic sense of American freedom that is projected through driving fast on an open road. Peck took the purity of childhood innocence from Li’l Bit at age eleven and, as she notes, “That day was the last day I lived in my body.” 416 Here it is revealed that Li’l Bit has been permanently damaged by the sexual abuse that she suffered at the hands of her Uncle Peck. She no longer lives in her body. She, as far as the play informs us, does not have a mature, sexual relationship with an adult – either male or female. Although she explains

414 Ibid., 40-41.
415 Ibid., 92.
416 Ibid., 90.
that she no longer lives in her body, she does feel something when she is driving: “The nearest
sensation I feel – of flight in the body – I guess I feel when I’m driving.” She has learned to
compensate with the illusion of total freedom, independence, and control that is granted her
when she is driving. The play can be seen as concluding the protagonist’s journey as one
wherein Li’l Bit is no longer driving in order to leave her past completely behind her, but instead
she has made peace with her past and Uncle Peck. She cannot forget, but she is willing to
forgive. This forgiveness is shown in the final visual scene during which her past is accepted
and she allows Uncle Peck’s “spirit” to symbolically accompany her on her future drives. That
would be the upbeat interpretation of this ending; an interpretation that I admit I optimistically
wished I could wholly buy into. The other interpretation is a much more realistic one, albeit also
more depressing. In this interpretation, having Uncle Peck accompany Li’l Bit on her drives can
be seen as representing the idea that she will never be free from his incestuous grasp. By
abusing her, he has saddled her with emotional baggage that she carries everywhere she goes,
even in the car when she attempts to feel something, to feel a sense of flight and freedom.
Although Vogel has shown that there have been positive aspects to Li’l Bit’s journey, she leaves
the audience with a very complicated final image at the end of her play. Vogel is able to achieve
what The Oprah Winfrey Show can only reveal in retrospect – that confession can lead to very
complicated results and that catharsis is unlikely to be achieved in a pure and complete form.
Winfrey likely knows this, but the one-hour format of her show does not allow the entire story to
be told. When doing a follow-up interview – ten years later – with crash victim Jacqui Saburido,
it is revealed that her gesture of forgiveness toward her perpetrator’s mother did not bring pure
catharsis. It may have been “one of the greatest lessons in humanity” that Winfrey ever

417 Ibid., 91.
experienced, but it did not bring Saburido miraculous healing. Saburido reported that after that dramatic encounter on The Oprah Winfrey Show, she endured seventy more surgeries and continued to struggle with chronic depression.

Conclusion

How I Learned to Drive and W;t can be contextualized and understood within the “Age of Oprah” because these dramas line up closely with the trend of personal confession as cathartc spectacle, as developed most extensively on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Both dramas employ theatrical techniques that break the fourth wall and allow their protagonists, Li’l Bit and Vivian Bearing, to address the audience directly in the style of personal confession. Their confessions are different, but both characters are suffering in bodies that are in “dis-ease.” Li’l Bit’s body is in dis-ease because she lives only in her head ever since her Uncle Peck first started sexually abusing her at eleven years of age. Vivian Bearing’s body has been corrupted by the literal disease of cancer. Both characters are on life journeys, which lead to transformation and some form of healing. It turns out that for Li’l Bit and Vivian Bearing, the healing is emotional and spiritual, not physical. This healing is achieved in stages, first through the act of confession and then by the gift of forgiveness. Vivian Bearing has forgiven herself and received God’s forgiveness; Li’l Bit has forgiven her abuser, Uncle Peck. When it comes to catharsis achieved through confession, there is a kind of purification in W;t that cannot happen in How I Learned to Drive. Edson’s character’s catharsis is pure and complete, in the same way that many of Winfrey’s show episodes represent an idealized form of complete catharsis following confession.

418 “Jacqui Saburido,” The Oprah Winfrey Show, disc 1, segment 2: Heartprints.
Li’l Bit does not achieve such a complete and wholly positive form of catharsis; nevertheless, she does achieve some measure of healing and transformation, in a way similar to that experienced by Winfrey’s guest Jacqui Saburido. A popular and expanding trend, personal confession as cathartic spectacle incorporated painful struggle, confession, transformation, and catharsis as part of a personal journey and was seen throughout the run of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, as well as in the plays *How I Learned to Drive* and *W;t*. It is not possible to say whether or not these plays would have flourished – and won their respective Pulitzer Prizes – if they had not been presented in the “Age of Oprah.” But one can argue that confessional stories by female characters, whose journeys lead to personal enlightenment and transcendence was a rewarding trend – commercially, artistically, and spiritually – at the end of the twentieth century.
Chapter Four

Two Civil Wars: Parks and Nottage

The first decade in the twenty-first century included a major shift in the history of women’s drama when two African American women were awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Suzan-Lori Parks became the first African American female dramatist to win the Pulitzer Prize with her 2002 play, *Topdog/Underdog*. This was followed in 2009 by Lynn Nottage’s drama, *Ruined*. Male playwrights had broken the color barrier several decades earlier, when Charles Gordone’s play *No Place to Be Somebody* won the Pulitzer Prize in drama in 1970. Charles Fuller followed in 1982 with *A Soldier’s Play*. And August Wilson (who was born to a Sudeten-German father and an African American mother, but identified as Black) won the coveted award twice: *Fences* (1987) and *The Piano Lesson* (1990).

Although there are many intriguing aspects to these dramas, it is the struggle for survival within the realm of national violence that most strongly links these two plays. Suzan-Lori Parks uses the U.S. Civil War as a major theme and metaphor for *Topdog/Underdog*. While exploring the relationship between two brothers (named Lincoln and Booth by their father), Parks uses the specter of this civil war to examine issues of racism, heritage (national and familial), violence, and what it takes to survive in a culture of oppression. The play *Ruined*, by Lynn Nottage, also takes place in the midst of national violence – the civil war in the Congo. Its protagonist, Mama Nadi, establishes a neutral place of profit within the nexus of violence, a bar and brothel in the Congo that caters to rebel forces and government soldiers alike. It is both a refuge and an area of continuing exploitation for women who have become victims of the sexual violence inflicted upon them by both sides. Inspired by interviews she conducted in the area and influenced by
Bertolt Brecht’s character Mother Courage, Nottage explores issues of divided nationality, gendered violence, family, and the not-so-hidden costs of profiting during war.

Although these two plays continue the themes of disrupting and reconstructing family units addressed earlier in this dissertation, they are also historical and political. Both examine national identity and the way a nation’s political context changes its citizens’ lives. Parks’s historical references are metaphorical and oblique, using a reenactment of Lincoln’s assassination by John Wilkes Booth to create a poetic allegory capable of commenting upon contemporary society and race relations. Ruined is a reflection of a much more recent (and arguably, on-going) history, war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Using the testimony of survivors, the playwright fictionalized a conventionally structured drama (with Brechtian aspects) that represents various real aspects of this Congolese civil war. These plays present the audience with protagonists – Mama Nadi and Booth – about whom we are likely to feel ambivalent. Both of them are suffering in their current circumstances. The audience may feel sympathy, because it appears as though the violent environments have pushed them to act and react in less than humane ways. In order to survive, they seem willing to sacrifice the well-being of others. These others are not strangers, but either blood relatives or newly chosen family members. Beneath a rough exterior, both the main characters show that they have feelings for their family members, but that is not enough. The struggle for survival demands certain sacrifices. Does survival necessitate the loss of a person’s humanity? These playwrights also appear to ask: How responsible are those who choose to do nothing in the face of ongoing oppression?

What made the early part of the twenty-first century the right time for these plays to win the Pulitzer Prize in Drama? Like the other Pulitzer Prize-winning plays examined, these two
works bring heightened attention to important social issues. And I would argue that they were calls to action in response to stalled progress. The United States has achieved a number of de juris civil rights victories, but racial equality remains far from de facto in many instances, especially among the lower and middle class populations. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the war was officially over in 2003; nevertheless, people continued to die. Some were dying due to continued regional conflicts in the Kivu provinces, but many others were dying because of the after-effects of the war. Educated audiences have known the facts relating to social injustices in the United States and abroad, but through their dramatizations, Parks and Nottage worked to elicit emotional responses from the audience and to heighten awareness about those who have suffered and continue to suffer from violent oppression.

Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks

Robert Brustein opened his review of Topdog/Underdog with this ambivalent statement: “I was on the committee that gave this year’s Pulitzer Prize for Drama to Suzan-Lori Parks for Topdog/Underdog. This play was not my first choice for the award.” Not exactly a ringing endorsement, but also not a damning one, especially in context. He did not favor this particular play because it was “far from Parks’s most ambitious writing,” but he was “content to endorse the decision of the majority.” The actual “Report of the Pulitzer Nominating Jury in Drama” reveals very little about which play was the majority’s favorite, opting instead for the standard list of three finalists in alphabetical order by playwright, including The Glory of Living by Rebecca Gilman, Yellowman by Dael Orlandersmith, and Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks.

421 Ibid. In point of fact the jury makes recommendations for the prize, but the prize is actually given by the Board – a point that either Brustein did not know or chose not to emphasize, thereby giving himself the appearance of power that he actually did not fully possess.
Parks. There is a note in the report referencing the fact that “Parks was a nominated finalist in this category in 2000.”\textsuperscript{422} Brustein was not on the year 2000 jury that nominated her \textit{In the Blood}, so it is not possible to know exactly what he was referring to when he said that “Prizes often go to the lesser achievements of good playwrights whose better stuff had been previously ignored.”\textsuperscript{423} Quoted by Vanessa E. Jones of the \textit{Boston Globe}, Brustein claimed an inverse relationship between the growing popularity of an artist’s work and her creative venturousness.\textsuperscript{424} In the case of \textit{Topdog/Underdog}, this argument was vigorously joined by academics and critics.

Deborah Geis provided a complete (up-to-that-point) list of premieres in her monograph on Parks, including: \textit{The Sinner’s Place} (senior honors thesis play), \textit{Betting on the Dust Commander}, \textit{Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom}, \textit{The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World}, \textit{Pickling} (a radio play), \textit{Devotees in the Garden of Love}, \textit{The America Play}, \textit{Venus}, \textit{In the Blood}, \textit{Fucking A}, \textit{Topdog/Underdog}, and 365 Days/365 Plays.\textsuperscript{425} Don Shewey wrote that Parks “first made her way with plays that defied virtually every aspect of naturalistic theater,” which established her as a writer who “experimented with poetic repetition, literary wordplay, an irreverent perspective on history and a love for odd titles and wacky names.”\textsuperscript{426} Elizabeth Pochoda described Parks’s earlier works as “bold, disconcerting experiments in theatrical form.”\textsuperscript{427} Not all commentaries were so positive or benign. Ben

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Brantley succinctly stated that Parks “has often been regarded as overly opaque,”\textsuperscript{428} Shewey more pointedly wrote that “mixed with praise have always come complaints that her plays are obscure, impenetrable, pretentious, even infuriating.”\textsuperscript{429} Topdog/Underdog, on the other hand, remains “most shocking to anyone familiar with Ms. Parks’s work” because it is “a two-character, one-set contemporary drama with recognizably naturalistic dialogue.”\textsuperscript{430} As noted by Pochoda, “For a play by Parks it is uncharacteristically conventional – a straightforward story with familiar characters that comes close to observing the classical unities.”\textsuperscript{431} And when this drama opened at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in 2001, it was branded by Brantley as the author’s “most consumer friendly and outright entertaining work to date.”\textsuperscript{432} This, in part, made the play more appealing to the Pulitzer Board, because the plays that have received the Pulitzer Prize in Drama are often a playwright’s most conventional work in her oeuvre. Brustein proposes a trajectory for artists ascending in popularity, wherein an artist’s “seepage of reputation” causes that artist’s recognition to spread from “a few passionate admirers” to “the larger public” and even “the commercial theater.”\textsuperscript{433} The effect of this rise in popularity is that “the work is a lot less venturous than it was to start with.”\textsuperscript{434} At this peak of recognition in a playwright’s career I would argue that an artist is ripe for Pulitzer consideration, because he/she is now a known commodity, practically ensuring the likelihood of more grants, commissions, productions, and awards, all leading to greater recognition and popularity, thereby virtually guaranteeing a reciprocal benefit between the recipient and the Pulitzer Prize. In addition, a

\textsuperscript{429} Shewey, “This Time the Shock,” AR4.
\textsuperscript{430} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{431} Pochoda, “I See Thuh Black Card,” 36.
\textsuperscript{432} Brantley, “Brothers in a Game,” E3.
\textsuperscript{433} Jones, “Drama Queen,” E7.
\textsuperscript{434} Ibid.
consumer-friendly and/or entertaining work which has garnered this prize is highly likely to be reproduced in multiple theaters throughout the United States and perhaps even translated worldwide in the months and years following its win.

