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Family Dynamics in American Literature: Genesis and Beyond

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FAMILY DYNAMICS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: GENESIS AND BEYOND

By

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To Brent. You are my myth—my perfect story.
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ABSTRACT

The family unit established by Adam and Eve in the first book of the Bible is often rewritten and resurrected in American literature. This dissertation explores that Genesis lore cycle in American literature as an emblem of changing family dynamics in the past two centuries. The family unit established by Adam and Eve is rewritten in order to address American literary themes such as fratricide, incest, marking, and more. I analyze texts ranging from very canonical American pieces, such as John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, to contemporary ones like Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Topdog Underdog* and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*. The fall, fratricide, and implied incest evident in Genesis appear in American literature amid new families who fail to mirror the utopian nuclear family set forth in the initial Edenic creation. These new American families maintain the lore cycle and combat the connotation that American families fit the Genesis first family mold. This study also incorporates findings from other disciplines, including history, sociology, and psychology. Utilizing this scholarship, I examine the ways in which American writers have resurrected Genesis amid major American historical changes such as civil rights, feminism, and more.
INTRODUCTION

European colonizers explored and conquered the American landscape as if to create a new beginning, a promised land—an Edenic garden, a Genesis. The European intrusion, contrary to such a utopian allusion however, lacks anything but gentle Edenic promises. The west was won; in fact the continent was won, without approval from any remaining native communities. In 1845, John O’Sullivan coined the term “manifest destiny” as the mission of the United States “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” (Stephanson xi). Using divinity as a source of approval, Americans birthed the American Dream. Deeply tied into our sense of the American Dream is the analogous concept of starting anew, hence a Genesis. American literature, as a reflection of its history and culture, has not forgotten its tie to Genesis and for the past two centuries has alluded to and modified the Genesis creation lore cycle. So why is the myth of the Genesis first family, its utopian garden, and subsequent murder so alive in American literature? An investigation into the nature of the first family (Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel) and its constantly modified appearance in American fiction will unfold within each chapter of this dissertation.

Specifically, this dissertation analyzes family dynamics in predominantly twentieth century American literature. I have chosen to analyze a selection of texts through the scrutiny of literary theory as well as other disciplines, including history, sociology, psychology, and more. This multi-disciplinary study will navigate a new understanding of American literature, one that evaluates familial roles, historical changes, and the use of lore cycles such as the Genesis lore cycle. It is not news that American authors constantly allude to Genesis in their writings, however subtle or obvious. Obviously John Steinbeck’s East of Eden
somehow relates to Eden. This dissertation analyzes the way American authors slice up the myth of the first family and recreate the tale in an American facet. This is telling of what American literature is and what the family has become.

Although the Genesis lore cycle dominates much of American literature, the cycle ultimately leads to a new understanding of what it means to be an American family. By rewriting such an austere myth in the American mindset, writers have opened doors for a broader understanding of the family in general. Civil rights advocated by black, female, and gay communities have all contributed to a new consciousness of what an American family really is, and Americans revise the mold on a daily basis.

The first family emulates the model nuclear family: husband, wife, and two children. It is pure, reaches a climactic crisis, falls, and eventually leads to murder. In the opening chapters of Genesis, God creates the world, the animals, and mankind. Although Adam and Eve are warned not to eat from the tree of knowledge (Genesis 2:17), the pair eventually disobey their creator and fall from grace for eating the forbidden fruit. God’s punishment for Eve is twofold: “trouble in pregnancy and your pain in giving birth. In spite of this, you will still have desire for your husband, yet you will be subject to him” (Genesis 3:16). As for Adam, God warns, “the ground will be under a curse. You will have to work hard all your life to make it produce enough food for you” (Genesis 3:17). After being cast out from the pure Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve bear two sons: Cain and Abel. Cain, the farmer, presents an offering to God of his most recent harvest. Abel, the shepherd, presents an offering to God of the first lamb born to one of his sheep. Without explanation, God prefers and praises Abel’s offering (Genesis 4:1-5). Out of anger and jealousy, Cain eventually “turned on his brother and killed him” (Genesis 4:8).
The stark contrast between the initial purity of the story juxtaposed with the fall and the murder creates a creation myth tied to the heart of American literature. The Genesis lore cycle is not just a well established creation myth; it is a solid traditional plot with a calm exposition, conflict, climax, and resolution. A dozen key elements exist in the first four chapters in Genesis that continually appear in American literature:

1. Family Violence/Fratricide
2. A Fall
3. Sibling Rivalry
4. Jealousy
5. Garden Setting/Orchard
6. Scowl
7. The Number Seven
8. Forgiveness
9. Marking
10. An Offering
11. Father’s Favoritism
12. Occupation Emphasis

These concepts appear more and more in twentieth century literature. Even the phrase “my brother’s keeper” has entered our lexicon as a common idiom in American cultural dictionaries.

The American pieces I’ve chosen to explore both consciously and subconsciously allude to Genesis, yet in the American style of “striking it new” have morphed the Genesis tale. Oftentimes the characters’ genders are reversed, new races are introduced, and elements like the murder and the curse are rearranged and initially unrecognizable. What I want to answer is: Why are American writers so reliant on the first family? How does the family operate and change over time in the course of the twentieth century and beyond? What makes this lore cycle so dominant? Who is left out of the power dynamic created by the nuclear first family? The fictional literary characters serve as my case
study families. Their creators, the many American writers who spin the lore cycle, each participate in the continuation of the creation myth.

The Lore Cycle

W.T. Lhamon, Jr. examines the lore cycles of blackface performance as it developed in America, Europe, and the initial European colonies and highlights the relevance of the academic study of lore cycles. He claims, “The concept of lore becomes a tool to recover emotional histories of groups who have left few conventional records….Whole groups of people are left out of expressive history if we do not learn to interpret the lore cycles” (70). Borrowing from Lhamon’s analysis in Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop, this dissertation explores characters who have been rewritten and reshaped over time and space within American literature. As Lhamon explains, “Lore moves in a cycle, therefore, not a circle. Lore moves and returns. Patterns of lore rise and fall” (71). Characters and concepts from the first family evolve, and I investigate their reappearance in literature under a myriad of settings. Having sustained particular attributes amid history, wars, politics, and more, these characters endure in fluctuating, yet constant, lore cycles.

Methodology

The methodology for this project crosses disciplines to understand American literature within a living culture and history. I intend to cross-reference the families in these texts with events such as war, civil rights movements, political upheavals, scientific inventions, cultural changes regarding the home, and much more. It is imperative that this study rely upon historical and cultural context in order to interpret the American family. Now that the twentieth century is behind us, the time has come to look back at the lore cycle to
see its ripples and recurrences. Eventually moving beyond Genesis, I intend to create a more definitive illustration of the American family at the dawn of the 21st century.

In addition to a historical and cultural perspective, this study also includes Sigmund Freud’s understanding of the family in his psychological research on family, sexual relationships, power, and the subconscious. Early in the twentieth century, Freud’s psychoanalytic theories revolutionized the way we understand the concept of family. Combining familial relationships and taboo sexual desires, Freud shocked the world. In “Totem and Taboo” he interprets family roles, occupation, and incest:

The son’s efforts to put himself in the place of the father-god became ever more obvious. The introduction of agriculture increased the son’s importance in the patriarchal family. He ventured upon new demonstrations of his incestuous libido, which found symbolic satisfaction in his cultivation of Mother Earth (507).

Referencing the ancient development of agriculture, Freud’s analysis of the son’s desire to cultivate mother earth implies another incestuous retelling of Genesis. Freud’s work will aid this dissertation in its focus on family sexuality and violence as well as the use of new terms in our lexicon such as the subconscious and repression.

Prior to the 20th century, family studies did not exist as an academic field. Now, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists have all contributed to the understanding of the family. I intend to examine a myriad of literary selections through the lens of these scientists by using my own training as a reader of literature. This is the most exciting aspect of this study: it is a hot topic in every discipline, yet the American writers of fictional families have rarely been studied in this light.
My approach to literature is that it reflects reality. If we begin to think about the ways in which families interact in literature, then we can begin to understand how families interact in real life. This dissertation highlights the undiscovered pieces of literary works which continue the Genesis first family lore cycle. I contend that American families conceptualize their own families much in the same way they perceive the first family, and that it dominates our subconsciousness. For starters, Genesis set the socially acceptable parameters for the wife’s placement in the family, for God states, “It is not good for the man to live alone. I will make a suitable companion to help him” (Genesis 2:18). Later, the married male and female have two children, particularly two sons with which to a) continue the family name and b) work and support the family. This structure exists in the late twentieth century as “White Christian men, who, by the tens of thousands in the late 1990s, attended Promise Keepers revivals that focused on renewing their traditional roles as husbands and fathers” (Farrell 3). The Promise Keepers epitomize the continuation of the biblical lore cycle and its ties to the American family. The first family’s familial dynamic dominates the American mindset founded by Christians intent on building a new Eden.

According to Betty Farrell, American families feel “an acute sense of loss and nostalgia” for the American nuclear family (1). The Genesis myth set forth such a strong example, that many families obviously mourn the loss of what Adam and Eve initially established. Genesis defines family roles and cuts out a pattern for future families. As Freud notes, a son’s place in the family establishes the family economics and promises progeny. Like Cain and Abel, sons marry, produce offspring, and even build new cities as Cain does in exile. Although Genesis creates a nuclear family in the first family, Cain and Abel’s progeny had to be invented:

We know that Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel, but the
Bible tells us nothing about any daughters. If no daughters were born, how did the human race ever continue to propagate? Faced with this dilemma, some ancient interpreters simply supplied the missing female(s) (Kugel 87-88).

Women in the Genesis myth are negated, ignored, and assumed. They have no role, yet everyone knows they have to be there in order to make this myth a creation myth. This dissertation highlights the many American writers who have pulled these female characters out of the shadows. The affection for the first family and its utopian nuclear status also turns a blind eye to the fall and to Cain’s subsequent murder. How would the lore cycle change if Cain and Abel were daughters? How can marginalized families such as a single mother or a gay couple fit into this equation and consider themselves normal? My argument is that they cannot, and American writers’ attempts to reshape the lore cycle have been attempts to make the Genesis lore cycle more inclusive. The American family is homogenized just like our towns and cities. In many American cities, people can drive down most streets and not know if they are in Buffalo, Atlanta, or Santa Fe. The same Chili’s, Office Depot, Toys-R-Us, and Target signs appear in the same order. In our quest to be homogenized in the family and emulate the Genesis first family, we deeply impair the functionality of the family.

The Genesis myth is an important rhetoric to reproduce a certain ideology to empower the few and dis-empower the many. If we are to accept gay marriage, single mothers, and non-nuclear families in general, then we have to accept that their behaviors are normal. To say that they are normal destroys the American infrastructure that cherishes its deep ties to the first family. Farrell speaks of the “dominant family norm” in her text, *Family: The Making of an Idea, and Institution, and a Controversy in American Culture*:

One common fallacy that some sociologists have promoted in studying
the family at the societal level is the equation of its prevalence with the idea that it is functionally necessary. The assumption that societies ‘need’ families in order to continue, based on the observation that some form of family exists in all known societies, ignores the range of variation in or the exceptions to this institution. Individuals and subgroups within all societies have constructed alternative arrangements to the traditional family of parents and their children. But the very fact that they are considered alternative or experimental social organizations suggest how powerful the dominant family norm continues to be (6).

Everyone wants to be accepted at his/her most vulnerable points, and America is slow to accept the marginalized families who desperately try to gain normative status. Admitting that a non-nuclear family creates productivity and familial love like the mythical nuclear family is an endeavor America has pursued only as of late. When politicians and celebrities admit they are gay or were raised by half siblings in poverty-stricken environments, the American community casts its judgmental eye upon them. By announcing these actions, I hope we can assess the value we place on the first family.