**A Literary “Mexican Turnover” from Realistic Play to Poetic Allegory**

Yes, being entertaining and seemingly naturalistic helped *Topdog/Underdog* take home the Pulitzer, but this simple idea is troubled by the fact that the play is actually not in the strict genre of American realism. Suzan-Lori Parks has created a realistic portrait of racist society through an uneasy – and at times an uneven – blend of realism and poetic allegory. Parks said in her interview with David Savran that “it takes about five years” to write a play. 435 If this was the case for *Topdog/Underdog*, then she may have been attempting to brace her audience for the change that she felt was happening when she wrote in 1999, “One year a writer may find a certain style of writing most helpful and inspiring, the next year she will undoubtedly be embracing other styles and forsaking those she once found so necessary.” 436 In her review of the Public Theater’s production, Una Chaudhuri wrote that “Indeed at first glance *Topdog/Underdog* strikes one as a retreat for Parks, a move backwards both in terms of dramatic history as well as in terms of the poetic imagination that illuminates her earlier plays.” 437 Deborah Geis warned readers, “It is a mistake to claim that Parks has ‘evolved’ into creating psychologically complex characters in later plays such as *Topdog*.” 438 In part she blamed this tendency of favoring realism on critics, admonishing readers to be “wary of reviewers’ tendency to favor more

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believable’ or ‘fleshed out’ representations.” I disagree, because it is not the reviewers who favor realism, but rather commercial theatre producers who appear to require a strong dose of realism (plus a dash of celebrity) in order to fulfill their economic mission. In the case of *Topdog/Underdog*, the producers were able to mount a seemingly realistic work by an edgy and experimental artist, one that was attractive to celebrity actors and audiences alike. Parks provided producers and audiences with an idea they felt that they could comprehend: a realistic contemporary portrait of two American brothers sticking together while trying to survive in a tough world. Then she performed a literary version of three-card Monte’s “Mexican turnover” on the audience and switched this realistic play with a poetic allegory. As Maley asserts, “Lincoln [one of the two principle characters in the play] is performing a Mexican turnover when dealing” and that he has been “actively withholding knowledge from his brother.” As Lincoln would say, “Lean in close and watch me now,” because this essay reveals how Parks used poetic language and metaphorical characters in order to create an allegorical play masquerading as contemporary realism.

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439 Ibid., 19.
443 Ibid.
Parks’s Poeticized Variation of Black Vernacular

Far more than Parks simply creating a contemporary, realistic and/or naturalistic play about two brothers, she brought to the project of *Topdog/Underdog* her overarching vision, which in recent decades has “thrown wide the doors of traditional psychological realism to let in an expansive vision of American history, geography, and speech.” Each of these areas is an important site of exploration for the playwright, but I will start with the one that received the most praise in this production – her use and transformation of speech. Many critics noted that “this is hardly a flawless dramatic work,” citing issues ranging from its languid structure to its unmotivated ending; nevertheless, the writing retained a “vitality, freshness, and gritty lyricism” that transcended its flaws. Charles Isherwood wrote that Parks “may currently be more skilled as poet than playwright, but her language, as interpreted by this pair of strutting Stradivarii, makes intoxicating music here.” This quote emphasized that the “music” of the play emanated from a combination of the language written by Parks and its expression via the actors’ primary instruments of body and voice. Actor Don Cheadle explained that what excited him about the project was “the language, which seems naturalistic but is not at all. The tension between what’s real and what’s poetry makes for a more intricate dance than I’ve been involved in in a long time.”

There is no clean line dividing the poetry from the “real” language in this play. The language written for the characters by Parks will always carry aspects of both. Parks has said, “I’m really much more interested in characters than I am in language. Language is just

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446 Ibid.
447 Shewey, “This Time the Shock,” AR4.
something that comes out of the people.” In this case (and in many cases of Parks’s writing) the language issuing from the characters is a variation on black vernacular. There is long history of the use of black dialect in theatre. Parks’s use of black vernacular comprises a far different mission from that of minstrelsy or August Wilson. I would argue that, like Ebonics in the 1990s, Parks is attempting to legitimize the use of black vernacular and show how it can be a powerful tool.

In the 1990s there was a movement in the Oakland, California, Public School system to have “Ebonics,” also known as Black English or dialect and/or Africanized English, used as the language of education. It was hoped that if the students had the educational content taught in a language that they used – and were able to comment on it (and receive high grades) in the language that they used – that more students would stay in school and graduate. A very controversial debate ensued, with the organization “Atlanta’s Black Professionals” waging an advertising campaign to illustrate their view – which was that changing from Standard English to Ebonics would effectively incapacitate students. In their eyes, shifting to Ebonics would handicap students’ attempts to compete in society at large and to get jobs in the wider economy. It would also mean that those literate only in Ebonics would lose two key abilities that are used in civil rights struggles – the ability to write an argument and the ability to speak so that people would listen to and be motivated to take action in relation to the message. The advertisement run in newspapers by Atlanta’s Black Professionals was dramatic – the photo was of a well-dressed black man seen only from the back. The caption reads, “I Has a Dream.” Of course the connection one immediately makes is to Martin Luther King, Jr. (often photographed dressed in

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a suit) and his iconic speech, “I Have a Dream.” The implication is that if King spoke in Ebonics, instead of Standard English, he would not have been listened to, followed, or revered in the same way as he was based on the combination of his powerful oratory and his ability to craft an argument within a speech. There is a class element to this argument, as well as a racial one, which surfaces with the issue of whether or not Dr. King was too bourgeois to really understand the needs of all the people. Certainly King’s personal perspective was primarily that of a middle-class man who possessed a strong education, receiving a B.A. from Morehouse College, a B.D. from Crozer Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from Boston University. His class status did not preclude his ability to see the suffering of other people, even – or perhaps especially so – people who were poorer or less-educated than he. The language King spoke was able to be understood by the majority of Americans of all races, and especially by those in power in the United States.

Parks, through her specific use of black vernacular (which she sees as “a sort of borrowing, like I borrow from everybody”\textsuperscript{450}), makes the point that the language spoken by those who have been marginalized through racism, poverty, and class oppression can also be very powerful. Booth and Lincoln may share the same parentage (or perhaps they do not, as Lincoln seems to question at one point in the play when he asks, “I know we brothers, but is we really brothers, you know, blood brothers or not, you and me, whatduhyathink?”\textsuperscript{451}) but they do not share the same education level. It is not just “choice” that keeps Booth jobless, but also the fact that he cut school consistently and never received his high school diploma. Lincoln stayed in school, so that he is capable of at least functioning in the “legitimate” workplace and his

\textsuperscript{450} Savran, \textit{The Playwright’s Voice}, 156.
vocabulary reflects that. Parks has crafted vernacular that deviates from Standard English and therefore reflects these characters’ disparate education levels (or lack thereof) and also reflects their surrounding environment, where this language is presumably spoken and heard on a daily basis.\(^{452}\) And yet, this language is not heard on a daily basis anywhere, other than the stage. Whereas August Wilson was known for utilizing “real” black dialect in his plays that came straight from his memory and experiences in Philadelphia, Suzan-Lori Parks neither borrows from memory nor environment. She writes what sounds like familiar “street talk” but is not. She is inventing a language that is poetic and dramatic and seemingly familiar all at once. Topdog/Underdog is not her first invention and/or manipulation of language. The most extreme example is “Talk” – the language that she invented for Fucking A, which utilized a translation device in production so that the audience could understand what the characters were actually saying. Parks does not create an entirely new language for the characters in Topdog/Underdog, but she does continue her use of creating an alternate form of spelling for everyday words, such as “thuh” for “the.” This use of orthography helps to define and, ultimately legitimize her poeticized black dialect.\(^{453}\) One way Parks extended an air of legitimacy to it in the beginning was by explaining her methods in the essay “from elements of style.” It is no coincidence that its title is the same as that of one of the most famous and highly utilized books on grammar and punctuation in the United States, Strunk and White’s, Elements of Style.\(^{454}\) Even though Ebonics never achieved widespread use because of the controversy surrounding its efficacy and legitimacy, Parks’s poetic language has reached a high level of legitimacy in art. The proof of

\(^{452}\) The creation of a poetic black vernacular is just one of the many manipulations of language that Parks performs, but one that is particularly pertinent to the investigation of these characters, Lincoln and Booth.

\(^{453}\) Thank you to David Savran for pointing out her use of orthography to me.

her legitimacy in art is as evidenced by the critical reception of her works and the numerous awards she has won, including the Macarthur Fellowship (also known as the “genius grant”). By awarding *Topdog/Underdog* the Pulitzer Prize, the Board has extended the artistic importance of this type of poetic writing into a larger cultural arena, thereby granting Parks and her literary experiments in language even greater cultural importance.

**Amazing Grace: Key to Salvation or Tool for Oppression?**

Using a woman who never appears on stage allows Suzan-Lori Parks another opportunity for “sleight-of-hand” in the crafting of this play and its characters. Because the character of Grace is never seen, she is able to become symbolic of “woman” and her gendered role in this racist and sexist environment. The two brothers refer to Booth’s girlfriend Grace as “Amazing Grace.” This is because, according to Booth, she is sexually amazing, but it also seems to imply that Grace is the key to Booth’s salvation. Almost hypnotically, the playwright allows the repetition of the phrase three times, “Amazing Grace,” to allow it to work subconsciously on the audience’s psyche. For many people, the phrase immediately recalls in one’s mind the iconic Christian hymn written by John Newton. Newton had been a sailor and later a captain working in the African slave trade who – after a particularly close brush with death aboard ship – remembered crying out to God during a terrible storm. “Amazing Grace” has been described as Newton’s autobiography in verse because even though he continued in the slave trade after surviving that close call, later he looked back on that moment as a catalyst for his eventual

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455 I disagree with Maley when he claims that Booth “invents Grace, a sexual conquest.” Patrick Maley, “What Is and What Aint,” 192. Booth does continue to revise his story of his interactions with Grace, but this does not disprove her existence. Other scholars may be undecided, such as LeMahieiu who described her as “his (real or imagined) girlfriend Grace.” Michael LeMahieiu, “The Theater of Hustle and the Hustle of Theater: Play, Player, and Played in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog*,” *African American Review* 45, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring/Summer 2012): 38.
spiritual conversion. Newton had difficulty gaining sponsorship to become a clergyman, but did ultimately achieve this end when the Earl of Dartmouth sponsored him for ordination with the Bishop of Lincoln after hearing about his experiences in the slave trade and subsequent conversion.456 While serving as curate at Olney, Buckinghamshire, in 1764, Newton wrote a number of hymns with William Cowper, published anonymously as the _Olney Hymns_.457 Written for use in a prayer meeting, "1 Chronicles 17:16–17, Faith's Review and Expectation" was the original title of the poem that contains the words that eventually became known as _Amazing Grace_.458

For Protestant believers, the hymn evokes a deeply imbedded desire for salvation, an acknowledgement that – according to the Scriptures – Christians are all wretched sinners and that forgiveness and salvation are possible only through belief in God. By having Lincoln and Booth both refer to Grace as “Amazing Grace,” I argue that Parks is initially equating Grace with one who holds the potential for granting salvation to Booth, a man who has sinned by stealing and committing adultery. And neither of these offenses were one-time things. In her review of the play Una Chaudhuri wrote that Booth had “virtually supernatural skill as a shoplifter.”459 And according to Charles Isherwood, “Booth’s funky ballet of disrobing, as he slowly sheds two entire suits of clothing he’s shoplifted, is a showstopper.”460 On the other hand, Grace has a job and she is a nice woman. Not only might she civilize him and his behavior, but she may also

459 Chaudhuri, “*Topdog/Underdog,*” 290.
460 Isherwood, “*Topdog/Underdog,*” 15.
forgive him. Instead of God being the one to grant forgiveness, Booth continually seeks his forgiveness from Grace. He wants to be forgiven for all the times he has cheated on her. He lies and says that she has forgiven him, when in reality she does not forgive him and will not take him back. Before the audience realizes Grace’s rejection of Booth, we learn that she has had a somewhat civilizing influence on him. As he waits for their date, he is wearing a nice suit and setting the table with “a lovely table cloth and there are nice plates, silverware, champagne glasses and candles.” Unfortunately, this civilized appearance is achieved only through criminal activities. There are two big problems: 1) Everything – silverware, suit and all – has been “boosted” or stolen by Booth; 2) Grace never shows up for this “big date” that is meant to lead to their reconciliation. It could be assumed that Grace has rejected the subservient status inherent in being with Booth, as evidenced by the fact that he would steal a ring that is half a size too small for her – on purpose – so she “can’t just take it off on a whim, like she did the last one I gave her.” Booth appears to admire Grace, describing her as “real different from them fly-by-night gals I was making do with.” He tells Lincoln that she is in school studying cosmetology and making something of herself. On the other hand, he highly sexualizes her, lying to Booth by saying she “comes to the door wearing nothing but her little nightie, eats up the food I’d brought like there was no tomorrow and then goes and eats on me.” Booth knows that both of these qualities – her drive to make something of her life and her red hot sexuality – will impress Lincoln equally. He must outdo Lincoln and she becomes a tool for that purpose. In the script, Parks has led the audience to believe that if Booth remains with Grace, then he will become a better man. He has even given Grace a ring. But here is where Parks turns over a different card.

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462 Ibid., 8.
463 Ibid., 41.
464 Ibid., 38.
than the one that is expected, because the ring is not a symbol of commitment, but one of possession. And instead of being a key to salvation, Grace is a commodity and she is being used sexually by Booth as a tool of oppression. Booth is desperate to hold on to his vision of himself as a man. Even though he is unable to win Grace back, he is still pretending to Lincoln that she is going to come back to him. That she is desperate to be back with him. Booth wants Lincoln to believe that Grace is his once again, in order to show that he is better than his brother and more of a man. In this same way Booth used Lincoln’s own wife against him.

Booth, more so than Lincoln, “consistently equates sexual virility and a particular construction of black masculinity with being the topdog.”\textsuperscript{465} Adultery had become imprinted upon both brothers. Lincoln began having sex with one of his father’s mistresses, who “liked me, so I would do her after he’d done her.”\textsuperscript{466} He couldn’t steal his father’s lover openly, so the father would “be laying there, spent and sleeping and snoring and her and me would be sneaking it.”\textsuperscript{467} And although Lincoln was married to Cookie, Booth says, “but you had other women on the side” and Lincoln acknowledges this fact.\textsuperscript{468} Booth confesses to being consistently unfaithful to his girlfriend Grace, when he claims that she has forgiven him for “all the shit I put her through: she wiped it clean,” including “the women I saw while I was seeing her.”\textsuperscript{469} This adulterous behavior appears to be accepted by both men, even when it is used against the other. It is revealed that Booth slept with Lincoln’s wife Cookie, while they were still married: “And the bad part of me took her clothing off and carried her into thuh bed and had her, Link, yr

\textsuperscript{465} LeMahieu, “The Theater of Hustle and the Hustle of Theater,” 38.
\textsuperscript{466} Parks, \textit{Topdog/Underdog}, 89.
\textsuperscript{467} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{468} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{469} Ibid., 37.
This fact, which is verbally brushed off by Lincoln with the phrase, “I used to think about her all thuh time but I dont think about her no more,” actually smolders inside of him. Both men, Lincoln and Booth, respond negatively to the rejection received from the women in their lives. I would argue that Lincoln’s knowledge that his brother betrayed him by having sex with his wife contributes to Lincoln wanting to take what is most important to Booth – his inheritance money. It is revealed at the end of the play that Booth has responded violently to Grace’s rejection.