There has to be tolerance for the non-nuclear family. Even a nuclear family with a mother and father and two children that alters the roles by a fraction still deviates from the traditional lore. Novels such as E.L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* integrate adopted parents to challenge the nuclear norms. As well, poetry by Mina Loy and Audre Lorde integrates domestic violence and homosexuality which also challenge utopian nuclear norms. By combating the rigid lines defining the family, the texts in this dissertation enable acceptance of new American family structures.
Exposition and History

Unlike most countries in the world, America is a young country, only containing approximately two hundred years of history with which to gauge the American family. This makes the study of the American family condensed and complex. Additionally, the country burgeoned from a mixture of immigrants from all over Europe, Asia, and Africa all of whom emigrated for different reasons. The “melting pot” theory defines the United States as a culturally diverse continent. However, the power dynamic of who made decisions and who did not has changed over time. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation outlawing slavery in the United States. In 1920, the United States signed the nineteenth amendment declaring women had the right to vote. In the latter half of the twentieth century, both African Americans and women of the United States revolutionized the country by declaring their lawful and equal presence in this country with the civil rights and feminist movements. These monumental changes drastically altered twentieth century American family dynamics.

One particular focus in this study is the place of the African American family within the white dominant culture. Most African Americans came to the United States by force during the period of legalized slavery. Caught in the crosswind between a burgeoning American family and a restricted slavery family dynamic, many slave couples were only allowed to cohabitate in order to reproduce more slaves. Official marriage ceremonies were not recognized nor recorded amongst the slaves, and only sometimes was there a celebration by “jumping the broomstick.” This cultural tradition exists today, and many African American weddings reproduce the broomstick ceremony in order to pay homage to their past. Because of the non-nuclear familial inception of the African Americans in this country, one cannot be surprised at the variety with
which African Americans today represent the family. With such history in mind, Betty Friedan advocates a more inclusive definition of a family:

I have been interested in studies of the African American community that show the strength of family structures that do not fit the pattern of mama, papa, and two children. There are structures, for instance, that take care of age in ways that the small nuclear middle-class American family does not. Our thinking has to be open. We can have family values without perhaps thinking only of one kind of family (104).

The country’s history, albeit a short one, cannot possibly be captured in one brief synopsis. The point is that as the face of America changed with immigration and political movements, so too did the face of the family. At the heart of everyone’s purpose in modifying the laws of the country regarding race, gender, immigration, and education exists the deep sense of providing for the progeny. What challenges the norms for the American family is also open to debate. John Leo, of *U.S. News and World Report* argues, “Behavior and values have nothing to do with the crisis of the American family. Everything is economic” (Friedan 97). Others argue that the American family is dependent upon religious convictions as evidenced by the Promise Keepers and other contemporary religious organizations. This dissertation will examine a variety of factors that lead to the American family’s place within the Genesis lore cycle. American writers resurrect Genesis and boldly claim the myth as their own.

Unfortunately, the first family lore cycle only prescribes one form of family. The ways in which American writers have molded the myth to fit the non-normative status and to reflect the changing cultural consciousness of the United States enables America to come to terms with its multifaceted self. It will assist family studies as it enters literary scholarship.
Chapter 1: The American Garden of Eden

In Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!,* a narrative secret emerges through the character, Carl Linstrum. In a moment of wisdom, Carl relates, “Isn’t it queer: there are only two or three human stories and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years” (60). The “fiercely” repeated story Cather secretes through Carl is the Genesis lore cycle. It contains the archetypal garden and orchard, focuses on the fruits of land and labor, contains bloodshed, and familial violence. Like her contemporary, John Steinbeck, Cather joins the lot of American novelists rewriting and reshaping the ancient Biblical lore cycle of the first family. Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* and Cather’s *O Pioneers!* translate the tale in an American facet, bringing the revised myth both a modern and uniquely American quality.

This chapter argues that Steinbeck and Cather rewrite the Genesis lore cycle by rupturing traditional familial roles set forth by the ancient first family. While it is no surprise that these authors allude to Genesis, they also maintain the consistency of the lore cycle through familial violence and emphasis on land and farm. Rather than rewrite the evil spirited murderous Cain, Steinbeck introduces Cathy Ames, a woman who traverses a series of her own violent acts against her family from murdering her own parents to attempted murder of her own child(ren). Often shadowed by the Cain and Abel brother similarities in characters, Charles/Adam and Cal/Aron, Cathy represents a new Cain as both woman and mother. Additionally, Adam Trask’s cook, Lee, circumvents traditional family dynamics by becoming the feminine parental figure needed to raise Cal and Aron and a spousal figure to his employer, Adam Trask.

As well, Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!* defies nuclear family models by acquiring the head-of-family status occupied by Genesis characters, Adam and
Cain. As a woman without her own descendants, she ruptures the doctrine of Eve’s purpose in the Garden of Eden and breaks the dominant cataloguing of names present in the first books of the Bible. Cather morphs the sibling violence into a lover’s dispute and the familial bloodshed appears between husband and wife, not brother and brother. This eventual fall, in an orchard no less, arises not from temptation to eat an apple but by the sin of adultery. These American motifs of modified familial roles and changing forms of sin enable readers to recognize the “two or three human stories” repeated through time while also recognizing the consistency of the lore cycle in family bloodshed, home, and land—all of which characterize the American literary landscape.

Chapter 2: The Blood Crieth Out to Us: Cain and Abel

The very first act of familial violence occurs in the ancient story of Cain and Abel when Cain “turned on his brother and killed him” (Genesis 4:8). Representations of these archetypal characters slide through time and emerge in 19th and 20th century American literature. By examining the texts of Nathaniel Hawthorne (The House of the Seven Gables), Mark Twain (Adventures of Huckleberry Finn), Ralph Ellison (Invisible Man), and others, this chapter contends that the Cain-Abel lore cycle in these novels also incorporates issues of race and gender. The authors of the above texts, albeit subconsciously, have resurrected the Cain-Abel theme amidst brothers and sisters, whites and blacks, as well as in clothing, cross dressing, scars, and facial features.

Although short of the twentieth century, The House of the Seven Gables and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn exemplify an important step in the Cain and Abel lore cycle. Hepzibah Pyncheon and Cain are marked characters, Hepzibah with her scowl and Cain with his mark from God to protect him from murderers. Hepzibah lives in the house of seven gables as a home, but it is not hers.
Although stationary, she is just as homeless as the marked man in the Land of Nod. Hepzibah marks herself with her turban and black silk, and her scowl and attire tell the world she bears self-inflicted sin: guilt. In the same vein, Huckleberry Finn suspends himself between life on the river and life in a home. On the river, he is naked with Jim in his natural element. At his several “homes,” he is uncomfortably marked by man-made clothes. In addition, Pap marks Huck with his whippings. The marks on the river protect him, whereas the marks in the supposed safety of a home harm him. Like Cain, Huck is a wanderer, a nomad of the Mississippi River, escaping the anger of “the father.”

This chapter then moves into the twentieth century and explores the Cain and Abel motif evident in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, and Suzan-Lori Parks’ play, *Topdog Underdog*. As centuries evolved and the lore traversed cultures and generations, the Cain-Abel theme manifests itself in these texts amid new races and new genders. Cain and his violent story surface with an eerie presence within these selections.

**Chapter 3: African American Women and the Family**

Eve’s character in the Genesis myth possesses two main features. First, she is created to provide a “companion” for Adam. Second, after eating the forbidden fruit, she is cursed to have difficult childbirth. On the other hand, the myth emphasizes the occupations of all three men in the first family: Adam to toil the land, Cain the farmer, and Abel the shepherd. Eve’s character establishes the boundaries of a patriarchal society in which women are merely wives and mothers. In other words, the image of the “perfect” nuclear family formed. Thousands of years later, twentieth-century African American women writers evaluate Genesis as both a patriarchal and white dominated myth. Their texts
address African American women in regards to family violence and to community violence as a metaphor for the extended family.

Specifically, this chapter focuses on three African American female writers who continue the Genesis lore cycle, yet rewrite it in order to combat the power dynamic in patriarchal literature. These writers are Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Sapphire. With feminist scholarship from Hélène Cixous, Simone, De Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, and more, the chapter assesses the place of the African American female in the context of American family dynamics. Beginning their careers in the 1960s, both Rich and Walker joined the feminist movement and much of their writing encompasses civil rights agendas for women, black Americans, and lesbians. Reshaping Genesis, their works challenge those norms while also discussing Genesis features such as family, home, bloodshed, jealousy, markings, and more.

Chapter 4: Family Violence Aint What it Used to Be

A popular theme in American literature is that of family violence, however, the execution of its blatant appearance in fictional families varies from generation to generation. This chapter examines family violence as it reflects and rewrites Abel’s murder and Cain and Abel’s incest. I address three pieces in this particular analysis: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender is the Night, Mina Loy’s Songs to Joannes, and E.L. Doctorow’s The Book of Daniel. Spanning a variety of genres, these texts explore the use of family violence in different facets. Moving away from sibling rivalry, this chapter contends that the twentieth century has enabled family violence to appear in a society coming to terms with its burgeoning definition, both in law and literature.

Early works like Tender is the Night and Songs to Joannes speak of family violence in private code. Fitzgerald inserts family incest into his novel, almost
so quickly that readers might miss it. Nicole Warren’s father confesses, “We were just like lovers—and then all at once we were lovers—and ten minutes after it happened I could have shot myself” (Fitzgerald 129). This new form of family violence, a father-daughter sexual relationship, reshapes the popular Genesis fratricide in several ways. First, it resurrects the often-overlooked premier form of family violence in Genesis: incest. Nicole Warren’s entire life reflects this repressed love affair with her father. It symbolically murders her adult life which includes many stays in psychiatry wards and a failed marriage.

Mina Loy’s famous epic poem, *Songs to Joannes*, is often read by scholars as a sexual “shocker.” By historicizing domestic violence and offering a close reading of the *Songs to Joannes*. I show that the poem sequence portrays the characteristics of a physically and sexually violent relationship. My discussion navigates Loy’s imagery regarding flesh, blood, battles, and physical space between the lovers. Contrary to the popular belief that *Songs to Joannes* was simply a “sexual shocker,” I contend that the poem makes a statement for the American modernist movement (Morse 14). By creating an ambiguous voice, Loy speaks for all modern women and enables them to have a candid voice, not just about intercourse, but about the sexual (and physical) tension of love and hate that exists behind a family’s closed doors. Ultimately, this chapter shows American literature able to accept and enter into a new understanding of family violence, one saturated with incest, domestic violence, and more.

**Chapter 5: The Future Family**

The final chapter in this dissertation examines pivotal points in time concerning American family dynamics. I begin with a reading of Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) as an example of the family dynamics at the turn of the twentieth century. Turning away from Victorian family values, the
temporary family James creates with the governess and housekeeper elicits a change to come in future family units. This change encompasses new family structures which cross class boundaries, welcomes homosexuality, and integrates legal adoption agencies. In addition to *The Turn of the Screw*, I close with two pieces that represent the turn of the twenty-first century. These texts are Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) and Jodi Picoult’s *My Sister’s Keeper* (2004). Both of these texts exemplify contemporary American literature still coming to terms with family violence, bloodshed, and nostalgia for the perfect nuclear family. *My Sister’s Keeper*, in particular, reminds us that the Genesis lore lives more than ever in our lexicon, our ideology, and our art. Picoult, a current bestselling writer, introduces Anna Fitzgerald, a protagonist genetically engineered merely to aid her leukemia-ridden sister, Kate. The initial need of Ana’s cord blood turns into blood transfusions, bone marrow, and eventually a kidney. This novel resurrects Genesis by transferring the fratricide into a sorority where one sister must murder parts of herself so that the other may live. This novel tells of a new dawn in American literature, one that recognizes a changing relationship between American families and Genesis. This change stems from a growing relationship between science, technology, and humanity.