BOOTH: Popped her good. Twice. 3 times. Whatever.

(Rest)

She aint dead.

(Rest)

She weren’t wearing my ring I gived her. Said it was too small. Fuck that. Said it hurt her. Fuck that. Said she was into bigger things. Fuck that. Shes alive not to worry, she aint going out that easy, shes alive shes –.

LINCOLN: Dead. Shes –

BOOTH: Dead.472

Parks’s language is repeated and revised again in this section, which runs in “threes.” Booth revised his story from shooting Grace twice to three times and from she “aint dead” to “dead”

470 Ibid., 92.
471 Ibid.
472 Ibid., 107.
with the word dead being repeated three times between the brothers. Grace’s rejection of Booth has cost her life. The playwright has put forth the possibility of woman’s role as civilizing influence and savior for man, but ultimately provides a homicidal portrait that reveals the inherent sexism in society and the pervasive use of the sexual conquest of women as a show of male dominance.

Two Brothers Metaphorically Represent the Confederacy and the Union

Deborah Geis wrote that the characters of “Booth and Lincoln fit on a continuum that merges the fictional, the mythical, the historical, and the psychological, and that includes the Foundling Father from her related America Play.” Although Suzan-Lori Parks refuses to admit to writing anything other than a simple play about two brothers, this play contains multiple metaphorical layers. Although the scholarly researcher begins working in layers, as one would on an archaeological dig, the close textual readings reveal connections that are more circular than expected. The text appears to contain simultaneous parallel connections between Booth and Lincoln, President Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth, and John Wilkes Booth and his brother Edwin Booth, which circles the researcher/excavator back to the relationship between brothers Lincoln and Booth once again.

As in her earlier plays, there is a distinct debunking of the nuclear family myth. In the case of Parks’s Topdog/Underdog, the nuclear family unit has bilaterally divided in an eerie parallel of the secession of the Confederate states from the Union just before the Civil War. When the curtain rises on Topdog/Underdog, the family (father, mother, and two sons) is already broken apart, although the full extent of what happened is slowly revealed throughout the play.

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473 Geis, Suzan-Lori Parks, 18-19.
The father and mother had been cheating on one another, and both ended up leaving the family. Booth says to Lincoln, “I didn’t mind them leaving because you was there.” The bond between the brothers is very strong, although they have different personalities and different allegiances. The issue of adultery ends up aligning Booth with the mother and Lincoln with the father.

The mother has had a “Thursday” lover, as discovered by Booth, when he skips school one day and decides to go home and pretend he is sick. He catches them in the act of having sex, “They both had all they clothes on like they was about to do something like go out dancing cause they was dressed to thuh 9s but at thuh last minute his pants had fallen down and her dress had flown up and theyd ended up doing something else.” Every Thursday Booth sneaks back and sure enough, “he was her Thursday man.”

Thursday man is there consistently. One day the mother complains to her lover that “thered been some kind of problem some kind of mistake had been made some kind of mistake that needed cleaning up and she was asking Mr. Thursday for some money to take care of it.” This sentence is one of many examples of “Rep & Rev” that Parks incorporates throughout this play (and her work in general). Parks explains, in detail, her ideas surrounding the use of “repetition and revision” in her essay “from elements of style.” She describes how the repetition of words (in poetry it is labeled “incremental refrain”) creates a “weight and a rhythm.” In this case, the gravity of the mother’s unplanned, adulterous pregnancy is emphasized by the repetition and variation of refrains “some kind of problem” and

474 Parks, Topdog/Underdog, 69.
475 Ibid., 99.
476 Ibid.
477 Ibid.
479 Ibid., 9.
“some kind of mistake.” Thursday man says, “I ain’t made of money.” Booth describes Thursday man as “putting his foot down.” Two months later, Booth is not sure if she aborted the baby or “maybe she’d stuffed it along with all her other things in them plastic bags” – even though she has perfectly good suitcases – she joins her lover who has been sitting in the car with the engine running. Booth felt that this time the mother had expected to get caught, because she was ready with his “payoff” or “inheritance” of “5 hundred-dollar bills rolled up and tied up tight in one of her nylon stockings.” Even though he is consistently broke, years later Booth still retains possession of this money left to him by his mother. According to Jochen Achilles, “the silk stocking is not a container of money for him but the embodiment of the mother’s ambivalent mystery.” Although Achilles is incorrect about the stocking being made from luxurious silk – it is nylon – it does represent Booth’s mother and keeping the stocking (and money) allows him to keep alive his connection to her.

Lincoln is aligned with the father, who “had side shit going on too.” The father has often taken him along when he went to visit women and there was definitely “more than one.” Most of the time Lincoln describes being relegated to waiting for his father on the porch, in the lobby, or in the car, but “sometimes he’d let me watch.” Both brothers have seen their parents have sex with people who were not their spouses, leaving a lasting impression of marriage as a con, where the participants only pretend to be faithful and committed to one another and the

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480 Parks, Topdog/Underdog, 99.
481 Ibid., 100.
482 Ibid.
483 Ibid., 68.
485 Parks, Topdog/Underdog, 88.
486 Ibid.
487 Ibid.
family. Two years after the mother left, Lincoln says the father “slips me 10 fifties in a clean handkerchief.”

Both brothers received “an inheritance” of five hundred dollars cash, each from a different parent, upon that parent’s departure from the family. The brothers’ bond grew tighter after their parents abandoned them. As Booth says, “It was you and me against the world, Link.”

Nevertheless, their allegiances remain divided with the specter of their parents’ conspiracy, even as the brothers attempt to pool their resources and show familial solidarity.

A dysfunctional family can be a microcosm of a dysfunctional nation. The Report of the Pulitzer Nominating Jury in Drama, presumably compiled by Chair Ben Brantley, states that this “exhilarating tale of two combative brothers finds the state of a nation in the state of one family.”

This nation – the United States of America – continues to be a dream. It is a physical reality, because there has been no secession since before the Civil War; however, there continues to be social, political, and religious division among the people. Margo Jefferson aptly described Parks’s characters of Lincoln and Booth: “Like the South and the North, they are divided brothers; like Lincoln and Booth, they are actors in a theater of war.”

Topdog/Underdog reenacts one of our nation’s most mournful moments – the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln – in order to remind us that we are still suffering as a divided people. Race divides us, class divides us, and gender divides us. According to the character of the older brother Lincoln, the father named them after President Lincoln and his assassin Booth as a joke. Parks explains the origins of Topdog/Underdog and the characters’ names to Shewey:

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488 Ibid., 69.
489 Ibid.
490 Fischer and Fischer, eds., Chronicle of the Pulitzer Prizes, 410. Jury members include: Ben Brantley (Chair), Robert Brustein, Betty Corwin, Robert Hurwitt, and Ed Siegel.
I was thinking about “The America Play” one day in 1999, she said, and I thought, “Oh, man, I should just – that’d be cool, two brothers, Lincoln and Booth.” Ha, ha, ha, it’s funny. To me it’s funny.⁴⁹²

The flippant provenance of the characters’ names aside, they provide the foundation for the arguments that Parks makes concerning the United States’s current condition as a racist society. Brantley interprets Topdog/Underdog as “a variation of sorts on the story of Cain and Abel, a tale that has traditionally served American artists well in exploring the divided nature of their country, from John Steinbeck’s ‘East of Eden’ to Sam Shepard’s ‘True West.’”⁴⁹³ Chaudhuri described True West and Topdog/Underdog as two works that explore “masculine identity as a function of cultural mythology.”⁴⁹⁴ Whereas Shepard’s brothers “content with an overdetermined national geography, Parks’s brothers are shaped by a radically racialized history.”⁴⁹⁵ Lincoln and Booth come from a dysfunctional family that has literally split in two and parallels the secession of the Confederate states from the Union just before the Civil War. The dysfunction of the nation at that time is embodied in the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln by Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth. And although Parks never mentions the relationship between this infamous assassin and his famous brother, Edwin, the dysfunction of the nation can also be seen reflected in their relationship, with the older brother, Edwin, a Union supporter and the younger brother John, a Confederate sympathizer and spy.⁴⁹⁶ Sibling

⁴⁹² Don Shewey, “This Time the Shock,” AR4.
⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.
⁴⁹⁶ Nora Titone, My Thoughts Be Bloody: The Bitter Rivalry that Led to the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln (New York: Free Press, 2011). Using over one hundred years of Booth family papers, Titone examines the relationship between brothers Edwin and John, as well as the entire family dynamic in this narrative history.
rivalry is typical and expected, but it reaches the level of kill or be killed in the context of “brother against brother” during the Civil War. Both of these Civil War era brothers (as well as a third, lesser known brother, Junius, Jr.) were actors like their father, but younger John Wilkes did not have the studied technique contemporary witnesses observed in his more famous older brother, Edwin, who was dedicated to the craft of acting. Instead, John Wilkes was known for his highly physical and acrobatic style as an actor and appealed to audiences with his romantic personal attraction. Parallel differences exist between Parks’s older brother Lincoln – who relies on hard study and technique to become a master at three-card monte – and younger brother Booth, who relies on physical prowess and animal magnetism in the areas of shoplifting and womanizing.

In order to add another layer of meaning, Suzan-Lori Parks turns the assassination of Lincoln by Booth into a metatheatrical event, a participatory reenactment of the assassination of Lincoln, as played by her drama’s antagonist Lincoln – in whiteface. Brustein sees the whiteface as “reversing the conventions of the minstrel show” and also as “underlining the African American ambivalence toward the man who both freed the slaves and, in the minds of some, patronized them.” Topdog/Underdog distinctly “extends the ambiguous fascination with the Great Emancipator that Parks first displayed in The America Play in 1993.” Similar to The America Play, customers in the arcade where Lincoln works can pay to be Booth and shoot the

497 A famous example is that of James Barbour Terrill, who graduated from Virginia Military Institute and served as an officer in the Confederate army and his brother, William Rufus Terrill, a graduate of West Point who served in the Union army. Virginia Military Institute Archives, http://www.vmi.edu/archives.aspx?id=5657 (accessed 19 July 2012).
500 Ibid.
President. Dawkins explains how this particular usage of “The playwright’s commitment to what she calls ‘Rep & Rev’ (repetition and revision) invites us to consider her use of this technique intertextually (as well as intratextually), and thus interpret the black Lincoln impersonator in Topdog/Underdog as a revision of her earlier version – one that both alters and adds new symbolic resonances to the original character in The America Play.”

Creating what Parks describes as a “drama of accumulation” the use/reuse of the metatheatrical assassination that Lincoln performs for his work enables the playwright to do three things: 1) Make reference to The America Play; 2) Comment on her characters’ current environment; 3) Reference the historical assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. Parks achieves a drama of accumulation, thereby constantly reminding us that the past is always present – whether consciously or subconsciously, literally or figuratively – in our bodies and our minds. We may make attempts to escape the past, or erase the past, but the trauma of the past marks the soul and informs our present and future actions. By having Lincoln posing as President Lincoln and allowing all manner of persons to come into the arcade and repeatedly shoot and kill his character, Parks has set up a situation in which southern, Confederate revenge is repeatedly taken out on the black body.

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501 The action is only spoken of in Topdog/Underdog, whereas it takes place on stage in The America Play. Parks, The America Play, 164-165.
503 Parks, “From Elements of Style,” 9.
504 In the printed edition Parks does not specify a year in which the drama takes place. I presumed it was the 1990s; Pochoda wrote that it was “probably in the 1960s.” Pochoda, “I See Thuh Black Card,” 36.
Three-Card Monte: A Metaphorical Representation of the Racist United States of America

Parks’s characters of Lincoln and Booth can be seen as living in a border territory, not between Northern and Southern states, but an undefined urban area where the lack of employment opportunities appears to split the population between law-abiding citizens and criminals. Employment opportunities are limited, in Lincoln’s case encompassing a pool of entrepreneurial criminal activities versus working for someone else in a white-owned and controlled business that may be “legal” in the eyes of the law, but is unequal in its methods of compensation due to racist practices. When Lincoln dealt three-card monte on the streets, he was engaging in a criminal activity, similar to Booth’s shoplifting. But when one of the card crew members, Lonny, is shot to death, Lincoln decides to give up the game.\(^{505}\) This is because Lincoln sees his own impending death from running the scam, “something inside telling me – ”.\(^{506}\) When Booth tries to pull him into a card game, such as poker, rummy, or even solitaire, he says repeatedly, “I dont touch thuh cards.”\(^{507}\) Lincoln could be seen as the “big brother” setting the example for the little brother of being a man who does honest work. But little brother Booth does not see Lincoln’s choosing a legitimate job for a white employer as a model he would wish to emulate, but as another instance of Lincoln being “stepped on” by society. As Booth says, “Thuh world puts its foot in yr face and you dont move. You tell thuh world tuh keep on stepping.”\(^{508}\) They choose sides over this issue; it is a matter of pride and personal identity. Lincoln says that there is “more to life than cheating some idiot out of his paycheck or his life

\(^{505}\) Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 54.
\(^{506}\) Ibid., 55.
\(^{507}\) Ibid., 14-15.
\(^{508}\) Ibid., 81.
Booth experiences Lincoln’s abandoning of the game as a personal affront, because Lincoln refuses to share with him all the secrets of the three-card monte con:

Here I am interested in an economic opportunity, willing to work hard, willing to take risks and all you can say you shiteating motherfucking pathetic limpdick uncle tom, all you can tell me is how you dont do no more what I be wanting to do. Here I am trying to earn a living and you standing in my way. YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK.\textsuperscript{510}

One of Parks’s morals of this story is that “there is no winning.” She uses the game of three-card monte as a metaphor for the existence of these characters. Just as monte is a rigged game, in which the unknowing participant – the mark – feels he has a chance, but really is only allowed to win when the dealer chooses, so go the lives of Lincoln and Booth. Booth believes that Lincoln is taken in by the con of a legitimate job, even though the game – in this case the job – is rigged so that he can never win. Lincoln is constantly at the mercy of his employer. The first and most dramatic way that the job is “rigged” is that Lincoln is forced to accept a wage that is less than a white worker would receive:

LINCOLN: And as they offered me thuh job, saying of course I would have to wear a little makeup and accept less than what they would offer a – another guy –

BOOTH: Go on, say it. “White.” Theyd pay you less than theyd pay a white guy.\textsuperscript{511}

\textsuperscript{509} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{510} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{511} Ibid., 27.
Although this is not slavery because Lincoln is not forced to work for this man, it is the exploitation of the black body for the financial gain of whites. Lincoln is not enslaved, but he has limited choices for employment, based on his skin color, in combination with his education level, so this business “owner” is able to take advantage of him. Fraser describes Lincoln and Booth as “emasculated men who have inherited powerlessness.” Instead of being able to escape a history of exploitation and oppression, they are trapped within a system that revises and essentially repeats their repression via economic factors. Saal and Poole claim that “Besides rendering a troubled view of American interethnic history and the marginalization of black men,” Parks, “also reveals the hidden strategic maps of virtuality and reality, order and contingency, freedom and predetermination that underwrite, similar to a three-card monte, finance capitalism.”

In 2010 (two years after the financial market crash of 2008) many citizens of all nations and races might have agreed that “By now, we may all feel involved in a global, both digital and real, three-card monte con, which leads everybody on invisible strings and involves financial centers, stock markets, and governments in the reproduction of a strategic map, no longer either attributable to, or transparent for, identifiable individuals and groups.” Although globally applicable at that point, Larson points out how this state of affairs has been an ongoing reality for Black America when she claims that “White America, the play implies is playing with a stacked deck, especially economically.” It is this pervasively unfair atmosphere that makes

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513 Ilka Saal and Ralph J. Poole, “Enterprise and Drama: Performing Capital on the American Stage,” South Atlantic Review 75, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 8.
Booth see Lincoln’s working the “honest” job at the arcade – where he makes less than a white man would have in his position – as “Uncle Tom” behavior. Once again Parks brings us back to earlier American history, this time to the fictional title character in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Booth is implying that Lincoln, like Uncle Tom in the book, is acting like a dutiful, long-suffering servant to his white master – the arcade owner. Lincoln claims, “It’s a living.” Booth replies, “But you aint living.” And Lincoln says, “I’m alive aint I?” Lincoln has chosen survival by accepting this low-wage job instead of the con because he was certain that the card hustle would lead to his death. When Lincoln is fired from the arcade, in a moment reminiscent of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s conclusion to his “I Have a Dream” speech, Booth says, “Yr free at last!” LeMahieu argued that “Lincoln’s pretense of reluctance was only part of his act, which claims Booth as its next, and ultimately its last victim.” If the reluctance LeMahieu refers to is in relation to Lincoln’s return to the con in general (as opposed to possible feigned reluctance in playing against brother), then I would have to disagree. This is because one must take into account the fact that *Topdog/Underdog* is rooted first and foremost in the economic and political reality shaping their lives – in other words, the postmodernity of Lincoln’s position is a

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516 The story was originally published in installments in an abolitionist journal titled the *National Era* in Washington, D.C. There is an “anecdote about Lincoln’s remark upon meeting Mrs. Stowe: ‘So this is the little lady who made this big war.’” Scholars and historians have seriously questioned the remark, but one cannot question that many, many people read this book. And this is a book which, according to Stowe’s sister-in-law, was written to “make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is.” John William Ward, afterword to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (New York: New American Library, 1981).
518 Ibid., 61.
result of the very real material, economic conditions in which he lives." Lincoln wants, at all costs, to avoid crossing back over into the territory of entrepreneurial criminal activity, but being replaced by a wax dummy has emasculated him further and left him economically vulnerable. It is as if Lincoln – both the President and his current day stand-in Lincoln – will be perpetually executed in effigy. Although he has misgivings, circumstances force Lincoln to face his fears of death and return to dealing three-card monte.

**Realism and Allegory Collide in a Controversial Ending**

Brantley wrote that “In a sense the whole play is about life as a series of theatrical postures: some voluntary, some reflexive and some imposed by centuries of history.” These postures all collide in the final showdown between Booth and Lincoln. The ending of Parks’s play has been the source of conflicted opinions among scholars and critics. Margo Jefferson explained:

> When I say the ending was strong but disappointing I mean that, for me, it didn’t fully live out the complexity of what had gone before. I also mean it when I say this is a minor point in a play with all the fun and fury of “Topdog/Underdog,” and from a playwright – Ms. Parks – who is so gifted and so blessedly idiosyncratic.

The ending appeared, at first, to be a continuation of the same banter and jockeying for position that had taken place throughout the play. Isherwood wrote, and I agree with his assessment, that

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521 Tucker-Abramson wrote that Parks, through Booth and Lincoln’s employment troubles, “gives us a powerful representation of the American de-industrialized worker.” Ibid., 80-81.
“the writing never brings into focus the irrational extremity of Booth’s frustration at his brother or his sometime girlfriend, or the despair that sends Lincoln back to the scam.” Indeed both men seem to be “having a fine old time until, instantly, they’re not.” Lincoln and Booth have fought before and as Parks noted, “They switch constantly. They’re always trying to be the dominant person in the room. They always ask, “Who the man? Who the man? I’m the man now! No, I’m the man!” It is difficult to determine why this last confrontation escalated to murder. And Grace’s murder, although not entirely unexpected, is also a surprise. I agree with Isherwood and others that “the play’s tragic climax feels superimposed.” Brustein describes it as “a climax that does not seem sufficiently prepared for or realistically motivated.” Brantley described it as “thematically apt but emotionally unsatisfying.” Like Jefferson, he emphasizes the positive: “Nonetheless, you’ll probably still feel like raising a glass of the expensive (stolen) Champagne that the brothers share in a fleeting moment of domestic harmony.”

If the play had simply been written in the realistic genre, then this dramaturgically unmotivated ending would likely have marred the play irrevocably. But the play is not a realistic play about two contemporary brothers – it is a poetic allegory. And this allegory must end with Lincoln’s death – whether motivated or not. Charles Isherwood wrote that it could be argued that the brothers could no sooner escape their family history “and the economic circumstances they were born into” than “President Lincoln could avoid his fatal bullet.” Although unrealistically motivated, the ending allows the audience to witness a parallel moment in history, with Booth

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525 Ibid.
530 Ibid.
surprising Lincoln from behind, ready to murder him, just as the historical Booth snuck up on the President from behind. Even though Lincoln tries to give it back several times, Booth will not accept the stocking/money. Determined to show Lincoln that he is more ruthless, he forces Lincoln to open it. The stage directions read:

Lincoln brings the knife down to cut the stocking. In a flash, Booth grabs Lincoln from behind. He pulls his gun and thrusts it into the left side of Lincoln’s neck. They stop there poised.\textsuperscript{532}

Although eye-witness accounts do not quote President Lincoln as saying anything or even knowing that he was about to be shot, Parks’s Lincoln utters one word, “Dont.”\textsuperscript{533} The playwright uses one single word to punctuate Lincoln’s last protest, setting it apart from all of the words that have come before. The stage directions continue: “Booth shoots Lincoln. Lincoln slumps forward, falling out of his chair and onto the floor.”\textsuperscript{534} The audience has seen Lincoln do this several times in the apartment, while practicing alone and with Booth. The action has been repeated once again and it is also revised, because this time the shooting is real. There is a sense that history – in the present – continues repeating itself over and over and over. Parks’s Lincoln, like President Lincoln, has been shot and killed. Anger and revenge have taken their toll on another black body. When Booth kills his brother, at first he is triumphant, but during the last moment of the play Parks allows the audience to feel Booth’s pain and remorse. He releases his hold on the money and instead cradles Lincoln’s body in his arms, sobbing. His last vocal outburst is an inarticulate visceral howl: “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” The

\textsuperscript{532} Parks, \textit{Topdog/Underdog}, 108.
\textsuperscript{533} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{534} Ibid.
brothers have failed at their “quietly desperate attempts to outrun the legacies of their personal history”\textsuperscript{535} and their national history.

**A View of Racism Holding No Hope for Healing of Wounds – Familial or National**

Although Parks describes the play as “about family wounds and healing,”\textsuperscript{536} there is very little healing of the accumulated trauma (decades and even centuries worth) that these brothers have endured. As Achilles noted: “Whereas through its emphasis on resurrection as well as victimization and death *The America Play* ends on a more hopeful note with regard to the chance for escape from historical patterns of ongoing violence, *Topdog/Underdog* leaves readers and audiences with a pungent sense of the unavoidability of such patterns.”\textsuperscript{537} Actor Jeffrey Wright, who played Lincoln, recalled Parks talking about “an existential question” wherein, at the end of the play “is their destiny fulfilled, or were they supposed to do something different and they missed?”\textsuperscript{538} Yes, as Brantley wrote, “Like ‘Invisible Man,’ Ralph Ellison’s landmark novel of 1952, ‘Topdog/Underdog’ considers nothing less than the existential traps of being African-American and male in the United States, the masks that wear the men as well as vice versa.”\textsuperscript{539} Parks has crafted a drama that brutally reflects the lives of two African-American men who are victims and perpetrators of our extremely inequitable, brutally violent, racist, classist, and misogynistic society. Were they supposed to do something different and they missed? Perhaps they were. But, as Tucker-Abramson wrote, “*Topdog/Underdog* is both a social drama confronting the issues of racism and classism in modern America, and a psychodrama in its focus

\textsuperscript{535} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{536} This program note is quoted in: Fraser, “Messages in the Bottle,” 118; and Brustein, “A Homeboy Godot,” 25.
\textsuperscript{537} Achilles, “Postmodern Aesthetics and Postindustrial Economics,” 22.
\textsuperscript{538} Shewey, “This Time the Shock,” AR4.
\textsuperscript{539} Brantley, “There’s Nothing To Worry About,” E1.
on the individual unravelling of Lincoln and Booth as well as of their relationship.”\textsuperscript{540} The men were responsible for their actions, but the implication is that the nation was responsible too. Suzan-Lori Parks may well be asking if we – the United States of America – were supposed to do something different and we missed? The Civil War is over, the United States underwent Reconstruction, and civil rights were fought for and legally granted. But we are still suffering as a divided people. Race divides us, class divides us, and gender divides us. Like other Pulitzer Prize-winning authors in drama, Suzan-Lori Parks crafted a drama that reflects our continued need to work on important social issues – the pursuit of liberty and equal justice for all. At the end of \textit{Topdog/Underdog} the unspoken question remains, “where do we go from here?”

\textbf{Ruined by Lynn Nottage}

Bold experimentation, at least of the theatrical sort, is not the forte of \textit{Ruined}, just as it is not the preferred mode for Pulitzer Prize-winning plays. Ben Brantley described the play as “a comfortable, old-fashioned drama about an uncomfortable of-the-moment subject.”\textsuperscript{541} What made this play Pulitzer-worthy material (besides its structure) was its willingness to tackle an important social topic – one that was definitely “of-the-moment” and also very uncomfortable – the use of sexual violence against women as a weapon of war. The guidelines of the Pulitzer Prize state that the Pulitzer is meant to be given to an American playwright for a play reflecting the American experience. In this case, the playwright is American – a Brooklyn native – but the subject is not American. In fact, there is not even one American character in this play. David Cote described the play as “the kind of new play we desperately need: well-informed and

\textsuperscript{540} Tucker-Abramson, “The Money Shot,” 78.  
unafraid of the world’s brutalities.” The civil war in the Congo during the early part of the twenty-first century is the backdrop for Nottage’s play. This is certainly a departure for the prize, one that was enabled, at least partially, by the election of a U.S. president who is truly first generation “African-American,” having been born in the United States to a white, U.S. mother and a black, Kenyan father. On Change.gov, the website for the Office of the President-elect Barack Obama, it stated that the then new administration would rebuild U.S. alliances: “Now is the time for a new era of international cooperation that strengthens old partnerships and builds new ones to confront the common challenges of the 21st century – terrorism and nuclear weapons; climate change and poverty; genocide and disease.” Cote wrote that “one thing President Barack Obama’s administration promises is a United States that is less insular and more connected to the world.” He felt that we “could use that in our theater, overly reliant on suburbs and dysfunctional middle-class families.” The nominating jury for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama appeared to have felt that way too, as evidenced by their description of Nottage’s play as “Keenly American in spirit and inquiry if not in setting, it resonates powerfully in an

545 Ibid. The prize was awarded the previous year (2008) to August: Osage County by Tracy Letts, featuring a dysfunctional, American, middle-class family. The following year (2010) it was awarded to a musical, Next to Normal, music by Tom Kitt, book and lyrics by Brian Yorkey, featuring a suburban American family dealing with mental illness.
increasingly international world.\textsuperscript{546} Their awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to \textit{Ruined} promotes a more global view on the American stage, and hopefully, in the culture at large.