Ultimately, it is not enough just to say these writers, whether consciously or subconsciously, *refer* to Genesis. It is more important that this study examines the changes in the lore over time as it reflects and reinvents a new understanding of the American family. We miss a vast amount of American cultural value if we fail to recognize the influence of John Steinbeck’s Trask family or Alice Walker’s Johnson family. I do not propose to read the future for American literary families, but I examine topics such as 1) the nuclear family phenomenon, 2) the Genesis lore cycle, 3) violence in the home, 4) power dynamics, 5) familial roles,
and much more. The family lives and evolves like a growing organism, and one can only interpret this literature within the realm of the past and the present. The Genesis lore cycle transgresses boundaries of literary genres and generations, and this literary study seeks to evaluate its ever-changing evolution.
CHAPTER 1: THE AMERICAN GARDEN OF EDEN

John Steinbeck and Willa Cather shared time and space writing early twentieth century American fiction concerning America’s manifest destiny. Their characters often settle in the west and persevere amid the hardships of economic failures, family tragedies, and variegated climates. The fictional rural families each writer creates exemplify the hardworking spirit of “striking it new” in an American agricultural landscape. Like the Genesis myth of a new world filled with land curses, temptation, and hard work, their fictional families also mirror many of the same elements in the creation myth so briefly described in the first book of the Bible. Often rewritten and interpreted as lore, the Genesis creation story and Steinbeck and Cather’s texts coincide in a myriad of forms. Specifically, Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* and Cather’s *O Pioneers!* share the continuation of the Genesis lore cycle in twentieth century American fiction. They pick up the Genesis myth just as “the larks in this country that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years” (Cather 60). Writing
during a time when the word “family” sought its own redefinition, Steinbeck and Cather utilized the Genesis myth as their model for striking it new.

Steinbeck and Cather rewrite the Genesis lore cycle by rupturing traditional familial roles set forth by the ancient first family. With twentieth century settings, the novels update the Genesis myth by emphasizing the monumental historical changes recently made to American family dynamics. Steinbeck and Cather create strong female characters in Cathy Ames and Alexandra Bergson who greatly contribute to the changing power dynamic in American families not evident in the Genesis “first” family. They also rewrite the elements present in the first few chapters in Genesis by changing the settings, rearranging the archetypal qualities such as the mark, the garden setting, family violence, jealousy, and more. While it is no surprise that these authors resurrect the Genesis first family, they also maintain the consistency of the lore cycle and create their own updated American versions.

East of Eden

In the Genesis creation myth, Adam represents the first human on earth, and in Hebrew, his name translates as “mankind.” Not surprising then, John Steinbeck’s East of Eden commences with none other than his lead character: Adam Trask. Adam Trask’s given name resurrects the Genesis myth’s very first character: Adam. Adam in Genesis and Adam Trask are both farmers who bear the burden of toiling the land. God puts Adam in a mythical imaginary garden “to dress it and to keep it” and Adam Trask traverses the country and settles in Steinbeck’s imaginary Salinas Valley (Genesis 2:15). Like the lore cycle of a story passed down over generations, the Salinas Valley itself changes ownership. Steinbeck notes, “First there were Indians…Then the hard, dry Spaniards came…Then the Americans came” (6-7). Steinbeck borrows the Genesis myth
much like the Trask family (or any American family) borrows their land. The land and the lore parallel as passed down, changing, motifs of the American literary and literal landscape. The land and the lore of the land, whether it be a creation myth or not, are archetypal elements in any human history.

Like Adam’s relationship with God, Adam Trask has trouble accepting the wishes of his father. Mirroring the discourse between God and Adam in the Garden of Eden, Steinbeck recreates a similar scene between Adam Trask and his father, Cyrus:

Cyrus took Adam to walk with him one late afternoon, and the black conclusions of all of his study and his thinking came out and flowed with a kind of thick terror over his son. He said, ‘I’ll have you know that a soldier is the most holy of all humans because he is the most tested—most tested of all. I’ll try to tell you. Look now—in all the history men have been taught that killing of men is an evil thing not to be countenanced. Any man who kills must be destroyed because this is a great sin, maybe the worst sin we know. And then we take a soldier and put murder in his hands and we say to him, ‘Use it well, use it wisely.’ We put no checks on him. Go out and kill as many of a certain kind or classification of your brothers as you can’ (24).

Cyrus speaks of a paradox: to murder is sin, yet he must murder his “brothers” in warfare. God, like Cyrus, puts Adam in the same predicament with the temptation of the tree of life. Cyrus’ words echo God’s warning to Adam, “You may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except the tree that gives knowledge of what is good and what is bad” (Genesis 2:16). Although Cyrus’ warning concerns warfare, it speaks of the evolution of sin and murder, elements in this scene and Genesis.
Adam Trask’s relationship with his father suffers as a result of being “sent out” into the world. He explains that Cyrus “tested me and hurt me and punished me and finally he sent me out like a sacrifice, maybe to make up for something” (69). In the same sense, Adam in Genesis is also tested with the temptation of the tree of life and “sent out” of the garden for his own weakness. God pronounces judgment on Adam and exclaims, “You listened to your wife and ate the fruit which I told you not to eat. Because of what you have done, the ground will be under a curse” (Genesis 3:17). Unfortunately for Adam Trask, his curse is twofold: his future farm and his future wife. Both Adams enter into relationships with women who are blamed for their fall. Their weakness exists in their naiveté. Charles Trask, the dominant brother, breaks one of the Ten Commandments stated in Genesis, and rather than fratricide, the sin between the brothers is that Charles commits adultery with Adam’s wife, Cathy. Even after years of turmoil between the brothers, Adam cannot believe that Charles could have “thr[own] back the blankets” to receive his own wife. He innocently asks Cathy, “Do you think I could believe that of my own brother?” (322). Still early in his text, John Steinbeck foreshadows the many Genesis revisions to come. He has begun to spin the Genesis lore cycle in Adam Trask amid a twentieth century American family.

Initially, Steinbeck creates a Cain/Abel relationship in his premiere East of Eden generation, Charles and Adam Trask. The brothers immediately emblematize Cain and Abel in the Genesis creation myth. Genesis states that “the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering. But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect” (Genesis 4:4-5). Later, “It came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him” (Genesis 4:8). Likewise, Charles, jealous that their father loves Adam more than himself “moved close and struck [Adam] with his bat” over a simple game of
peewee (23). His domineering ways prevail throughout their childhood, and Adam Trask constantly fears his brother’s temper and falls victim to his violence. By keeping the Abel figure alive, Steinbeck enables Adam to straddle the roles set forth in Genesis.

The details of Cain’s fratricide are few. In the fourth chapter of Genesis, the jealous Cain asks Abel to go out into the fields where “Cain turned on his brother and killed him” (Genesis 4:8). Over the centuries, scholars and artists have interpreted the murderous scene in a plethora of contexts. Below are a few of the many illustrations in which an artist recreates the murder:

![Image of Bartolomeo Manfredi's Cain Killing Abel, c. 1610.](image1)

Figure 2. Bartolomeo Manfredi. *Cain Killing Abel*, c. 1610.

![Image of Gustave Doré's The Death of Abel, 1866.](image2)

Figure 3. Gustave Doré. *The Death of Abel*, 1866.
In each illustration, Cain possesses a weapon, although no weaponry exists in the Genesis text itself. Each scene imagines Cain standing over Abel in a figuratively dominant position. As well, the works all maintain a rural setting with evidence of trees and shrubbery. These artists transfer the lore into visual art just as Steinbeck transfers the lore into American fiction. Like “the larks...singing the same five notes,” one can only assume the myth will continue and the token
elements will morph into new illustrations as we move into the twenty-first century and beyond.

The mark that God put “on Cain to warn anyone who met him not to kill him” while in exile for his sin also endures constant revision (Genesis 4:15). The mark itself has traversed a myriad of distinguishing features. In Ruth Mellinkoff’s, *The Mark of Cain*, she coins the many versions as “variegated images,” ranging from painting, burning, tattooing, and cutting (xi, 24). The most common interpretation in today’s mindset is that the mark was some form of tattoo placed on Cain’s forehead, but interpretations of the mark range from horns, to an invisible aura, and to what appears as a dance (Melinkoff 57 and Lapple 95).

Charles Trask is the first *East of Eden* character to possess the biblical mark. Steinbeck’s own delivery refers to the mark as a tattoo. As Charles worked, “he drove his bar deep behind [the stone] and threw his whole weight back. The bar slipped and its upper end crashed against his forehead….When the wound did heal, it left a long and crinkled scar…and made a kind of tattoo” (46). He writes to Adam that “Somebody marked me like a cow….it just seems like I was marked” (46). This violent act, in a rural field no less, alters the original tale by juxtaposing agriculture, violence, and marking.

Ricardo Quinones’ text, *The Changes of Cain*, explores the literary function of literature that alludes to Cain. In his study, the lost and sacrificed brother “becomes the shadowy other – or the double – when the self struggles to assert its autonomy” (Quinones 39). So, once Adam leaves for California, Charles no longer has a rival brother and creates a “shadowy other” brother in a metaphorical fight with himself out in the fields. This concept will be explored later in this chapter when Cathy Ames stages her own murder, and in chapter two when Huckleberry Finn does as well.
Marked by his own violent aggression, Charles Trask resurrects the temperament so often identified with Cain’s character type. It is important to note that neither Cain’s nor Charles’ marks were given to them naturally by birth. Steinbeck highlights this in a very minor character who foils the Charles/Cain temperament. Adam meets a bartender who has “a strawberry mark on his forehead” and the bartender relates, “Birthmark...gets bigger every year” (47). Although his birthmark “gets bigger every year,” the bartender cannot exemplify evil and aggression. His mark was not brought about because of his actions and directly contrasts that of Cain and Charles. The difference is free will, as described by biblical scholar Zvi Adar:

Man’s experience of evil originates not in his destiny or in the will of God, but in himself and is a result of his own sin. God endows Man with free will at birth, and he acts in accordance with that will (23).

The birthmark and the mark “after” birth represent two different versions of how characters cope with free will. Charles Trask and Cain ultimately had the choice whether or not to commit their violent acts.

Although Steinbeck asserts the Cain and Abel lore cycle by marking Charles as his violent Cain figure, he modifies the parameters. First, Charles inflicts his mark upon himself rather than having it bestowed upon him by a deity. Also, Steinbeck scrambles the Genesis settings, having the scene of Charles’ mark happen in a field where the scene of Abel’s death occurs. Additionally, Adam, the weaker victimized “Abel” brother becomes the wanderer and is “cast out” of Connecticut by his war veteran father who intends to make a soldier out of him. Although separated by years and miles, the mark always connects the two characters, much as Cain will always be marked by his fratricide.
Most significant in the novel is that Charles (as Cain) does not murder Adam (as Abel). Still, a form of a mark intimately ties the brothers together despite the thousands of miles between them. Years after Charles marks himself, “The brothers were strangers now. They shook hands at the station, and Charles watched the train pull out and rubbed his scar” (132). Steinbeck juxtaposes the distance between the brothers both literally and figuratively. As the train pulls out, the brothers are separating. As Charles rubs his scar, they are permanently connected. Steinbeck potently rewrites this myth and deviates from it just as much as he follows it. This indicates that in order to “raise Cain” or resurrect the lore, Steinbeck doesn’t feel the fratricide truly resurrects a Cain/Abel relationship. The violence between the brothers, their relationship with “the father,” their occupations, and ultimately their physical separation contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the Cain/Abel motif. Throughout this dissertation, sibling rivalry will constitute its own Cain/Abel resurrection and may or may not include murder.