“Lynn Nottage takes on one of playwriting’s toughest challenges – the dramatization of distant, gruesome political realities – in her elegant and eloquent new work, ‘Ruined’,”\textsuperscript{547} wrote Steven Oxman in his \textit{Variety} review. The fact that this brutal civil war was taking place on a distant continent (out of sight, and therefore likely out of mind) constituted one of the main reasons that Nottage conceived an adaptation of \textit{Mother Courage} set in the Congo. Once she had done so, she took steps to delve deeper into the subject through first-hand experience on the ground. Through an Amnesty International organization based in Kampala, Uganda, Nottage had contacts “set up interviews with Congolese women who had crossed over the border to escape the violence.”\textsuperscript{548} The violence that the women were attempting to escape included sexual violence.

In the \textit{International Journal of Peace Studies} Janie Leatherman explained how “sexual violence in armed conflict has long been part of the spoils of war.”\textsuperscript{549} She referenced Susan Brownmiller’s documentation of this underestimated tendency in her seminal work,\textsuperscript{550} which is “a systematic historical study of the mass psychology of rape spanning the two World Wars, case

\textsuperscript{546} Unpublished Pulitzer Prize Drama Jury Report for 2009, Columbia University Private Archives of the Office of the Pulitzer Prize. This 2009 jury is comprised of Dominic P. Papatola (Chairman), John M. Clum, James Hebert, David Henry Hwang, and Linda Winer.
\textsuperscript{548} Kate Whoriskey, introduction to \textit{Ruined} by Lynn Nottage (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009), x.
studies on Bangladesh and Vietnam, as well as the American Revolution, and civil violence and pogroms in other societies, including against Indians and slaves in the American experience.”

Others have continued to document sexual violence as a weapon of war, particularly in what are considered the “new wars”, post-cold war conflicts that are “no longer caught in the ideological contestations of the superpower-driven bipolar system, where the parties came under some disciplinary influence of their patron.” These “new wars,” often centered on ethnicity, religion, or race are “distinguished by fractionation of warring parties (in some cases like the East Congo, extreme fractionation, see Nest et al. 2006) and the spread of small arms and light weapons (partly from the selling off of Cold War stocks).” One recent example of this type of new war includes the terrorist attacks throughout Nigeria by the extremist militant group “Boko Haram,” which is figuratively translated as “Western education is sin.” On 14 April 2014, Boko Haram extremists abducted hundreds of young women from their school in Nigeria and the leader claimed they are now slaves that can be sold as “wives” on the black market.

The Democratic Republic of Congo has had very high rates of sexual violence. In a March 2010 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, “998 men and women aged 18 or older in 19 eastern territories of the DRC participated in one-on-one interviews.” Of those 998 interviewees, “overall, 42% of women and 31% of men reported

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552 As Leatherman wrote, “Other scholars have documented its use against Native Americans (Smith 2005), Chinese in Nanking during World War II (Chang 1997), and comfort women by the Japanese between 1928-1945 (Dolgopol 2006).” Ibid.
553 Ibid., 54-55.
having experienced some form of interpersonal violence, 43% of respondents reported that someone in their household had experienced a sexual human rights violation related to the conflict.”

In the DRC, Michael Deibert claimed that women were not only at risk from the Congolese government and rebel factions, but also from their UN protectors, as noted in “a 2004 internal UN report” that concluded that sexual abuse and exploitation of women and girls by both military and civil elements of the United Nations’s force appeared to be ‘significant, widespread and ongoing.”

Theatre director Kate Whoriskey and playwright Lynn Nottage traveled to the neighboring country of Uganda to interview these women “because the violence in the Congo had been heating up between the Hema and Lendus and multiple other factions.”

In addition to rape, “other frequently reported types of sexual violence included molestation, sexual slavery, and being forced to undress.” Whoriskey noted that “after interviewing the women, I realized that it [sexual assault] was not just a tool to humiliate the women or to degrade the opposing side’s masculinity, it was a way to strip women of their wombs.”

The targeting of women has been used in many different conflicts; for instance, one practice used in Sierra Leone was called “virgination” – “the targeting of young girls who were believed to be virgins – in order to make them less eligible for marriage,” which was “another tactic to destroy the fabric of the


558 Whoriskey, introduction to *Ruined*, x.


560 Whoriskey, introduction to *Ruined*, xi.
Another womb assault tactic was forced impregnation, “because rebel forces were concerned that the high level of killings required them to replace the population.” Among those who survived, the most extreme cases of sexual victimization left women “ruined.” Longombe et al. provide case studies documenting incidents of sexual violence that they deem “widespread and pervasive.” They noted that “Gang-rape is often exacerbated by other forms of sexual savagery, including the forcing of crude objects such as tree branches and bottles into the vagina.” Other forms of torture documented include having “their genitalia mutilated with knives or bayonets or burned with a naked flame” and even being “shot through a gun barrel thrust into the vagina.” Often “the dreaded outcome of the trauma from sexual violence is genital fistula, defined as an abnormal communication between the vagina and the urinary tract (usually the bladder), or between the vagina and the alimentary tract (usually the rectum) or both.” Many of the women who are “ruined” suffer from genital fistula (also referred to as vaginal fistula and gynecological fistula), which can cause uncontrollable leakage of urine or feces or both and can only be repaired (if at all) by surgery. Two of the women in Nottage’s play – Mama Nadi and Sophie – have been ruined.

Ibid., 60.
Ibid.
According to director Kate Whoriskey, “Since her days working for Amnesty International, Lynn had been disturbed by the lack of interest the international community showed for such a devastating conflict.” One of the reasons Nottage has taken on this global topic is a sense that art is activism and that her art should help promote social and political action and make a difference in the lives of people, in this case, to bring further attention to the conflict and more international aid to those who have been deeply affected by all the fighting. This idea of art as activism is one that she passes on to young playwrights that she mentors, such as Katori Hall, who wrote the play, *The Mountaintop*, about Martin Luther King, Jr.’s last night on earth. “Lynn helped me understand what it was to be more than just a writer but to be an activist with your work,” says Hall. The hope was that doing *Ruined* would help to call even more attention to the war, thereby spurring increased impetus to bring it to an end and simultaneously bringing relief to the people devastatingly affected by the conflict. Evidence of Nottage’s real-life commitment to raise awareness and aid through the writing, promotion, and production of *Ruined* can be seen when navigating Nottage’s current website, as well as the printed version of the play, which contains a section “For further information and/or to make contributions, please visit these websites.” The websites all share missions devoted to human rights, peace, and an end to sexual violence against women. Hall explains how Nottage believes “that your work is an extension of you, and the words you put on the page have to mean something —

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567 Whoriskey, introduction to *Ruined*, ix-x.
570 Lynn Nottage, *Ruined* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009), 125-126. Among the organizations and websites listed are: Amnesty International; Enough Project; Equality Now; Friends of the Congo; Global Fund for Women; Human Rights Watch; International Rescue Committee; International Women’s Health Coalition; Mapendo International; Peace Women Project; Raise Hope for Congo; UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict; VDAY: Sexual violence in the DRC background; and Women for Women International.
particularly since as women of color we don’t get many opportunities on stage. So when we’re given the opportunity, we gotta make it count.” Nottage and Whoriskey made it count by writing and staging a realistic drama based on their personal interviews with survivors of sexual violence, which extensively detailed the perpetration (and the traumatic toll it takes in the aftermath) of sexual violence committed during the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Many of the women, having been physically and emotionally assaulted, were consequently shunned by their families and driven from their villages, left with few means of survival. Nadine Puechguirbal wrote an in-depth article on “Women and War in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” documenting her experiences in 2001 as a military-civil liaison officer working for the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations while “on a fact-finding mission to collect information about the security situation in the region.” She was careful to provide a disclaimer that “The views expressed herein are mine and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.” When Puechguirbal participated in the delivery of a UN Gender Training Package for newly arrived UN military observers, she helped invite local community members to share their experiences with the peacekeepers. She recalled that, “It was very moving to see one young woman talk about Congolese women who turned to prostitution because they do not have other means of livelihood.” The personal aspects of Puechguirbal’s professional mission sounded very similar to Nottage’s and Whoriskey’s artistic one: “I hope to

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573 Ibid.
574 Ibid., 1277. “The political economies of violence pose numerous barriers to post-conflict transitions to reconstruction and development, and further threats to the welfare of women and the girl child, leaving them vulnerable to sex trafficking and sex work, for example (Machel, 2001, 57; Tambiah 2004 on Sri Lanka).” Leatherman, “Sexual Violence,” 55.
collect enough evidence about the harrowing living conditions of these women and about their coping mechanisms; they want me to be a messenger, to spread the word both about their appalling circumstances and about their fortitude.”

This is also a distinction that Nottage made very clear when she explained that during their interviews “the women felt it was important to go on record, which is why my play is not about victims, but survivors.”

Listening to first-hand experiences of this conflict altered Nottage’s and Whoriskey’s initial conception of the work. No longer so sure that the Brechtian model ought to determine the ultimate form the play took, Nottage eventually abandoned the idea of an adaptation of *Mother Courage* and set about writing a play that was “true to our experiences in Uganda.”

**The Legitimizing Effect of Bertolt Brecht**

Why would Whoriskey, in the introduction to *Ruined*, bring up an idea – the adaptation of *Mother Courage* – that Nottage chose to abandon? First, I would argue that although Nottage did not write a strict adaptation of Brecht’s play, she kept and used aspects of Brecht’s work to create her own synthesis. Second, I believe that by referencing Brecht, the entire theatrical production gained an air of legitimacy in the eyes of the Pulitzer jurors, as well as scholars, critics, audiences, and theatre artists. Legitimizing the work by linking it to Brecht may not have been Whoriskey’s intention, but it is a likely consequence of her action. Brecht has been recognized as one of the most important theatrical practitioners and theorists of the twentieth-century. The productions that he crafted (collectively, whether acknowledged or not) were experiments in ways to combine art, politics, theory, and practice in order to achieve material

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575 Ibid., 1271.
576 Nottage, *Ruined*, 120.
577 Whoriskey, introduction to *Ruined*, xi.
change. Peter Brooker described Brecht’s desire “to trigger change in the material world by changing ‘interpretations’ (‘human feelings, opinions, attitudes,’ as Brecht otherwise put it) in the analogous, experimental world of theatre”\(^{579}\) as the optimistic and proactive aim of his Epic Theatre. Anyone embarking on a political theatre work in the post-Brechtian era must take his towering example into account, whether it be to imitate Brecht in some form, refuse to engage in any of his ideas, or to create some synthesis of Brechtian and non-Brechtian ideals and techniques. In this section I wish to explore this type of synthesis, first in \textit{Fabulation} and then in \textit{Ruined}.

In general, graduate students of theatre count Brecht’s writings among their stacks of required reading, as do numerous advanced undergraduates. Both Whoriskey and Nottage have extensive theatrical educations: Whoriskey graduated with a degree in Theatre from New York University (the Experimental Theatre Wing) and also completed a post-graduate program in directing at the American Repertory Theatre Institute for Advanced Theatre Training (housed at Harvard University); Nottage received her undergraduate degree from Brown University and then went directly to Yale School of Drama, where she earned her M.F.A. in playwriting. Whoriskey claimed that she had “always been drawn to Brecht’s heightened style and epic writing.”\(^{580}\) Reading the published script of \textit{Fabulation}, one can see strong Brechtian influences surfacing in Nottage’s writing; therefore it becomes a natural progression to have this writer and director, while mounting a play with Brechtian aspects (\textit{Fabulation}), to be discussing a future collaboration based on an adaptation of another Brecht play – \textit{Mother Courage}.


\(^{580}\) Whoriskey, introduction to \textit{Ruined}, ix.
The first play of Nottage’s that Whoriskey directed was *Intimate Apparel* (2003), which was commissioned and first produced by South Coast Repertory and CENTERSTAGE. Aside from the Pulitzer-winning *Ruined* (2008), *Intimate Apparel* is often considered Nottage’s best known work, one that has multiple facets: “a rich, vivid portrait of turn-of-the-last-century New York; a feminist lament of intelligent, talented women defined and controlled by men; a soft-focus glimpse into the beating hearts behind the archives of African-American life a century ago.” It is a fairly realistic work, although with its flashbacks it is not as completely “conventionally structured” as *Ruined*. In her *New York Times* review of the revival of *Intimate Apparel* (2010), Anita Gates wrote, “If you’ve seen Ms. Nottage’s ‘Ruined,’ about Congolese women in wartime, which won the Pulitzer Prize in drama, no introduction is necessary.” Perhaps Gates felt that mentioning *Fabulation* (the second play written by Nottage and directed by Whoriskey) would only confuse the average theatregoer, because it does not share the realistically based conventional structure of either *Ruined* or *Intimate Apparel*. *Fabulation, or The Re-Education of Undine* (its full title) premiered at Playwrights Horizons and was described as using “social satire to address the conditions of American black women’s lives.” It is the strongest example of Nottage’s later work to evince her willingness to experiment with Brechtian ideas.

One way that Nottage has adapted Brecht’s *Gestus* in *Fabulation* is, as he did from the late 1920s onwards, “as socially encoded expression.” Meg Mumford describes its use by

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Brecht, as the “subconscious body language of a person from a particular social class or workplace, such as the genteel manners of a group of diplomats as they stir their tea or the posture of a farmer just back from a day’s labour in the fields, who converses with tired hands resting on his knees.”\footnote{586} The body language may be “subconscious” in life, as when the aforementioned tired farmer rests with his hands on his knees, but Brecht meant for these “subconscious” gestures to be revealed as ways of reflecting one’s circumstances, but also as ways of performing one’s class status. Nottage removes it from the subconscious realm to an overly conscious one when she has her protagonist Undine speak directly to the audience and lets them know that the accent (described in the stage directions as “an affected continental accent”\footnote{587}) and manners of her close friend are “affected” because “Allison, known in Harlem as Tameka Jo Greene, aspired to the black bourgeoisie after a family trip to New Rochelle.”\footnote{588} In this way, Nottage is able to adapt Brecht’s original intent for *Gestus* to make it reflect the changing social conditions and physical status of Allison and Undine throughout *Fabulation*.