After quitting the Army and disappointing his father, Adam Trask begins to emblematize a true wanderer. “He rolled a blanket and started slowly eastward” (55) just as Cain “went away from the Lord’s presence and lived in a land called Wandering, which is East of Eden” (Genesis 4:16). Later Charles asks him, “Where have you been” to which Adam responds, “Mostly wandering around all over” (61). When Adam finally settles, Steinbeck’s imaginary Salinas Valley epitomizes the new city that Cain establishes as the founder of cities.

As the Abel figure in his relationship with Charles, the Cain figure in his relationship with wandering, and the Adam figure in his relationship with his father, Adam Trask straddles the Genesis lore cycle as three archetypal characters. With this, Steinbeck creates a more dynamic version of Genesis in which one character encompasses three. Adam Trask’s own character possesses
an awareness of this when he tells his neighbor, Samuel Hamilton, “Look, Samuel, I mean to make a garden of my land. Remember my name is Adam. So far I’ve had no Eden” (167). Steinbeck’s tale symbolizes the basic American motif of striking it new in a new land. Having been driven out of Connecticut, like the Puritans driven out of England, Adam finds his manifest destiny in California. When he recollects “back to his father’s house, to the farm, the town, to his brother’s face, there was blackness over all of it…and he shook off the memories” (155). He has literally created a new city for himself, a Genesis from east coast to west.

It has long been contested whether or not Cain and Abel had wives, and if they did, from where they came. As I mentioned in the introduction, many scholars simply “supplied” the missing wives, although they are never officially placed in the story. Furthermore, the number of wives/sisters for Cain and Abel was also contested:

If Adam and Eve had two daughters, that would have provided a wife for both Cain and Abel. But what if only one daughter had been born (as some…sources suggest)? It occurred to some interpreters that this might have been the real reason for Cain’s killing his brother? (Kugel 87-8). The Genesis myth contains holes with which ancient interpreters “supplied” missing elements. It only makes sense, then, that twentieth century writers like Steinbeck and Cather would add their own American interpretation. Obviously, part of the lore cycle from the beginning has been to interpret and modify it. Given so few details and centuries of evolution, the myth easily falls victim to revision.

With that said, Steinbeck’s answer to the “missing females” question is Cathy Ames. Rather than rewrite the evil spirited murderous Cain in one male character, Steinbeck creates Cathy, a woman who traverses a series of her own
violent acts against her family from murdering her own parents to attempted infanticide. Often overlooked by the Cain and Abel theme in characters, Charles/Adam and Cal/Aron, Cathy Ames represents a new Cain as both woman and mother. Cathy shares Cain’s sin for murdering a family member, his mark, as well as his famous “scowl.” With changing women’s roles in the early twentieth century comes changing character types proposed by ancient stock choices. Steinbeck’s Cathy Ames epitomizes a new way to “raise” Cain. She embodies the ancient character and deserves just as much credit for doing so as any male in the novel.

As a young girl, Cathy locks her parents in their house and sets it on fire. Like Charles, she also murders her own “shadowy other” by committing artificial self-homicide. During the fire, she stages an artificial murder of herself. Steinbeck writes, “In the carriage house there was what is called ‘signs of struggle’ — in this case a broken box, a shattered carriage lamp, scraped marks in the dust, and straw on the floor. The onlookers might not have known these as signs of struggle had there not been a quantity of blood on the floor” (87). Cathy’s carefully premeditated murder of her family member parallels Genesis as Cain prepares for his own murder: “Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let’s go out in the fields.’ When they were out in the fields, Cain turned on his brother and killed him” (Genesis 4:8).

The family, during Steinbeck and Cather’s lifetime, metamorphosed into an entirely different concept. Cathy Ames is a pre-cursor to the many sociological changes ahead for family dynamics in the twentieth century. Betty Farrell emphasizes the changing focus in Steinbeck’s setting from the family as institution to the family as a series of “relationships” and “internal division of labor”:
American family sociology in the first half of the twentieth century gradually shifted from emphasizing the societal role of the institution to focusing on the dynamics of family relationships and the internal division of labor (Farrell 8-9).

Cathy’s character crumbles any notion of the standard form of family institution and motherhood as set forth in ancient literature like the Bible. She commits adultery and murder, attempts infanticide, fails to raise her children, leaves her husband, and becomes a cutthroat business woman and prostitute. Her character emphasizes the lengths to which women have gone and possibly will go in the future to rupture the austerity in familial roles of the early twentieth century. Cathy Ames represents a hyperbole of possibilities available to modern woman. Her humanity, her pain, and her complex reasons for the crimes listed earlier have barely been evaluated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Linda Gordon’s 1990 scholarship on feminism and family violence argues that motherhood still lacks the scholarship needed to understand its intricacies:

Feminist scholars have studied the social organization of mothering in theory but not the actual experiences of child raising, and the movement as a whole has not significantly influenced child welfare debates or policies. When such issues emerge publicly, feminists too often assume that women’s and children’s interests always coincide (183).

Cathy Ames’ evil nature and un-mother-like qualities may have been misunderstood emotions, as characters like hers were few and far between. In an institution of rigid familial roles, women like Cathy Ames, who never wanted to raise children, could not exist without an evil stigma. Could she really be a desperate character crying out for help and not the evil murderous woman she so often appears to be? Readers are often sensitive to Cain’s crime because he
was subject to God’s obvious discrimination. Perhaps Steinbeck parallels the same social stigma with Cathy, pushing the boundaries of socially acceptable “crimes” in a rapidly changing society.

Cathy Ames’ evil (or not so evil) character is complex. Samuel Hamilton, a symbol of humanity and neighborly love in the text, admits he does not like Cathy (192). When he looks in her eyes, he thinks to himself that “they were not human eyes…not like the eyes of man” (167). Years after murdering her own parents in Connecticut, Cathy builds a mother-daughter relationship with her employer, Faye. Prior to murdering Faye, Cathy freely admits her own violent nature. She tells Faye,

Dear Mother, sweet fat Mother, take down the pants of one of my regulars. Look at the heelmarks on the groin—very pretty. And the little cuts that bleed for a long time. Oh, Mother dear, I’ve got the sweetest set of razors all in a case—and so sharp, so sharp (234).

Juxtaposing physical violence with sexual fantasy, Steinbeck connects binaries like pleasure/pain and good/evil. Is Cathy evil for contributing to the close proximity of these polar opposites? Always dominant, her complex character may have actually loved Faye, loved her parents, and possibly loved her sons. It is possible that she transferred unknown feminist aggression to the above just as Cain transferred his rage at God onto Abel. Quinones coins this transfer as “displaced anger that is really directed at God, against the figure that bestows favor so arbitrarily” (16). In addition, Zvi Adar describes Cain much as one could now possibly view Cathy:

The story [of Cain and Abel] simply reveals a basic mechanism of the human soul which is stressed in modern psychology. The source of man’s aggression and violence is in his feelings of frustration. Because of Cain’s frustration he is filled with anger and violence, and since he cannot vent
his violence against God he diverts it against Abel….The murder is perfectly understandable and the explanation is inherent in the story. The author wishes to stress that murder is plausible, that it is not actuated by a disposition of evil people to commit wrong, just because they are evil. There is no evidence that Cain was fundamentally a bad man. On the contrary, he is an ordinary man; the story shows how an ordinary man becomes wicked out of frustration, bitterness, hatred, and jealousy (27).

Steinbeck consistently weaves Cathy into the Genesis lore cycle by spreading her into multiple symbolic roles. Her three names emulate her shape-shifting nature: Cathy Ames, Cathy Trask, and Kate. Like her husband, Adam Trask, Cathy embodies multiple characters from Genesis including Cain, the missing/provided female character(s), and Satan. Adam and Charles find their unnamed female lead much like the “supplied” female(s) in the Bible. One night, she simply appears on their step like the miraculous birth of a child in a “bundle of rags…oozing blood” (109). She immediately symbolizes Cain by being marked in the center of her forehead. Adam views her wounds and tells her, “That’s a bad one on your forehead. I’m afraid you’ll have a scar there” (110). Realizing its permanence, she later retorts, “Adam, the scar on my forehead isn’t going to go away… [and] it turns red if you touch it” (158). In Steinbeck’s own narration, “It looked like a huge thumbprint” (158).

During her child labor, Cathy bites Samuel, who has come to aid her in the process. Her act reflects Cathy’s connection to the ancient tempter of all time: the snake. After the bite, Samuel retorts, “Humans are more poisonous than snakes” (191). This scene exchanges the gender dynamic that echoes throughout East of Eden. Although giving birth as the would-be mother figure, Cathy represents the dominant, conniving male snake. She does not require any medicine, does not whimper, nor does she express that she experiences any pain. Her midwives are
male characters, Samuel Hamilton and Adam Trask’s cook, Lee. Her weak husband “turns green” and leaves the room at the sight of the blood.

In addition to her strength and un-femininity, Cathy also warrants Cain’s resurrection in her “scowl.” Steinbeck writes:

Cathy looked after [Lee] and her eyebrows drew down in a scowl. She was not afraid of Lee, yet she was not comfortable with him either. But he was a good and respectful servant—the best. And what harm could he do her? (159).

Unfortunately, Steinbeck’s ironic use of the word “harm” does emblematize the future harm Lee commits upon her: he takes over her role and raises her children. He usurps her function as mother, whether she wanted it or not. Because the twins live, despite her attempted infanticide during pregnancy, Lee and Adam triumph over Cathy by raising the boys. Lee circumvents traditional family dynamics by becoming the feminine parental figure needed to raise Cal and Aron and a symbolic spousal figure to his employer, Adam Trask.

Like a stereotypical American family, Adam and Lee operate on a shared household budget and speak of their money in first person plural. Adam asks Lee, much like one spouse may ask another, “Have we got enough money to send him to college, Lee?” Without a pause, Lee responds, “If we’re careful and he doesn’t develop expensive tastes” (485). They put the boys to bed while Lee sits “with his darning basket, mending the long black stocking the twins wore to school.” Like the token husband, Adam sits nearby “reading the Scientific American” (430). Lee worries about Adam much as a wife worries when her husband is away. He laments to the twins, “I wish your father would come back. He worries me” (569). Lee’s character, although minor, foreshadows a complex shift in family dynamics and racial integration to come in the second half of the twentieth century.
The Trask family mirrors any American family of the time, except that Lee alters the formula by being both Asian and male. Lee is intelligent and plays the role of a trickster. He speaks broken English to those who expect it of him and speaks flawless English with enlightened men like Samuel Hamilton. His role continues to evolve as he becomes the wife and mother in the Trask household. Steinbeck’s diction even indicates that Lee has symbolically taken the Trask surname: “In the Trask house next to Reynauld’s Bakery, Lee and Adam put up a map of the western front” (517). Lee “keeps Adam’s eggs warm” and Adam compliments Lee on “the quiet splendor of [his] clothes” (449, 483). Later in the novel, “Adam gazed after [Lee] affectionately” (539). Lee also decorates the Trask home and acts “like an old woman fishing for compliments” (539). His character redefines family binaries such as male/female and employer/servant relationships. With Cathy Trask as the missing mother, Steinbeck “supplies” yet another version of a new mother in the Genesis first family.

By creating a second Cain/Abel motif in the twins, Cal and Aron, Steinbeck exemplifies the modifications in the lore in just one novel amid multiple generations. Rene Girard’s theory on violence among twins highlights the contradictory nature of affections between Cal and Aron:

We instinctively tend to regard the fraternal relationship as an affectionate one; yet the mythological, historical, and literary examples that spring to mind tell a different story: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Eteocles and Polyneices, Romulus and Remus, Richard the Lion-Hearted and John Lackland. The proliferation of enemy brothers in Greek myth and in dramatic adaptations of myth implies the continual presence of a sacrificial crisis, repeatedly alluded to in the same symbolic terms. The fraternal theme is no less ‘contagious’ qua theme for being buried deep in
the text than is the malevolent violence that accompanies it. In fact, the theme itself is a form of violence (61).

Girard’s emphasis on the “continual presence” of fraternal violence echoes the strength and fluidity of the Genesis lore cycle. He terms this constant theme as the “basic mythical theme of enemy brothers” or “the old theme of enemy brothers” (Girard 109). The fact that Cal and Aron are born amid the turmoil of the Trask family and its deep ties to Genesis embodies their own strength as surviving symbols of fraternal violence. Cal’s sense of aggression burgeons out of his own jealousy regarding his father figure, his preferred brother, and his absent mother. Cal admits in the novel that he hates his brother (454), makes him cry (460), and is fundamentally “mean” to Aron (462). He embodies Cain and redefines him all at once.

Plunging deep into the Cain and Abel motif, Steinbeck repeats the fourth chapter of Genesis almost word for word. Adam, the father figure, questions Cal, “Do you know where your brother is?” Cal responds, “Am I supposed to look after him?” (562). Reinventing the infamous “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Steinbeck’s last East of Eden generation maintains the Genesis lore (Genesis 4:9). Like Cain, Cal offers sacrifices that never work. He presents an offering to Adam of $15,000 and tells him “It was a present.” Adam rejects Cal’s gift and returns, “You’ll have to give it back” (540). Later, Cal redefines Cain by repenting. He thinks he must save Aron and bring him back:

Cal knew had had to bring Aron back, had to find him and build him back the way he had been. And this had to be done even though Cal sacrificed himself. And then the idea of sacrifice took hold of him the way it does with all guilty-feeling men. A sacrifice might reach Aron and bring him back (565).
At that moment, Cal decides to burn the money and symbolically “bring Aron back.” Unfortunately, it does not work, but his attempt enables him to revise the Genesis myth in one new turn. No matter how many times the story is told and retold, his sacrifice will always be denied. Yet, the tale cannot be complete unless Cal, like Steinbeck’s other Cain characters, receives a mark. On the final page of the novel, Lee tells Adam, “Your son is marked with guilt out of himself” (600). Coming full circle, Steinbeck’s marked characters span three “C”ain names: Charles, Cathy, and Cal. Each character modifies and redefines the ever-changing lore cycle amid an ever-changing American family.

**O Pioneers!**

Like Steinbeck, Willa Cather borrows and reshapes the Genesis creation myth in her own narrative style. *O Pioneers!* depicts the American west’s pioneering community in the Bergson family of Hanover, Nebraska. Cather multiplies the theme of passing down land and lore with yet another cyclical enterprise: homes. In her exposition, Cather indicates that the setting of *O Pioneers!* lacks permanence, much like the Genesis lore cycle from which she borrows so many artifacts. Early in chapter one, readers learn that the American prairie dwellings also evolve: “None of them had any appearance of permanence, and the howling wind blew under them as well as over them” (3). As well, Adam, Eve, and eventually Cain, also generate a sense of homelessness as they are each cast out of their homes in Genesis 3:23 and 4:12, respectively. In direct contrast, Cather’s heroine, Alexandra Bergson, builds a virtual empire out of her farm and home, expanding her acreage and square footage throughout the novel. Cather writes:

They drove westward toward Norway Creek, and toward a big white house that stood on a hill, several miles across the fields. There were so
many sheds and outbuildings grouped about it that the place looked not unlike a tiny village. A stranger, approaching it, could not help noticing the beauty and fruitfulness of the outlying fields (42-43).

This passage directly contrasts the Genesis myth, so articulately that it resurrects the myth in its sense of opposition. Unlike Cain’s “eastward” land of Nod, the Bergson home is “westward toward Norway Creek.” Alexandra’s “tiny village” is created by a woman, much like the new city of Enoch created by Cain (Genesis 4:17). Finally, unlike Cain who is told “if you try to grow crops, the soil will not produce anything” (Genesis 4:12), Alexandra’s farm is full of “beauty” and “fruitfulness.”

Alexandra’s character defies women’s traditional roles ordered by a rural setting during the text’s 1913 publication. While maintaining her “tiny village” described above, Alexandra employs six male farm hands and three female house servants. Although “…it is in the soil that she expresses herself best,” Alexandra Bergson profits from business mergers and sound financial planning. Alexandra Bergson reflects a changing ideology in American family dynamics. Eight decades after Alexandra’s setting, a 2000 study by David Morley emphasizes the still-standing austerity for American women’s familial functions:

Changes in gender ideologies notwithstanding, it does still seem that women maintain primary responsibility for the smooth running of the home and for the reproduction of domestic order and comfort. This means, among other things, that domestic leisure remains heavily gendered. In so far as the home remains women’s workplace….it is extremely rare for a housewife to have a room of her own other than the kitchen, the heart of the process of domestic labor (72).
Because Alexandra runs her home and business fluently, without a male counterpart, she represents a precursor to future occupations available to American women.

Although Genesis offers little details regarding the first family, one important factor in the myth is a sense of work and occupation. God curses the land that Adam must “cultivate the soil from which he had been formed” (Genesis 3:23). God receives sacrifices from Abel, a shepherd and Cain, a farmer. These important details in the myth coincide with a deep sense of work and occupation that exists in the American psyche. The pioneers heading west in Steinbeck and Cather’s fiction represent the work ethic apparent in American family dynamics. A sense of work in Genesis is deeply tied to its counterpart in American history:

Americans work more hours than do workers in most other advanced societies. A larger range in working time can also be found among American workers. When the focus is on the working time of couples, the American pattern becomes especially distinct. American families also have shorter vacations, and American women are more actively involved in the labor force (Jacobs and Gerson 7).

Alexandra helps reshape the Genesis myth into a uniquely American tale. She works on her family farm, which eventually usurps any marital commitments she may have negotiated in her youth. The land acts as her symbolic spouse throughout much of her adult life. Alexandra defies nuclear family models by acquiring the head-of-family status occupied by Genesis characters, Adam and Cain. As a woman without her own descendants, she ruptures the doctrine of Eve’s purpose in the Garden of Eden and breaks the dominant cataloguing of names present in the first books of the Bible. Rather than record the names of her descendants, she tells Carl Linstrum that “The land belongs to the future” and
asks him, “How many of the names on the county clerks’ plat will be there in fifty years?” (158). Alexandra’s purpose in her own Eden-like garden is to bequeath it to her younger brother, Emil. Her wish symbolically creates descendants for the Bergson family and its land.

Alexandra and Emil parallel the relationship between Eve and Cain. Breaking the lore cycle, Alexandra, as the eldest sibling, raises her youngest brother. She is neither mother nor father to Emil, but performs the roles of both. Like Eve, Alexandra is mute and blind to her “son’s” burgeoning sin. After Cain’s crime, he only answers to God. It is God who asks him of his brother’s whereabouts. It is God who punishes him into exile. Eve does not appear in the scenes regarding her son’s crime or in mourning for her other son. Without explanation, she is silenced. Alexandra Bergson also fails to see the imminent fall in Emil. Alexandra and Eve both fall victim to neglect, but Cain’s murder and Emil’s adultery exemplify the more serious, tragic crimes. Calum Carmichael compares the difference between Eve’s sin and that of her first born, Cain:

The first offence in mythical history is Eve’s deed, but hers is not wrongful rebellion, as has been so uncritically assumed by interpreters. Her disobedience is justified and is akin to that form of commendable action we term civil disobedience. The first wrongful human action is Cain’s murder. That it was chosen as the first is not surprising. It is dramatic: a murder. It is realistic: it occurs within a family. It is very human: the passions of envy and anger are displayed (Carmichael 60).

By revising the gender dynamic in the Genesis lore cycle, Cather creates a new mold for female characters like Alexandra Bergson. In Genesis, “God took some soil from the ground and formed a man out of it; he breathed life-giving breath into his nostrils and the man began to live (Genesis 2:7). Like Adam, Alexandra works the land and figuratively joins it, as if she too was created of its soil.
Alexandra’s success as the head of the Bergson family grows from her accomplishment with the family farm. When Carl asks Alexandra how she accomplishes success, she casually claims, “The land did it. It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right” (59).

Carl’s relationships with Alexandra and the land are very similar. He fails in both cases. Although he later reunites with Alexandra and confesses his love, his life and career are spent in the city after losing his own farm. Like his failed love, he terms the land, “a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years” (60). In her prime, Alexandra chooses land over love. A precursor to feminism, Alexandra Bergson chooses a career over marriage. She figuratively marries her land, and in Cather’s description, Alexandra’s heart is “hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun” (36). Accepting his place in Alexandra’s life, Carl views her like an organic element to the earth. She walks out of the morning as Adam out of dust and clay:

> Even as a boy [Carl] used to feel, when he saw her coming with her free step, her upright head and calm shoulders, that she looked as if she had walked straight out of the morning itself (64).

Her deep connection to the land continues, as Cather blends the land’s “germination” with Alexandra’s:

> There were certain days in her life, outwardly uneventful, which Alexandra remembered as peculiarly happy; days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil (105).

Once again, Alexandra’s offspring symbolize a union with the land. In Genesis, the land is cursed, is the source of the first family’s occupation, is the source of their initial creation, and is the location of the first murder. By morphing the
land myth and relying on its importance, Alexandra represents a new character in the Genesis lore cycle. As an American woman in the early twentieth century, she captures a new wave in rural living by being a successful businesswoman. Her capitalist mindset includes mortgages, settlements, and partnerships. These characteristics and her union with the land create her ultimate success.

Unlike *O Pioneers!*, the Genesis first family failed to incorporate any heroines. Eve’s minor temptation scene with the snake and Cain and Abel’s “supplied” wives contributed to an overall vacancy in the lore. Cather’s main character, like Steinbeck’s Cathy Trask, enables the Genesis myth a much needed revision. Alexandra’s first exhibit of strength appears in her father’s own view of his daughter:

Alexandra, her father often said to himself, was like her grandfather; which was his way of saying that she was intelligent….He would much rather, of course, have seen this likeness in one of his sons, but it was not a question of choice….He felt her youth and strength, how easily she moved and stooped and lifted (13).

Alexandra’s strength enables her to inherit her family’s farm, and her intelligence enables her to manage the farm and capitalize upon it. During this time, many Americans like Carl Linstrum were leaving their rural homes for jobs in the larger cities. By 1920, “for the first time, more Americans lived in cities than in small towns or rural countryside” (Hawes 10). The trend to seek employment in metropolitan areas drove Alexandra to push Emil into going away to college and becoming a successful businessman. She brags to Carl that Emil “is so different from the rest of us” but foreshadows his demise when she claims “he is so violent in his feelings” (60). Alexandra, living the American dream for her future generations, has high hopes for Emil. Her hard work and union with the land were supposed to produce a successful, non-farming, heir to the Bergson throne.
Unfortunately, Cather’s revision of the Genesis fall deletes any success for the Bergson progeny. The Genesis sibling violence morphs into marital murder and the family bloodshed appears between husband and wife, not brother and brother. The eventual fall, in an orchard no less, arises not from temptation to eat an apple but by the sin of adultery as Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata make love beneath the apples:

When [Emil] reached the orchard the sun was hanging low over the wheatfield. Long fingers of light reached through the apple branches as through a net; the orchard was riddled and shot with gold; light was reality, the trees were merely interferences that reflected and refracted light….Emil threw himself down beside [Marie] and took her in his arms. The blood came back to her cheeks, her amber eyes opened slowly and in them Emil saw his own face and the orchard and the sun (133-4).