Although Nottage’s use of *Gestus* is not strictly “Brechtian” – in many ways it lives closer to the realms of melodrama and realism – like Brecht, Nottage and Whoriskey when working on *Fabulation* were able to achieve the end result of presenting artistically “the mutable socio-economic and ideological construction of human behavior and relations”\footnote{589}

“Short Description of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces a Defamiliarization Effect”\footnote{590} was the essay by Brecht that dealt most comprehensively with his idea of the

\footnote{586} Ibid.
\footnote{588} Ibid., 93.
\footnote{589} Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht*, 54.
Verfrumdungseffekt or alienation effect. Nottage’s early play provided an opportunity to utilize a couple of variations of the Verfremdungseffekt: breaking the “fourth wall” and disrupting the flow of the text. Undine’s continual asides to the audience manage to simultaneously interrupt the flow of the text and break the fourth wall, such as when she says to the audience, “And this concludes the section entitled ‘Denial and Other Opiates.’” That particular aside can also be interpreted as a reference to Brecht’s practice of titling scenes, which he occasionally also spelled out on placards. In addition to the constant interruptions and abrupt changes from one scene to another, the use of an ensemble of four women and four men playing multiple characters continually breaks the illusion of reality.

Although one might find the implementation of Brechtian theories and techniques sets Fabulation in strong contrast with the conventionally structured emotional realism found in Ruined, it turns out that there are also some not-so-evident uses of Brechtian theories and techniques in the latter play, too. The first example is Nottage’s use of two encapsulated political statements by rival military leaders, which hearkens back to the idea of Epic Theatre as dialectic and to Ibsen. Much of the main conflict during the play takes place as “militias aligned with the government alternate control with militias currently not so aligned” patronize Mama Nadi’s bar, where she “carefully avoids taking sides.” Nottage has created two leaders of opposing sides, both of whom are deeply flawed and highly interested in personal gain. The government leader, Commander Osembenga, is likely based on Joseph Kabila, or – at the very least – is meant to represent a high-level commander loyal to the real-life leader of the DRC.

591 Nottage, Intimate Apparel/Fabulation, 103.
592 Although it should be noted that the actress playing Undine is excepted from playing any other character besides the protagonist, which would increase the possibility of audience identification with the main character.
593 Oxman, “Ruined,” 1-3.
The character of Jerome Kisembe, rebel leader, is probably based on real-life renegade Tutsi General Laurent Nkunda, who was responsible for the opposition in and around the eastern province of Nord-Kivu. As noted by Séverine Autesserre about the actual conflict in the Congo, “all parties have legitimate grievances, but all are also responsible for massive human rights violations.” Charles Isherwood noted that “Ms. Nottage has labored scrupulously under the burden of drawing into her story all the complicated issues that make the recent history of Congo such harrowing reading, but the result is a few too many speeches in which one or another of the characters sums up his or her point of view in a neat paragraph.” This tendency can be seen in the following speeches given by opposing leaders Osembenga and Kisembe. First, Nottage’s government leader, Commander Osembenga describes the rebel leader:

OSEMBENGA: Make a joke, but Kisembe has one goal and that is to make himself rich on your back, Mama. He will burn your crops, steal your women, and make slaves of your men all in the name of peace and reconciliation. Don’t believe him. He, and men like him, these careless militias wage a diabolical campaign. They leave stains everywhere they go. And remember the land he claims as his own, it is a national reserve, it is the people’s land, our land. And yet he will tell you the government has taken everything, though we’re actually paving the way for democracy.  

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596 Nottage, *Ruined*, 44.
In this speech, Nottage has used the character as a mouthpiece to encapsulate a good number of this conflict’s issues as seen by the opposing side. Later in the play, Nottage’s rebel leader, Jerome Kisembe makes an equally neat summation of how the government’s army and how the ruling body is sacrificing the smaller areas for the supposed benefit of the nation:

KISEMBE: They say we are the renegades. We don’t respect the rule of law…but how else do we protect ourselves against their aggression? Huh? How do we feed our families? Ay? They bring soldiers from Uganda, drive us from our land and make us refugees…and then turn us into criminals when we protest or try to protect ourselves. How can we let the government carve up our most valuable land to serve to companies in China. It’s our land. Ask the Mbuti, they can describe every inch of the forest as if it were their own flesh. Am I telling the truth?^597

Although these speeches can be construed as overly verbose and “neat encapsulations,” as described by Charles Isherwood, I would argue that they accomplished Nottage’s goal of succinctly providing an accurate picture of the true to life challenges of this complex conflict. For instance, Nottage’s rebel leader is referencing an actual “$5 billion loan to Congo” that the real life leader Kabila, received from China, “one of many such trade projects that Kabila’s government has overseen in its two years of democratically elected rule.”^598 The land in the Congo is extremely valuable. Autesserre explains that “Congo has massive reserves of gold and diamonds, most of the world’s columbo-tantalite and cassiterite (essential materials for most

^597 Ibid., 78.
Both the government forces and the rebel factions would benefit from having control of land that is rich in resources, because “access to resources means the ability to buy arms and reward troops, and thus to secure political power; political power, in turn, guarantees access to land and resources.” The corruption related to the desire to control these resources has been widespread. As an example, a major accusation of corruption was leveled against Australian company Anvil Mining and Kabila’s government in October of 2004: “A quartet of human rights organizations, including London-based Global Witness, have charged that Anvil, the leading copper producer in the DRC, provided logistical support to the army during its siege, including allowing use of its company cars to transport bodies of those killed in summary executions and to ferry stolen goods looted by soldiers.” Nottage has worked very hard in her writing in order to show the deep complexity of conflict and corruption in this civil war. In the case of the two opposing leaders, the complexity is handled through debate – thesis/antithesis/synthesis – in the Hegelian/Marxist pattern. So, although Whoriskey claimed that Nottage abandoned Brecht, here resides an example of Epic Theatre as dialectic.

Nottage has worked very hard in her writing in order to show the deep complexity of conflict and corruption in this civil war. In the case of the two opposing leaders, the complexity is handled through debate – thesis/antithesis/synthesis – in the Hegelian/Marxist pattern. So, although Whoriskey claimed that Nottage abandoned Brecht, here resides an example of Epic Theatre as dialectic.

It has already been established that Ruined is not a strict adaptation of Brecht’s Mother Courage, which itself is an adaptation of Haus von Grimmelshausen’s seventeenth-century

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599 Autesserre, “The Trouble with Congo,” 96. Columbo-tantalite has been shortened to the nickname “coltan” in parts of Africa.

600 Ibid., 97.

601 Deibert, “Congo,” 67. And, in case one feels that the UN Peacekeepers should have been able to help, Deibert also notes an incident documented in 2005 when “UN Peacekeepers were linked to a gold smuggling enterprise with local militias in Ituri.”
novels *The Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus* and *Mother Courage*. Both the source novel *Mother Courage* and Brecht’s play *Mother Courage and Her Children* remain focused on the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648). According to Robert Leach, Brecht does not dramatize any of Grimmelshausen’s scenes; what he does is to take the tone and the method to create his own parallel story.” Brecht retains the method of telling the story by taking the protagonist, Mother Courage, through a “series of adventures by means of unrelated but vivid individual scenes.” Nottage does not retain that method, or even Brecht’s tone, as Brecht did from Grimmelshausen, but she did select a Mother Courage-like character as the pivotal figure whom she re-situated in the middle of a civil war in the Congo. Leach described Brecht’s attitude to the Thirty Years’ War in this way:

Brecht is interested in the author’s own relationship to that reality. He sees certain events, and certain attitudes displayed, and uses them as the starting point.

I would argue that this is also the strategy Nottage followed with Brecht’s play. She used the setting of war, a cold-hearted, but occasionally kind mother attempting to make a profit in the midst of said war, and the children of that mother loyaly helping out in the process as a starting point to craft *Ruined*. Mother Courage is described by Leach as “a central character who is basically selfish and uncaring but whose attitude occasionally, especially towards her daughter,

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603 Ibid.
604 Ibid.
605 Ibid., 134.
Nottage has adapted the essence of this relationship between Mother Courage and her daughter into Mama Nadi and Sophie in *Ruined*.

Mama Nadi is emblematic of the truly complex nature of survival within the realm of national violence. Director Kate Whoriskey quotes a Rwandan man who had been speaking to Nottage about life after the genocide. He told her, “We must fight to sustain the complexity.” Whoriskey continues: “This phrase became a mantra for creating the piece” because they “did not want to focus solely on the damage, but also the hope.” Mama Nadi is a complex character who represents both the damage and the hope. “In Nottage’s hands, and in a charismatic performance from Ekulona [the actress playing Mama Nadi], the character’s displays of shrewd cold-heartedness hide a more generous spirit and, we discover in a very fine ending, a history of her own.” Upon our first meeting, we are introduced to Mama Nadi as a business woman – the owner of a bar and brothel in the tropical Ituri rain forest that serves the people of a small mining town. Based on another character which profited during war, Mama Nadi appears to be much like Bertolt Brecht’s Mother Courage, a woman who ends up sacrificing her children while trying to survive. In the opening scene of *Ruined*, Christian brings Mama three young women and offers a good price if she takes them all. Women are being sold as commodities. As nice as he is, as romantic and caring a person as the traveling salesman Christian is, his stock, alongside the items like cigarettes and chocolates that he peddles, is human flesh. The women in question are not enslaved or forcibly given to Mama, but they are being sold. These women have some small agency in this transaction; they are so desperate that they will agree to this arrangement. Women like the character of Salima, now one of Mama Nadi’s “girls,” were taken

606 Ibid., 140.
607 Nottage, *Ruined*, xii.
608 Ibid.
609 Oxman, “Ruined,” 2.
from their villages by rebel forces and turned into sexual slaves. Like many other victims, when Salima escaped and made her way back to her village, her people turned their backs on her – even her husband – who now regrets his behavior and is searching for her. In desperation, she submitted to being a prostitute at Mama Nadi’s, and in return she is provided with a bed, clothes, food, as well as safety – or at least as safe a space as is possible in this conflict. A number of these women have become part of Mama Nadi’s family of “girls” – who can be interpreted as the “children” to Nottage’s “Mother Courage.” It is a family unit that has no male head of household, but the “family” still revolves around serving the needs of men. The way the reader or audience member views Mama Nadi is riven with ambivalence. She takes in women who have been rejected by all others and she cares for them; however, she also profits from them. She is very clear that her place is not run like a charity: “I’m sorry, but I’m running a business not a mission.” This echoes Brecht’s Mother Courage, who “heartlessly proclaims ‘War is a business proposition: Not with cream cheese but steel and lead.’” If these girls cannot perform sexual services, then she has little use for them. One of the young women turns out to be Christian’s niece, the daughter of his sister. Christian explained to Mama, “Look, militia did ungodly things to the child, took her with…a bayonet and then left her for dead. And she was – .” She has been so badly damaged sexually, that she is “ruined.” Mama Nadi coldly tells Christian to take his niece “to the sisters in Bunia, let her weave baskets for them.” After more pleading by Christian, she relents and accepts Sophie. She tells Christian, “I’m doing this for you, cuz you’ve been good to me.”

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611 Leach, “Mother Courage,” 140.
613 Ibid., 14.
614 Ibid., 16.
must bring her “damaged goods” because it is “no good for business.” We later learn that part of the reason Mama takes her in is that she closely identifies with her situation, given her own secret past of having been ruined, as exposed in the play’s climax.

Unlike Brecht, Nottage chooses to let this “daughter” live. The playwright dramaturgically creates a situation for one of Mama Nadi’s other “girls” to die – Salima – another instance of Nottage continuing a type of parallel between her work and Brecht’s. In Brecht’s play, Mother Courage’s dumb daughter Kattrin cannot cry out a warning about the impending danger, but she takes a final stand by ringing the church bells in alarm. This victory costs her life and takes place at the climax of that play, just as Salima’s last stand takes place at the climax of Ruined. In the second to last scene of the play the women are going to be forcibly sexually violated, likely by the same men who have been paying to have “consensual” sex with them:

OSEMBENGA: This can stop. Tell me where I can find Kisembe.

MAMA: I don’t know where he is.

OSEMBENGA (Points to Josephine): Take that one.616

They are being forced in order to gain a strategic military advantage; the men wish to learn the location of the rebel leader and they are willing to brutalize the women in order to gain the information. The soldier has grabbed Josephine, who struggles as the soldier tears away at her clothing, ready to sexually violate her. The attack only stops because Salima, like the daughter in Mother Courage, chooses to take a stand. She is not willing to be sexually abused and

615 Ibid.
616 Ibid., 93.
violated again by the men fighting this war. She is defiant when she enters, bleeding, and says, “STOP! Stop it! For the love of God, stop this! Haven’t you done enough to us. Enough! Enough!” This shocking defiance is enough to stop the attack in that moment. Her husband rushes to her, as “a pool of blood forms in the middle of her dress, blood drips down her legs.” Salima’s husband, Fortune, and Mama attempt to help her. Salima just “smiles triumphantly” and takes her husband’s hand. Ben Brantley, in his review of the play noted that “Ms. Nottage should be above sloganeering lines like, “You will not fight your battles on my body anymore,” which Salima proclaims to the government leader Osembenga, his Soldiers, and her husband Fortune. I completely disagree, and argue the point that Salima thought about beforehand and perhaps even rehearsed this final moment in her mind; therefore, she would have been likely to have come up with a strong statement that she wished to proclaim as she took her final stand. Otherwise, she would simply have killed herself in the other room and bled to death on the bed in solitude. What Salima could not have imagined is that it would be her husband, the man who drove her from their village out of shame, who cradled her in his arms as she died. Like Jessie in Marsha Norman’s play, ‘night, Mother, Salima is only able to gain her true freedom and complete control over her life when she decides to end it. In life, the truth is that Salima could not stop these men or others from continuing to use her body as their battleground. But she was able to choose to end her own life, in order to stop the violence that has been repeatedly inflicted upon her female body.