The utopian description of the beauty and light in the orchard mirrors the perfection described in Genesis of the Garden of Eden. Cather’s imagery integrates a sense of beauty and perfection in the lover’s union. Despite Alexandra’s financial success, this relationship, like that of Adam and Eve, must fall.

The Bergson’s land, like Adam Trask’s farm in the Salinas Valley, echoes the theme of the first fruitful garden, the first farming community, and the curse. Early in O Pioneers!, Emil and Marie foreshadow their eventual fall from grace as they shoot ducks. The elements of the “blood dripping slowly from” the duck’s mouth and the “sharp crack from the gun” tell of the imminent violence to come (65). Like their eventual demise, this scene takes place outside, on the land. It is as if Steinbeck and Cather have taken up the pen to fill in the details of the first family, its struggle with a cursed land, and its impending murder and separation. In Genesis, Cain simply “turned on his brother and killed him,” yet
we know of the unspoken bloodshed and suffering through God’s statement that “Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the land” (Genesis 4:10).

Supplying the missing images, Cather writes with precision as she relates the murderous scene:

The story of what had happened was written plainly on the orchard grass, and on the white mulberries that had fallen in the night and were covered with dark stain. For Emil the chapter had been short. He was shot in the heart, and had rolled over on his back and died. His face was turned up to the sky and his brows were drawn in a frown, as if he had realized that something had befallen him. But for Marie Shabata it had not been so easy. One ball had torn through her right lung, another had shattered the carotid artery. She must have started up and gone toward the hedge, leaving a trail of blood. There she had fallen and bled. From that spot there was another trail, heavier than the first where she must have dragged herself back to Emil’s body. Once there, she seemed not to have struggled any more. She had lifted her head to her lover’s breast, taken his hand in both her own, and bled quietly to death” (139).

Containing Calum Carmichael’s elements of a dramatic, realistic, human, and passionate event, Marie’s husband Frank finds the lovers in the garden and murders them both. Unlike Cain’s premeditated murder, Frank “lifted his head…an idea flashed into his mind, and his sense of injury and outrage grew. He went into his bedroom and took his murderous 405 Winchester from the closet” (135). Later, when Alexandra visits him in prison, Frank sheds an ambivalent tear as he remembers his crime:

A woman, mutilated and bleeding in his orchard—it was because it was a woman that he was so afraid. It was inconceivable that he should have hurt a woman. He would rather be eaten by wild beasts than see her
move on the ground as she had moved in the orchard. Why had she been so careless? She knew he was like a crazy man when he was angry. She had more than once taken that gun away from him when he was angry with other people (137).

Cather conjures the intimate ties between man and woman, as Frank cannot fathom harming a woman, let alone murdering his own wife. In the same vein, he also blames her for being “so careless.” Is it Marie’s fault she was not there to prevent her own death and take the gun away from him? The juxtaposition between intimacy and blame, in an “orchard” and “on the ground” also appears throughout the Genesis myth amid a different order and different characters.

This same intimate familial tie exists between brothers, Cain and Abel, as readers are often shocked by Cain’s sudden fratricide. Both Genesis and O Pioneers! ask the same question of the murderer: Does he repent? In response to his crime, Cain simply tells God his “punishment is too hard for me to bear…and anyone who finds me will kill me” (Genesis 4:14). Frank Shabata sheds a tear as he claims he would “rather be eaten by wild beasts” than harm a woman (137). By avoiding the topic altogether, both the creation myth and the twentieth century novel have continued the lore with ambivalence and avoidance.

The Genesis creation myth possesses a universal nature that enables the order and disorder of the fundamental elements into centuries of lore. Susan Niditch’s Chaos to Cosmos, Studies in Biblical Patterns of Creation highlights the “inevitable” nature of breaking down creation boundaries:

Yet man by his activities since creation has turned the natural into the unnatural, the orderly into the disorderly and improper….The created boundaries of nature are breaking down because of mankind’s improper conduct. This point of view contrasts with those found in the Eden narrative (Genesis 3) and the Cain and Abel theme (Genesis 4) in which
misconduct is an inevitable part of his emergence into reality, a part of the continuing unfolding of the cosmos (87).

Niditch’s summary enlarges the scale of the creation myth to incorporate the entire cosmos and all of mankind’s history. It is only natural that “misconduct” juxtaposes with the attempted order of the world set forth early in Genesis. It is only natural that as centuries evolve, the ways in which societies break down the conduct also evolve.

Writers have struggled to represent Genesis particulars in a myriad of ways, yet no one knows the details of the barren scenes. Cather and Steinbeck, as American authors writing about the land of a new frontier, have joined in the search to define the legacy in their own terms. Ultimately, Carl Lunstrum’s observation that stories write themselves over and repeat themselves as if they had never happened enables readers to understand the massive undertaking a writer faces with the Genesis lore cycle. These American motifs of modified familial roles and changing forms of sin enable readers to recognize the “two or three human stories” repeated through time while also recognizing the consistency of the lore cycle in family bloodshed, home, and land—all of which characterize the American literary landscape.
CHAPTER 2: THE BLOOD CRIETH OUT TO US: CAIN AND ABEL

A recent front page headline registered the fluidity of lore cycles as they shape and reshape themselves over time. It read, “His Brother’s Helper,” a reference to Jeb Bush’s political support for his candidate-brother, George W. Bush (Cotterell 2A). The columnist delicately resurfaced the ancient theme of Cain and Abel. God asks Cain the whereabouts of his murdered brother and Cain responds, “I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen.4:9). In the headline, one brother aids his brother with political support, whereas in the biblical story, Cain speaks with verbal irony intended to indicate that he is certainly not assisting his brother. This diminutive element on a twenty-first century daily newspaper exemplifies the constant shift a lore cycle such as the Cain-Abel theme continuously occupies.

The term “Raising Cain” now appears in most cultural dictionaries as an acceptable part of our common lexicon. So when writers “Raise Cain” in the twenty-first century, new lore features will resurface and add layers to the already complex theme. As newspaper headlines, song lyrics, and novels raise Cain, the lore cycle will strengthen, enrich, and expand. As readers recognize these changes, “Raising Cain” will encourage scholarship of more features and new characters. Although the term now commonly means “to create a disturbance,” it is a phenomenon that has thrived through centuries and cultures (Hirsch 75). By resurfacing this ancient theme with canonical texts, “Raising Cain” slyly enters today’s headlines, tomorrow’s publications, and beyond.

The lore cycle of Cain and Abel boldly appears in nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century representatives. It embodies new options, new markings, and new characters. They do not possess the typical fratricide, biblical references, or even sacrifice, but they still possess central issues of the lore. In
fact, the selections in this chapter resurrect familial relationships between evil and goodness at their most basic level. These are characteristics any reader can recognize, and as Alfred Lapple writes, “to stamp” a man as Cainite involves more than simple fratricide:

The reader should identify himself more with Cain than Abel, for Cain lives on today, and his partisans have become legion. A Fratricide is not required to stamp a man as a Cainite. The ordinary unkindness and uncharitableness of daily living are enough to draw blood from our fellow men and drive them to despair (Lapple 97).

By “identifying” themselves with either Cain or Abel, Lapple’s readers create a “shadowy-other” of themselves in either brother, as discussed in Chapter One. More significantly, Lapple recognizes the vast open space left in the Cain-Abel lore cycle resurrection.

According to Ricardo Quinones, certain features must distinguish themselves in order to resurrect a Cain-Abel theme fully:

Division, the tragedy of differentiation, the offering, and the arbitrariness of preference have become distinguishing features of the Cain-Abel theme. But there are three other residual forces in the theme that are equally determining and that also deserve to be signaled in these introductory remarks. They are violence, envy, and mystery. While serving to set off the Cain-Abel story from allied themes, their abiding presences, in conjunction with the other great issues just indicated, help explain why it is that Cain-Abel has superseded other stories of “rival brothers” within or without the Bible and has become such a predominant part of the Western imagination (9).

Quinones’ “distinguishing features” need expansion. As exemplified in a myriad of American literature texts, the Cain-Abel lore cycle also incorporates
issues in American family dynamics regarding race and gender. The writers discussed in this chapter, albeit subconsciously, have resurrected the Cain-Abel theme amidst brothers and sisters, African Americans, clothing, scars, facial features, cross-dressing, and more.

These signifying features begin with the mark of Cain, his curse, and his paradoxical relationship with God. As centuries evolved and the lore traversed cultures and continents, the Cain-Abel theme has come to appear in these texts amidst new races and new genders. Therefore, Cain’s identity within issues of race and gender must be addressed. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hepzibah Pyncheon and John Steinbeck’s Cathy Ames represent female versions of Cain. As well, Nella Larsen’s Irene Redfield and Clare Bellows revise the myth as African American female versions of Cain and Abel alike. Splicing the myth yet again, Mark Twain’s joins metaphorical brothers, Huck and Jim, despite race, class, and age. Cain and his story of murder, mark, and exile surface in a variety of American literature texts—making Genesis a new American lore cycle.

**The House of the Seven Gables**

Readers often think of a “mark” and of Nathaniel Hawthorne and immediately register Hester Prynne’s punishing “A” in *The Scarlet Letter*. After writing Hester’s tragedy, Hawthorne may have subconsciously had marking on the mind when he published *The House of the Seven Gables* just one year later. In *The Good News Bible*, God asks Cain, “Why that scowl on your face?” and throughout *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hepzibah Pyncheon scowls at a world she can barely see (Genesis 4:6). Although a woman, Hepzibah’s character parallels Cain’s story so closely that the character must now include a female option. Hepzibah and her scowl and Cain and his mysterious mark from God are both marked characters. Mentioned at least six times throughout the text,
Hepzibah’s scowl is a paradox. She scowls because she is “dim-sighted,” yet “…her scowl had done Miss Hepzibah a very ill office, in establishing her character as an ill-tempered old maid” (29).

In the same vein, Cain’s mark is an ongoing paradox as well. Scholars cannot seem to agree whether his mark was one of protection or punishment. Calum Carmichael claims, “Cain’s life is protected from violence” (59). Robert Davidson claims, “Cain is cursed and outlawed, but not separated from the Lord’s protection” (54). Alfred Lapple claims, “God still protects the life and dignity of Cain, the murderer” (92). Ruth Mellinkoff, on the other hand, reminds us of the negative attributes associated with the mark:

Popular, customary, present-day ideas about the mark of Cain see it as a brand or stigma meant to identify, humiliate, and punish criminal Cain, yet such notions have no basis in biblical texts….This lack of scriptural information did not, however, prevent fertile imaginations from filling the gap with a fascinating and contradictory panorama of conjectures, reveries, legends, and questionable traditions (1-2).

This is where Quinones’ element of *mystery* in a Cain-Abel theme comes to fruition. Scholars continue to speculate whether the mark was one of punishment or protection. I contend that his mark is part of his protection and punishment, as it prolongs his acting out the lessons of sibling violence.