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617 Ibid., 94.
618 Ibid.
619 Ibid.
Mother Courage Never Fell in Love: A Controversial “Hollywood” Ending

With Salima’s death at the climax of *Ruined*, the parallels to Brecht effectively ended. Both Mother Courage and Mama Nadi survive their wars, but only Mama Nadi fell in love. Nottage left the realm of Brecht and returned to a path that she had trod earlier. One absolute non-Brechtian similarity between *Fabulation* and *Ruined* is Nottage’s insistence – in both plays – upon romantic endings that can be interpreted as a type of fairy-tale version of “happily ever after.” The following parallels run throughout the plays: 1) Constantly changing and severely uncertain circumstances that cause a reluctant female protagonist (Undine in *Fabulation* and Mama Nadi in *Ruined*) to brush off the advances of a sincere, gentle man (Guy in *Fabulation* and Christian in *Ruined*); 2) As both plays come to a close, these men make final pleas for the women to accept the love and emotional support that they freely – and honestly – offer; 3) The central female characters react positively to the men’s final advances, albeit with a continued hint of reluctance, as they attempt to rid themselves of the hurt and its resulting romantic skepticism due to the prior actions of other less scrupulous men. Neither the ending of *Fabulation* nor that of *Ruined* guarantees happiness, but both imply a strong possibility for the couples living “happily ever after” in unstable and ever-changing environments.

The ending of *Ruined* appeared to be the most controversial aspect for critics. It is of little surprise – considering the weighty subject matter and Nottage’s earnest approach to art as activism – that no one condemned the overall production for having what Brantley described as a “well-shaped, sentimental ending.”\(^{621}\) Nevertheless, Charles Isherwood wrote that “the cheering conclusion of this romantic subplot struck me as a device that vitiated some of the power of what

\(^{621}\) Ibid.
had come before.” In a “Hollywood-esque” move, Nottage has Mama Nadi succumb to the charm, romance, and genuine love that the character of Christian has tried to offer her throughout the play. Ed Minus bemoans this plot turn with the words, “alas, a love story.” He noted that although it was “hardly recognizable as such in the bulk of the play” it becomes “central in the final scene.” This may appear to be a cliché, but it is also a bold move because it is so unlikely; nevertheless, it does subject the audience “at least on the surface, to something close to a Hollywood ending.” And, he also insists that it is one of several instances in which “the profit motive” of theatrical production trumps “artistic integrity.” It is likely that having a hopeful ending helped the production to be extended seven times even though “Ruined has not yet received a Broadway production.” I would suggest that the true hopefulness of the ending comes from Mama’s transformation, which includes allowing herself to feel love. Her transformation nears completion in the play when Mama Nadi ceases to be like Mother Courage and instead chooses to sacrifice her own material and physical well-being in an attempt to provide a better future for Sophie and the other girls in her employ. These are monumental changes, in part because the Mama Nadi prior to this point in the action has given ample evidence that she rejects the idea that love can flourish in the environment they live in. Survival is harsh and love is not.

MAMA (with contempt): Love. What’s the point in all this shit? Love is too fragile a sentiment for out here. Think about what happens to the things we

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624 Ibid.
625 Ibid.
626 Brandi Wilkins Catanese, “Taking the Long View,” Theatre Journal 62, no. 4 (December 2010): 549. In this article Catanese refers to a quote Nottage gave to a reporter stating “I think gender and race play a large part” in her play not transferring to Broadway, despite its extensions, popularity, and numerous awards.
“love.” It isn’t worth it. “Love.” It is a poisonous word. It will change us. It will cost us more than it returns. Don’t you think? It’ll be an unnecessary burden for people like us. And it’ll eventually strangle us.⁶²⁷

From the time when Christian talked her into taking in his niece he helped Mama Nadi begin this process of transformation. And he begins building a “family” with her, even though neither of them quite realized that this was happening. This building of a family takes place slowly, as Mama transformed from being the one who profits first and foremost to the one who is willing to sacrifice her future for her child. By sacrificing for Sophie at the end of the play, she really does take on the role of mother as protector and nurturer. Mama has a stash of ore, but in particular, one beautiful, raw diamond. This can also be interpreted as a metaphor for her having a number of girls/daughters, with Sophie as the “raw diamond.” Mama has plenty of plain girls, but Sophie is beautiful – and raw – because she is ruined. Not only is it worth a lot of money, the diamond has special significance for Mama. She explains, “It is my insurance policy, it is what keeps me from becoming like them. There must always be a part of you that this war can’t touch.”⁶²⁸ As long as she has this “insurance policy” she does not feel desperate. She feels that, if need be, there is always a way out, that she will always have security and that, as a woman, she will keep her independence. When she becomes willing to trade the diamond for Sophie’s future, she becomes self-less in the greatest sense of the word. With the parallel circumstance of being ruined, Sophie can definitely be interpreted as a younger version of Mama Nadi – a daughter of sorts. And unlike a strict business woman, Mama does become willing to sacrifice – both her future materialist wealth and her personal safety – for this daughter figure.

⁶²⁷ Nottage, Ruined, 99-100.
⁶²⁸ Ibid., 53.
So, as self-serving as she can be, Mama Nadi proves that she is willing to put the needs of others before her own. Not all of her girls survive (as evidenced by Salima’s suicide), but Mama continues to work for them in whatever way she can. The parrot has the last words in the play, which somehow shows that even though Mama appears materialistic, connection to her heritage and relationships with people do matter. The parrot has been a subtle allusionary image throughout the play. Nottage writes, “A covered birdcage sits conspicuously in the corner of the room.” Many readers of the play are likely to make the literary connection with Maya Angelou’s memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Angelou’s autobiographical novel recounts her rape at age eight by her mother’s boyfriend, so Nottage’s work taps into a similar vein as Angelou’s. Whether intentional or not, Nottage does not rest with that symbolism, but expands the idea of the parrot that speaks Pygmy to larger proportions. The bird also has a spiritual component, as related by Mama, “He [Old Papa Batunga] believed as long as the words of the forest people were spoken, the spirits would stay alive” and she understands that, “when that bird dies this place is gonna lose part of its story.” Mama Nadi is a study in contradictions. She took in the parrot that no one wanted. And she recognizes its value as part of the history of the forest people, a Pygmy tribe. But when originally asked what she was going to do with it – she lost all sentiment and said, “Sell it. I don’t want it. It stinks.” Having Mama keep the parrot, feed it throughout the play, and then having the parrot speak the last words – in English and not in Pygmy – is a way for the playwright to say that, regardless of the hardships, the past will be remembered and remain part of the characters’ lives as they move into the future. This is very true for Mama.

629 Ibid., 5.
630 Ibid., 8.
631 Ibid.
Christian returns at the end of the play. Throughout the play this man has been a romantic and the polar opposite of Mama’s pragmatic, purposely disconnected self. Christian wants to settle down and be with Mama, to help her, to protect her, to make love to her. She responds, “Do I look like I need protection?” He says, “No, but you look like you need someone to make love to you.” Christian also confesses that – against his better judgment – he is in love with her. When he asks for the truth of why they cannot be together, she answers:

MAMA (With surprising vulnerability): I’m ruined. (Louder) I’m ruined.

Even if she felt that she deserved love, she believes that she cannot have love because she is a ruined woman. At this point the playwright boldly asserts the possibility for hope and change – not just for Mama Nadi and Christian – but for men in general. He is apologetic and self-effacing, but his words have the possibility of carrying great healing.

CHRISTIAN: God, I don’t know what those men did to you, but I’m sorry for it. I may be an idiot for saying so, but I think we, and I speak as a man, can do better.

Mama rejects his comforting and pulls away saying, “No! Don’t touch me! No!” Nottage writes that she breaks down in tears after finally succumbing to his heartfelt embrace. After being interrupted Mama breaks away and says to Christian, “Don’t think this changes

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632 Ibid., 99.
633 Ibid.
634 Ibid., 100.
635 Ibid., 101.
636 Ibid.
The real test is when Christian swears that “this is the last time I’ll ask.” Ever the poet, his request is symbolic:

A branch lists to and fro/An answer to the insurgent wind/A circle dance

Grace nearly broken/But it ends peacefully/Stillness welcome.

The moment is measured, symbolic, romantic, and according to the stage directions, it contains “possibility.” Stiff and resistant at first, Mama slowly gives in. Sophie pulls Josephine into the room to watch Mama and Christian dance. The final picture is of a family unit rising, like a Phoenix, out of the ashes of this civil conflict. After Josephine joyfully exclaims, “Go, Mama,” the parrot is given the last words, “Mama. Primus. Mama. Primus.” In addition to the parrot adding a moment of humor, as it squawks the name of the beer that flows freely in Mama Nadi’s place, it also reflects how Mama is willing to do two things: honor the history of the area and choose connection over profit. Each of these “family” members has had to make peace with the past, because they are unable to move forward by simply leaving it behind. And each has had to adapt to this new way of life, even the parrot. The ending of the play is far from obliviously romantic, as the war still rages north of them, business is bad, Salima has committed suicide, and Mama lost possession of the diamond while unsuccessfully attempting to trade it for Sophie’s crucial, redemptive operation. Both women remained ruined, but transformation has happened – a family has been created. It will still be a struggle to survive, but Nottage allows for continued “possibility.”

637 Ibid.
638 Ibid.
639 Ibid.
640 Ibid., 102.
641 Ibid.
Universality Equals “Canonizability”

Sometimes, as in the case of *Ruined*, the more specific a playwright’s message is, the more universally resonant it can be. The opening statement in the Pulitzer Prize for Drama’s Jury Report of 2009 reads: “Lynn Nottage’s searing drama unflinchingly demands that audiences confront universal quandaries of sacrifice, responsibility and action in the face of untenable decisions.” Unpacking this statement helps to ascertain the appeal that this play had with the Pulitzer Prize committee.

First the report notes that it is a “searing drama,” which is accomplished through Nottage’s use of conventional realism, scrupulously documenting the various aspects of this civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to Robert Leach, Georg Lukács “saw the dialectic of appearance and essence as the crucial field for realism, suggesting that the great works of literature created a true-to-life surface but were simultaneously able to reveal the underlying social forces which were not apparent in day-to-day existence.” Brecht rejected Lukács’s insistence that this could only be accomplished by realism and in his *Mother Courage and Her Children* he confronted “the spectator not with reality itself, but with attitudes toward reality,” by using techniques such as “breaking up the flow of the drama, fragmenting the totality and using montage, interruptions, non-psychological characters and gestures.” Nottage has done both: synthesized Brechtian aspects with elements of Lukács’s ideas about social realism. Nottage can be seen as following Lukács’s “formula” revealing the underlying social forces within a “true-to-life” framework by documenting the existence of Mama Nadi, as surrounded by

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643 Leach, “Mother Courage,” 133.
her clients (who represent both sides of the DRC’s civil war), her employees (Mama’s “girls”), and her friends (Christian and capitalist Mr. Harari).

Secondly, the play “unflinchingly demands that audiences confront universal quandaries of sacrifice, responsibility and action in the face of untenable decisions.” This is a political play that was written to raise awareness and promote social and political action. After her trip to Uganda, Nottage spoke at a public reception following a United States Foreign Relations joint subcommittee hearing entitled “Confronting Rape and Other Forms of Violence Against Women in Conflict Zones.”

Nottage wanted the play to help put increased pressure on the international community regarding this conflict. But, I would argue that she also wanted audiences, especially those in the United States, but perhaps all “Westerners” to see themselves in these characters. The non-combatant characters who represent the various aspects of capitalism in the play are Mr. Harari, Christian, and Mama Nadi. And, as noted by Oxman, “Structured commerce, in fact, is presented here as a net positive, a veritable oasis.”

Mr. Harari is a Lebanese diamond merchant who often patronizes Mama Nadi’s bar coming especially to consort with her girl Josephine. Like the multinational corporations which profit from exploiting the resources of the Congo, Mr. Harari is seen as an “outsider” and therefore the audience may feel less bad about the bad treatment he receives than they do about the treatment of the native Africans. It is even a slightly comical moment when Mama asks Mr. Harari why he

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645 Oxman, “Ruined,” 2.
is barefoot: “Your fucking country, some drunk child doing his best impersonation of a rebel soldier liberated my shoes. Every time I come here I have to buy a new fucking pair of shoes.”646 In the play’s social context, there are many unexpected costs of doing business. Harari has obviously been doing business in the country for years, as he mentions that he “understood Mobutu’s brand of chaos.”647 He complains that the continual fracturing and redefining of the country is making the practice of commerce extremely difficult, as “Militias form overnight, and suddenly a drunken foot soldier with a tribal vendetta is a rebel leader, and in possession of half of the enriched land, but you can’t reason with him, because he’s only thinking as far as his next drink.”648 Mama Nadi responds, “Let all the mother-hating soldiers fight it out. Cuz, in the end, do you think that will change anything here?”649 Like Mother Courage, Mama Nadi profits from all of the drinking and does not appear to care which faction is in control of the country, as long as she can continue to do business. But she must have supplies in order to do business and her supplier, Christian, has been having difficulty getting his goods through to her for the last three weeks because of all the fighting. Christian explains, “Every two kilometers a boy with a Kalashnikov and pockets that need filling. Toll, tax, tariff. They invent reasons to lighten your load.”650 It is not just outsiders and women who are vulnerable, but also men like Christian, who is a civilian and native to the country. In the bar he is made to parrot the slogans of the military leaders (providing yet another subliminal link to the omnipresent bird in the cage) and to do whatever they request when they are present. One scene exemplifies how Christian is treated like a marionette on strings, when he is forced to keep dancing because one

646 Nottage, Ruined, 24.
647 Ibid., 89.
648 Ibid.
649 Ibid.
650 Ibid., 6.
of the leaders finds it entertaining. He is also made to drink, even though he has struggled to achieve sobriety. The way Nottage embeds the dramatic stakes in these scenes, there is a fine line between appearing “smart” for trying to stay clear of conflict and being cowardly. On the one hand the audience realizes that it is not just profits that are at stake for these characters, but their literal survival. On the other, Nottage uses these characters to indict the audience for their lack of political action on behalf of those who are being victimized.

The indictment is not just for the international community’s lack of adequate intervention in the Congo; it is also a universalizing gesture for all of the ongoing conflicts throughout the world, especially those that result in sexual victimization. The United States is not exempt from perpetrating acts of sexual humiliation as a tool of war. This may not be clear in Nottage’s play, but it is specifically mentioned in the introduction by director Kate Whoriskey:

> Since our trip, I have been haunted by the human capacity to use creativity and imagination to such deadly ends. I would like to think that we are better off in the United States, but when you look at what was done in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, we are only wealthy enough to keep it offshore. In the United States, we have the money to create weaponry that removes us from the violence we enact.  

As an example, an official from the Bush administration reported that torture had been used on one detainee at Guantánamo Bay detention facility (a.k.a. GTMO), as reported by Bob

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651 Whoriskey, introduction to *Ruined*, xi.
Among the sexually-abusive tactics used for the interrogation of Mohammed al-Qahtani included: “Standing naked in front of a female agent” and being “forced to wear a woman’s bra and had a thong placed on his head during the course of the investigation,” as well as being “told that his mother and sister were whores.”  Although all of the techniques were authorized, the convening authority of military commissions Susan Crawford said, “the combination of the interrogation techniques, their duration and the impact on Qahtani’s health led to her conclusion” to call it torture.

As expressed by the Pulitzer jury, “Though the title refers explicitly to the results of the systemic and horrific mistreatment of women in a particular conflict, Ruined is also a sharp-eyed work that translates the wartime euphemism of ‘collateral damage’ into something palpable, personal, and inescapable.”  Nottage’s play carries a universal call to action on behalf of those suffering torture and violation during conflicts. It also functions as an inescapable indictment of those who commit the atrocities – even in service of stopping future acts of terror – and all those who stand on the sidelines and do nothing while atrocities happen.

Finally, I wish to address how, in its final paragraph about Ruined, the Pulitzer nominating jury spells out the aspects of this play that I believe make it not only perfect for the Pulitzer, but also extremely “canonizable.” The paragraph reads:

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653 Ibid.

Leavened with sometimes-morose humor, shot through with atmospherics and finished with a Coda ringing of hope among hopelessness, *Ruined* is [a] finely tuned play that is at once blisteringly contemporary and timelessly topical.\textsuperscript{655}

This describes a well-made play in the vein of social realism that is international in flavor, serious in tone but laced with humor, and one that contains a hopeful ending – all of which make it very palatable as a contribution to the theatrical canon. It also contains elements of Brechtian characters and theories, which elevate the play’s status even further. As a contributing text to the canon, *Ruined* is versatile enough to be used to examine a specific point in history, while also allowing for the discussion of universal quandaries in the contemporary world.

**Conclusion**

Dramatists Suzan-Lori Parks and Lynn Nottage have brought change to the landscape of the American theatre. Finally, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, two African American women have been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Although very different in their style and approach to writing plays, both women have crafted works that address the struggle for survival within the realms of national violence. Parks has repeated and revised her character of Lincoln, from *The America Play*, and paired him with a brother named Booth. While exploring the relationship between these two brothers, she takes the audience on a quasi-realistic journey that examines issues of racism, heritage (national and familial), violence, and what it takes to survive in a culture of oppression. Nottage has used the inspiration of Brecht’s iconic Mother Courage, blended with the testimonies of female refugees from the Congo, in

\textsuperscript{655} Ibid.
order to explore issues of divided nationality, gendered violence, family, and the not-so-hidden costs of profiting during war.

Suzan-Lori Parks utilizes poetic allegory, while Lynn Nottage creates a version of synthesized realism by combining the techniques and ideals drawn from Brecht, Ibsen, and even Lukács in their bold attempts to mine the ideals and prejudices contained within complex historical and political realities. These playwrights guide audiences through explorations of ambivalent characters, ones which act as both victims and perpetrators in order to survive within their oppressive environments. Through the eyes of Booth and Mama Nadi, the audience is given an opportunity to see the issues of these characters from personal and emotional perspectives, perspectives that transcend the reportage of urban violence and international wars that appear in the *New York Times*. Perhaps most importantly, the playwrights also offer indictments of the audience, questioning whether they are doing all that is possible to reignite stalled progress on civil rights in the United States and to help extinguish conflicts and the resulting sexual violence in the Congo and throughout the rest of the world.
Conclusion

The Pulitzer Prize-winning dramas by women investigated in this dissertation cover three decades – the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s – and explore the social zeitgeist of their times: the peak of Second-Wave Feminism, the “Age of Oprah,” and a new century – the twenty-first – that continues old patterns of violence and oppression both nationally and internationally. Each of these decades appears to contain “tipping points” regarding major social issues. The tipping point does not occur at the point an idea is initiated or a social change begins, but is rather when it hits the boiling point, the threshold, or the point of critical mass. Second-Wave Feminism began in the 1960s, but does not find its tipping point until the 1980s. Oprah Winfrey confessed to being the victim of childhood sexual abuse in the 1980s, but her crusade to stop the victimization of girls and young women does not reach critical mass until the 1990s. Both of the Pulitzer Prize-winning plays by women in the 2000s contain subject matter that had begun and technically ended by the time these plays were written and produced; nevertheless, the playwrights show boiling points related to the brutality and inequality that still exists, even after the official conflicts end. This is the most surprising discovery made in writing this dissertation: each play appears to reach the public at “the tipping point” of the issues it chronicles. Years, decades, even centuries earlier, the social changes advocated for in these plays were in their beginning stages. Perhaps at that time, in the beginning, other plays were written and produced regarding these issues, but it is these plays being written and produced at the tipping points that do win the prize. Although the conservative nature of the Pulitzer’s prize-giving in drama has forsaken the opportunity to instigate or reward cutting-edge dramaturgy, these plays are valuable historical records of social change once they become part of the American cultural and theatrical canons as winners of the Pulitzer Prize in Drama.
What constitutes the American cultural and theatrical canons can be debated, but once a drama wins the Pulitzer it becomes part of a nearly instantaneous canon that includes all the prize winners in drama. In part, this is because all of the scripts get published and generally carry the announcement on the cover that they are Pulitzer Prize winners. Due to this increased visibility (and more people having access to these plays via their published texts) these dramas become produced in regional productions throughout the United States and abroad in the years following their wins. In addition, many of them have even been turned into film and television versions. Since 1981 this would include: *Crimes of the Heart; ‘night, Mother; Glengarry Glen Ross; Driving Miss Daisy; The Heidi Chronicles; The Piano Lesson; Lost in Yonkers; Angels in America; Rent; W;t; Dinner with Friends; Proof; Doubt; Rabbit Hole; and August: Osage County*. Pulitzer prize-winning plays are strong additions to the canon of dramatic literature, adding diverse voices and rich subject matter; nevertheless, the fact that these plays are the most conventional examples of the individual playwrights’ works privileges contemporary realism in a way that may negatively limit the imagination of future playwrights and all those who study the canon of dramatic literature.

In pursuit of tangible links between how the prize is judged and why certain plays are chosen as winners, the major limitation of this study becomes exposed. This limitation centers on the issues of secrecy regarding the Pulitzer Prize Board, in particular the Board’s policy to refuse to share information and/or records regarding the membership of each subcommittee, the Board’s deliberations, or how any particular member votes in each category. Due to these restrictions, there can only be supposition as to why plays win the prize – especially when the Board completely overrides the drama jury’s recommendations. In spite of this limitation, this dissertation benefits greatly from the published writings of journalist, former administrator of the
prizes and secretary to the Advisory Board, John Hohenberg. In his three volumes on the Pulitzer, including his personal diary, he provides extensive commentary from the perspective of an insider, including information relating to Board issues and deliberations. With the permission of the Pulitzer organization, he has also published a fairly large amount of documentation – including excerpts from letters and meeting minutes – some of which was formerly private. Since his death in 2000, there is no longer an insider like Hohenberg who appears to be willing to continue the tradition of revelations, albeit belated ones, regarding the inner workings of the Pulitzer Prize organization.

The workings of the drama juries (the nominators) are distinctly more transparent. These juries are required to submit reports detailing the finalists and the reasons for the jury members’ choices. Sometimes these reports reveal how individual members voted and sometimes they do not. These records are kept in the private files of the Pulitzer organization and can only be publicly accessed with permission. At this point the organization is quite liberal with its access policy regarding jury reports, certainly as compared to the past. The one rule that does remain is that these records will not be available until three years have passed. This rule obviously puts limitations on the ability to examine the winning plays in a timely manner. In this case, I can surmise that among the reasons that the Pulitzer jury may have chosen *Water by the Spoonful* by Quiara Alegría Hudes in 2012 and *The Flick* by Annie Baker in 2014 are the two plays’ examination of the role of technology – emerging and vanishing – in contemporary American life. I see this theme as one that is extremely timely in the twenty-first century, especially the ways in which technology either leads to further connection or greater disconnection (and sometimes both) between the people who utilize it. Regrettably, I will have to wait until the records are released to find out whether or not my speculations are accurate.
In addition to unearthing limitations, this dissertation also brings to the surface some possibilities for continued scholarly inquiry. One future area of research would be to examine the ramifications of Third-Wave Feminism on writers like Suzan-Lori Parks and Lynn Nottage. Although this dissertation focused on other aspects of their Pulitzer-winning plays and other influences on these writers, exploration of Third-Wave Feminism and its many possible implications regarding these plays would be useful and enlightening as an area of future research.

Another area of possible scholarly investigation is that of Asian American dramatists and their relative invisibility in the arena of the Pulitzer Prize. The Board had been slow to award the achievements of minority writers, but has improved its track record in relation to women and African Americans. Hispanic playwrights are also receiving a higher profile, due to the recent Pulitzer Prizes in Drama awarded to *Anna in the Tropics* and *Water by the Spoonful*. So, although Hispanic writers like Cuban-American Nilo Cruz and Puerto Rican-Jewish-American Quiara Alegria Hudes are receiving increased recognition, American dramatists of Asian descent, such as Japanese-, Chinese-, and South Korean-American playwrights remain severely underrepresented as nominees and are completely absent as winners. Examining the writings of Pulitzer finalist and drama juror David Henry Hwang could be a fruitful place to launch an investigation on this subject.

Finally, one might further investigate the female playwrights contained in the first grouping of Pulitzer winners from 1921 to 1958. Although Craig included them in her study – and they are sporadically included in other Pulitzer collections – there may be more to question in regards to their wins. For instance, taking into consideration that the parameters for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama call for a work that was original, why would the Board award the prize
to *Look Homeward, Angel* by Ketti Frings (1958), especially when the novel by Thomas Wolfe was denied the prize? These and other questions persist, pointing to the possibility that there may be more to be learned from examining the early women who took home the prize.

Overall, this investigation into the relationship between female dramatists, the Pulitzer Prize, and American culture ends on a note of optimism. First of all, despite the fact that female dramatists still lag behind males in number of professional productions, they are gaining ground with the Pulitzer Prize. In the twentieth century, men won the prize 75 percent of the time, women won 11 percent, and no award was given 14 percent of the time. In contrast, the number of winning female playwrights doubled in the twenty-first century. Men’s numbers dropped from 75 percent to 72 percent, the number of “no awards” went down from 14 percent to 5 percent, and women’s numbers increased from 11 percent to 23 percent. In terms of nominations, the numbers for women in this century come close to equaling those of the men: Women were nominated for the prize 49 percent of the time to men’s 51 percent. One of the by-products of this increase in Pulitzer Prize nominations and wins for female dramatists in the twenty-first century is the raising of the profile of women playwrights in general.

Secondly, there is cause for optimism in regards to the changes in the structure and subject matter of the dramas that take home the prize. In the 1980s, the plays by women that won the Pulitzer were rather conventional in structure and in subject matter, with the major difference between their plays and the plays by males at the time being their focus on women. In

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657 Finalists during the twentieth-century were not considered because the Pulitzer organization did not begin announcing official nominees until 1983.
the 1990s, the female playwrights’ structure and subject matter became less conventional and less rooted in realism. By the 2000s, the women’s works were conventionally structured as realistic dramas, while harboring nonconventional aspects such as poetic allegory. And perhaps more importantly, the subject matter became extremely radical, at least in terms of the types of plays that usually garner the Pulitzer prize. Finally, the last two dramas, *Water by the Spoonful* by Quiara Alegría Hudes and *The Flick* by Annie Baker are distinctly not in the vein of the kinds of plays from the past that would be expected to win the Pulitzer, like recent winners *Clybourne Park* or *August: Osage County*. Overall one can see a decades-long shift taking place from an over-reliance on conventionally structured plays centering on the “average” American family – previously denoting white, middle class, with a male head of household – to works that portray increasingly more diversity and daring when addressing social and political issues in the United States and abroad. These are salutary changes regarding both the Pulitzer Prize and women playwrights. The Pulitzer Prize is becoming more inclusive of female dramatists and their plays, and ultimately, women’s contributions can be seen as slowly changing the face of the Pulitzer Prize in Drama. Despite its shortcomings, the Pulitzer Prize remains a positive force in the theatrical field and a true honor for the winners. Hopefully this dissertation will make a modest contribution to the fields of the Pulitzer Prize, dramatic literature by women, and American culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.
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