Another paradox appears in Cain’s relationship with home. He is cast out into the Land of Nod, which in Hebrew means “wandering” (Davidson 54). Later, he builds Enoch, a city named after his first son (Genesis 4:17). Is Cain a man with a home or without a home? Is he a symbol of wandering or foundations? Hepzibah lives in the house of the seven gables as a home, and yet she does not. Although stationary, she is just as homeless as Cain, the marked man in the Land of Nod. She lives in the house of the seven gables, creates a
small business from its location, yet she fails to occupy the residence truly. Hepzibah pleads to the Judge, “Is not the Pyncheon house mine while I’m alive?” (52). Her guarded defense illustrates the truth in Hepzibah’s heart: it is not her home. As a woman in the Pyncheon lineage, she does not have the legal right to own it. She occupies the home, but her residence is simply a gift bestowed on her.

Hepzibah resides beneath seven gables, and God warns “seven lives will be taken in revenge” if anyone harms Cain (Genesis 4:15). Hepzibah and Cain, protected literally and figuratively by the number seven, live in misery and loneliness. Miserable Cain states, “This punishment is too hard for me to bear” and miserable Hepzibah heaves “heavy sighs” (25), “gusty sighs” (31), and “sighs so deep” (59). The lore surrounding the seven gables revives God’s seven-fold warning and entraps Hepzibah and Cain in the same numeric boundary. Later in life, like Cain, Hepzibah leaves her house (that wasn’t a permanent home) and settles in “the country-seat” where the late Judge Pyncheon lived (294). She subverts ownership from him who owned the old mansion, and like Cain, settles in a new community.

Hepzibah resurrects a Cain-figure who is guilt ridden and “clad in black” (27). Marking herself in “a rusty black silk gown” and “the strange horror of a turban on her head,” Hepzibah mourns the metaphorical loss of her brother, Clifford (35, 208). Although Clifford’s imprisonment lacks any visceral connection to her, Hepzibah blames herself for his figurative death from society. Unlike Cain, condemned by God, Hepzibah’s mark and condemnation lives via “the public gaze” that interprets her scowl as evil (30). Her attire and internalized “evil” scowl tell the world she bears self-inflicted sin: guilt. Hepzibah carries the guilt of Clifford’s imprisonment and therefore instigates her own imprisonment as a recluse. Her mark, including both scowl and
internalized guilt, protects her from a society that chooses to condemn her as an evil old maid. By protecting her, the mark also punishes her because she cannot gain acceptance into the community. Cain’s mark protects him, but his “greatest punishment is in being separated from God” (Quinones 38).

Scholars will never know whether Cain felt guilty for having killed Abel and subsequently being separated from God. Hebrew writing in the Old Testament is economic and based upon action, much like an accountant’s ledger. One has to guess their feelings, so the Cain-Abel theme has room for interpretation (Borland Interview). However, one fact recorded in the myth is that Cain was cursed and no longer able to farm the land (Genesis 4:12). The same “cursed” lore surrounded the house of the seven gables. After Colonel Pyncheon acquired Matthew Maule’s land to build the house of the seven gables, “fireside tradition…preserved the very words” of Matthew Maule: “God will give him blood to drink” (4). This curse eventually affected the land and at its water source, Maule’s Well:

Whether its sources were disturbed by the depth of the new cellar, or whatever subtler cause might lurk at the bottom, it is certain that the water of Maule’s Well, as it continued to be called, grew hard and brackish. Even such we find it now; and any old woman of the neighborhood will certify that it is productive of intestinal mischief to those who quench their thirst there (5).

Hawthorne’s phrases “fireside tradition” and “any old woman of the neighborhood will certify,” validates the element of lore in the text itself. The lore of cursing the first farm of the first farmer began with Cain. Now living on this cursed land, Hepzibah Pyncheon appears as the nineteenth century female Cain. The Pyncheons’ garden, a “spot of black earth, vitiated with such an age-long growth of weeds,” echoes Cain’s cursed soil of the Genesis tale (205).
Like the cursed garden and marked Hepzibah, the yard hens also distinguish themselves with a mark. “The distinguishing mark of the hens,” writes Hawthorne, “was a crest of lamentably scanty growth, in these latter days, but so oddly and wickedly analogous to Hepzibah’s turban” (82). Immediately Hepzibah is likened to the hens, one of which cannot lay eggs. She is marked like the hens (82), croaks like the hens (124, 141), and fails to reproduce like the hens. The Bible attributes nine verses to Cain’s descendants (Genesis 4:17-26), and Hawthorne attributes an entire novel to Hepzibah’s inability to provide descendants. Like the “mark of the hen” who cannot lay an egg, Hepzibah typifies the ultimate un-mother (82). By metaphorically mothering Phoebe and Clifford, she gains deliverance from this debilitating mark and symbolically carries out lineage just as Cain did with the city of Enoch. Certainly, Hepzibah’s marks reflect Cain’s mysterious mark, but as a self-reflective reader, I cannot help but notice the many marks I make on the pages of texts I read. The marks I make as a reader provide another frame with which to interpret Genesis in a literary setting. These marks transform themselves into my native language: another form of ancient marking.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

From the outset, Huckleberry Finn does not seem to resemble the known father of evil, Cain. Huck doesn’t have a brother, doesn’t kill a brother, and doesn’t offer a sacrifice to God. Despite that data, Huck Finn does indeed resurrect the Cain-Abel theme. Ricardo Quinones claims that “the Cain-Abel story does more than express the falling-out of brothers…[but] offers powerfully compact tellings about ruptures in life itself” (10). Huck Finn’s entire life is one of rupture: he is separated from his father, from his mother, from the widow, often from Jim and Tom, in fact from everyone he encounters. Similar to
Hepzibah’s plight, Huck’s first rupture appears in his relationship with an unstable home. He consistently suspends himself between opposite forces of life on the river and life in a home.

On the river with Jim, Huck states, “We was always naked on the raft, day and night” (Twain 100). In a natural setting such as a river, it only makes sense that Huck’s natural attire would be his naked body. Huck is one with nature, knowing the river, the currents, the seasons, and more. He even scolds himself for not remembering, “Wherever you leave a dead snake its mate always comes there and curls around it” (45). This tie to nature resembles the very first profession: tilling the soil. After Cain is cast out of God’s presence, he no longer practices farming and “has a direct connection with the foundation of cities” (Quinones 28). The polarity between Cain’s rural life on a farm and urban life in the new city of Nod parallels Huck’s constant suspension between home and the river.

At his several “homes,” Huck is uncomfortably marked by man-made clothes. He wears clothes from the Widow “who took me for her son (3),” borrows clothes from Buck Grangerford (83), and dons “store clothes” during scams with the Duke and Dauphin (132). These clothes represent temporary marks on Huck’s body, not the permanent naked body that symbolizes his true self. Taking him away from his “naked [life] on the raft,” the clothes punish and suffocate him in the urban setting away from his true home: the river (100). Huck also marks himself in women’s clothes in order to get out of danger. To find out the details regarding his disappearance, Huck states:

So we shortened up one of the calico gowns and I turned up my trouser-legs to my knees and got into it. Jim hitched it behind with the hooks, and it was a fair fit. I put on the sun-bonnet and tied it under my chin (47).
The female attire marks and protects Huck. His cross-dressing reappears later when he puts on “the yaller wench’s frock” in order to hide his true appearance during a skit with Tom (224). In both cases, Huck marks and remarks himself to mask his true identity and shield himself from danger. Even when Huck hides, “snuggled amongst the gowns,” in Mary Jane’s closet, the gowns represent protection so the Duke and Dauphin won’t know of his presence (148).

In addition, Pap marks Huck with his whippings. The marks on the river protect him, whereas the marks in the supposed safety of a home cause him harm. Like Cain, Huck is a wanderer, a nomad of the Mississippi River, escaping the anger of “the father.” Pap was “getting too handy with his hick’ry,” and Huck “was all over welts” (22). Both Huck and Pap resurrect Cain identities, but it is Pap who, like Adam Trask, embodies both Cain and Adam from Genesis.

E.W. Kemble illustrated the text in 1929 and created Pap in shabby clothes, dark face, and a long beard. Mellinkoff notes that in Irish lore, “Adam was presumably created with his beard…and Cain was punished by being beardless” (59). At one point, even Huck refers to his father as Adam:

While I was cooking supper the old man took a swig or two and got sort of warmed up, and went to ripping again. He had been drunk over in town, and laid in the gutter all night, and he was a sight to look at. A body would a thought he was Adam, he was just all mud (23).

By marking Pap with a blackface and beard, Kemble resurrects Cain in the same version as the Atlantic culture minstrel shows. Both Pap and the minstrel show figures such as Jim Crow and Ginger Blue signify down-and-out blackfaced characters, victims of society. Minstrel shows “raised Cain’s contrariness to flag their own recalcitrance. They made his resistance their theme” (Lhamon 118). This confirms Huck’s connection to Cain, but skeptics may wonder where the text refers to Quinones’ basic attributes such as violence
and envy. These appear in two ways: between Huck and his “brothers,” Jim and Tom, and in the murder of Huck’s other “self.”

Huckleberry Finn possesses two metaphorical brothers: Jim and Tom. He envies and imaginatively competes with Tom, even calling him “brother” late in chapter forty-one. Throughout the text, Huck asks his readers, “Do you reckon Tom Sawyer would ever go by this thing? Not for a pie, he wouldn’t” (57). Displaying sibling rivalry and envy, Twain creates Tom as a brother and foil. Both boys are the same age, from the same town, enjoy the same games, but vary on levels of imagination. Huck is grounded, a boy of the land. Tom is devoured by adventure tales and stories he reads in books. These two different “professions” echo Cain, tiller of the ground and Abel, keeper of the sheep.

Although Jim is twice Huck’s age and of a different race, he symbolizes Huck’s second brother. The two make a brotherly pact, “honest injun,” but Huck often contemplates turning Jim in as a runaway slave (37). The two “brothers’ bond so well that at one point Huck states, “I could have almost kissed his foot,” one of the most humbling actions anyone can perform. Torn between his racist upbringing and his love for Jim, Huck internally battles himself. Ultimately, he climatically cries out, “All right, then I’ll go to hell” and vows to protect Jim at all costs (179). Like Cain, often seen as a sinner who repents and simultaneously as an unredeemable murderer, Huckleberry Finn traverses the scales of goodness and sin regarding slavery. Ironically, what Huck perceives as sin represents goodness to modern readers. The “mark” of an abolitionist also traverses lore cycles and now denotes integrity and righteousness. Caught in the middle of two symbolic brothers, Huck lies suspended between a myriad of forces, a true wanderer, and a true reflection of the ancient Cain phenomena.

So who does he murder? The answer is simple: himself. By slaughtering the pig to fake his own death from society, Huck figuratively kills the
Huckleberry Finn who wears clothes, goes to school, and lives in a house. As mentioned in Chapter 1, regarding Charles Trask and Cathy Ames, Quinones’ sacrificed brother “becomes the shadowy other—or the double—when the self struggles to assert its autonomy, its authenticity” (39). Huck’s murder of his other self represents his own “shadowy other” homicide. Like Cathy Ames’ carriage house, Huck’s set contains all the violence needed to make it a true crime:

I took the axe and smashed in the door—I beat it and hacked it considerable, a-doing it. I fetched the pig in and took him back nearly to the table and hacked into his throat with the ax, and laid him down on the ground to bleed….I pulled out some of my hair and bloodied the ax good, and stuck it on the back side, and slung the ax in the corner. Then I took up the pig and held him to my breast with my jacket (29).

René Girard argues that because Abel, as a shepherd, regularly dealt with violence and sacrifice, “the murderer is the one who does not have the violence-outlet of animal sacrifice at his disposal” (4). Cain’s “lack of sacrificial outlet” supersedes goodness and welcomes sin (4). In other words, Cain had to commit murder in order to have an outlet for his violent tendencies. The “displaced anger that is really directed against God” for not accepting his offering transfers to the murder of the other brother (Quinones 16). Twain’s imagery of Huck’s self-murder of bloodshed and violence “crieth unto” the reader of the ancient mythical crime. Clearly, it was one of violence and bloodshed for God states, “The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10). Just as Steinbeck, Cather, and Twain created her own blood-ridden scene from Abel’s unstated murder, Ralph Ellison, Audre Lorde, and many others, will also pen their own versions of bloodshed on the American landscape.
Passing: Irene and Clare

Nella Larsen’s heroines, Irene Redfield and Clare Bellows, are light-skinned African-American women who “pass” as white. Irene periodically passes for convenience and benefit, whereas Clare permanently joins white society by marrying a Caucasian man who knows nothing of her African-American descent. Written during the Harlem Renaissance, the text brings about a new Cain-Abel feature: the mark as a masked race. The two figurative sisters parallel the Cain-Abel lore cycle, often subverting one another as Cain. By having chosen a white husband and hiding her ancestry, Clare permanently marks herself as a white woman. Her husband, John Bellows, performs a minor role in the text as a stock character who is racist, wealthy, and always traveling. As a result, Clare nostalgically desires to rejoin the African-American community. John Bellows, always occupied on business, never suspects. The usual markings of the African-American such as “finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, and teeth” were discreetly disguised in Clare Bellows’ life (Larsen 16). Irene, on the other hand, temporarily marks herself as white in order to get a cab in Chicago (13), receive service at the Drayton Hotel (15), and occasionally for white shopping and dining benefits.

Like Cain, both women’s marks are a form of punishment and protection. Clare’s mark protects her in that she lives with a wealthy white man, sharing white society’s privileges. Like Hepzibah’s black turban and Huck’s protective frocks, Clare and Irene emit the Cain and Abel lore cycle through their make-up. These temporary marks provide layers to their already marked racial identity. Wavering between black and white societies, Clare and Irene are suspended between two polarities. Larsen describes Clare’s complexion as “ivory” whereas Irene’s complexion is “a warm olive” (14, 53). Although Irene’s marriage appears stable, as her African American husband, Brian, knows she is biracial, it
is actually more precarious than Clare’s. Irene’s make-up symbolizes her vulnerability as she often passes in white communities, but more importantly, it is a symbolic attempt to conceal her weak marriage. She “wipe[s] the cold cream from her face” and guardedly checks for “a streak of powder somewhere on her face” (88, 15). Even though Clare Bellows appears to mark herself more permanently as a white woman, Larsen denotes far too many passages to Irene’s make-up to ignore. Prior to greeting Clare, Irene “dust[s] a little powder on her nose” indicating that even in Clare’s presence she disguises her true identity (64). Whether she admits her jealousy of Clare’s permanent passing or not, Irene Redfield consistently marks herself with her “powder puff” (53).

Unfortunately, the more permanent “white powder” Clare dons on her “ivory skin” eventually aches to be washed. In a letter to Irene, she writes of her desire to “see” everybody in the life she used to know:

But if you could know how glad, how excitingly happy, I was to meet you and how I ached to see more of you (to see everybody and couldn’t), you would understand my wanting to see you again, and maybe forgive me a little. My love to you always and to your dear father, and all my poor thanks (46).

Irene rejects Clare’s constant attempts to remark herself as an African American woman while temporarily socializing with Irene and Brian’s social circle. Having a dark child herself, Irene chooses to sever herself from a woman who “nearly died of terror the whole nine months” in “fear that [her daughter] might be dark” (36). Eventually, Clare’s conniving personality steals its way into the Redfield house and heart. Whether Irene likes it or not, Clare Bellows is determined to rejoin African-American culture as much as possible. She invites herself to dinner, arrives unannounced, plays with Irene’s children, and even
befriends Brian. Ultimately, Clare’s relationship with Brian conjures the ancient jealousy of Cain and Abel and foreshadows Irene’s eventual violence.

With their offerings, Cain and Abel compete for God’s approval and favor. Similarly, with their beauty and charm, Irene and Clare vie for Brian’s attention. This triangle represents sacrifice on a completely new level. Irene sacrifices her instincts and her marriage by eventually allowing Clare into her home and social life. Clare’s presence, and possible adultery, keeps Brian in New York even though he wants to move to South America. Irene permits Clare going “alone with Brian to some bridge party or benefit dance” (80). She permits “Clare in the whirling crowd, dancing…frequently with Brian (75). As long as Clare Bellows visits, Irene can maintain the “life which she had so admirably arranged” (57). The sacrifice of her husband’s fidelity is worth it, until…she can think of another plan.

African-American folklore claims that “Cain he turned white as bleach” when the Lord asked him of Abel’s whereabouts. The tale states:

De whole race of Cain dey bin white ebber since. De mark de Lord put on de face of Cain was a white mark. He druv him inter de land ob Nod, and all de white folks hab cum from de land ob Nod, jis’ as you’ve hearn

(Taliaferro 189).

Toying with ancient Biblical data, Larsen continues this lore by marking Clare as a condemned white woman. Her mark and punishment resurface “de mark de Lord put on de face of Cain” (189). In addition, she and Cain share similar fate. Although speculative, “the belief that [Cain] was ultimately killed by his own descendant, Lamech was the story that became by far the most widespread, both in Jewish and Christian thought” (Mellinkoff 61). Like Cain, Clare eventually dies a mysterious death, perhaps at the hands of her symbolic sibling, Irene. Larsen’s readers must choose for themselves whether she was murdered or
committed suicide. Clare’s suspension between these two communities makes her a wanderer without a true home, therefore intricately binding her to the Cain-Abel lore cycle.

The aggression and dominance between Irene and Clare escalates and changes throughout the text. Initially, Clare appears to be an aggressive Cain-like figure. She metaphorically murders Irene’s happy suburban lifestyle. Prior to her reunion with Clare, Irene’s life gave her “a sense of security, the feeling of permanence, and a “life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to remain the same” (57). Clare “ruptures” Irene’s methodically planned life and challenges Irene’s identity, marriage, and class (Quinones 11). Larsen consistently mentions Clare’s “husky voice” throughout the text, adding to her already masculine, Cain-like character (14, 17, 24, 35, 66, 93, and 106). Additionally, Clare’s “face looked strange” as she laments her marriage and cries, “I could kill him! I expect I shall, some day” (71). Her “strange” face resembles Cain whose “countenance fell” and whose “scowl” disappointed God (Genesis 4:5). Like Cain, Clare is capable of murder and physically reflects her emotions. She warns Irene, “Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I’d do anything, hurt anybody, throwing anything away” (81). The warnings foreshadow an unknown climactic question: Will Clare murder Irene or will Irene murder Clare? Who will become the ultimate Cain figure?

Larsen gives the Cain and Abel myth a twentieth century African American female perspective. The text draws upon the larger familial theme of passing, in which members oftentimes lose family in order to gain another. Irene’s aggression towards Clare’s emergence back into the African American community escalates until Clare’s sudden death in the final chapter. Irene finally recognizes “the violence of [her] feelings” regarding Clare’s constant letters and visits (51). Just as blackface songs “mask Cain’s rage in domesticated and
licensed guise,” Irene masks her violent feelings with dinner parties and social affairs, all including Clare (Lhamon 107). Eventually, “Rage boil[s] up in her” as she assumes, without evidence, that Clare and Brian are having an affair (93). After “staring down at the hands in her lap,” she contemplates “how easily she could put Clare out of her life” (98). Those hands are the last sensation Clare Bellows feels before she hits the ground and dies from a fall. Whether Irene pushes her or she jumps is a new mystery in a new Cain-Abel legend.

**Power over Stigmatization: Invisible Man**

In describing the social context for Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Eric J. Sundquist writes, “African Americans were invisible to a majority of white Americans and denied access to many of the economic, political, and cultural institutions” (2). A portion of those “cultural institutions” includes white dominated mythologies and motifs. One in particular dominates Ellison’s renowned novel: the ancient story of Cain and Abel. To speak figuratively, the invisible man is caught up in the Cain and Abel lore cycle like a feather in a windstorm. The characters in the text, including the invisible man, family members, acquaintances, and fellow workers all capture the Cain and Abel theme and claim its resurrection within African American culture. The presence of this powerful story reshapes and reclaims white mythologies, insisting that African American folklore and folk culture can have power over stigmatization.

Ellison scholars have long since noted the general fact that “Ellison is indebted to the Bible for much of its imagery” (Busby 66). It is no coincidence that the invisible man reaches for the Bible in chapter eight and “turned to the book of Genesis” (162). Later, he witnesses the eviction of two elderly ex-slaves. After the wife cries, “Take your hand off my Bible!” the “crowd surged forward” cued by the mention of the ancient text (269). In a 1973 interview, Hollie West
asked Ellison, “You once wrote that American literature was built partly from Negro folklore?” His response validates the vast fusion of black and white mythologies, including the Bible:

Yes. There’s never been a time when we—our expression, our symbols, our turns of face—were not finding our way into the products of other Americans who were consciously or unconsciously creating....We didn’t reject the great traditions of British literature, the King James version of the Bible, Shakespeare or the great poets...This was inescapable. So when I say that we are always there, it isn’t just an idle assertion. All you have to do is look and say, ‘My God, when would the white man have had that particular insight?’ (West 37).

The invisible man acquires the same insight when grappling with his grandfather’s last words. “And here’s the cream of the joke” he tells his reader, “Weren’t we part of them as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?” (575). The paradox of being “part of them” and “apart from them” exists in the myths once dominated by white folk culture. The Cain and Abel myth is “part of” African American folk culture, deeply attached to its strife, and deeply ingrained in Ellison’s classic masterpiece.

God curses Cain so he can no longer farm the soil that “has soaked up your brother’s blood as if it had opened its mouth to receive it” (Gen. 4:11). As stated earlier, the curse possesses a twofold meaning. In one sense, Cain cries, “This punishment is too hard for me to bear” (Gen. 4:13). In another sense, it enables Cain to leave God’s protective presence and build the new city of Enoch in Genesis 4:17. Just as Hepzibah Pyncheon and Huck Finn suffer from their elder generations, the invisible man suffers a curse from both his grandfather and Dr. Bledsoe. The invisible man internally wrestles his grandfather’s curse throughout his narrative. In the epilogue he states, “I’m still plagued by his
deathbed advice” and speculates. “Did he mean…Or did he mean…Or was it, did he mean” (574). Finally, he surmises, “I can’t figure it out; it escapes me” (574). Like Cain, the invisible man possesses a contradictory relationship with a father figure. He must overcome the curse he carries with him from the foreboding words of “the father.”

Although he claims, I “had done exactly what I was expected to do,” the invisible man receives another curse from Dr. Bledsoe (146). Worshipping him like a deity, the invisible man sacrifices time and fun for student work duty in order to please Bledsoe. Destined to fail, as Cain failed in his sacrifice to God and Cal in his sacrifice to Adam, the invisible man ultimately cannot please his faux-deity. These characters performed their expected duties, but their destinies changed in a matter of moments. Like God casting out Cain, Bledsoe casts the invisible man out of the agrarian south to industrial New York City.

Cain and the invisible man share the same progression from agrarian home life to forced wanderer, to eventual home in a city. As the invisible man’s dream insinuates, the tribulations upon his arrival in Harlem “keep him running” (194). As a wanderer, the invisible man’s homes include the Men’s House, Mary Rambo’s, the Factory Hospital, the Brotherhood apartment, and his eventual hole. As he wanders the Harlem streets as Rinehart, he notes “No one paid me any attention, although the street was alive with pedestrians” (493). The “invisible” narrator realizes the aimlessness of his life and seals himself in an underground hole to discover his identity once and for all.

Marking himself a Rinehart represents one of many ways Ellison resurrects the Cain and Abel stigmatization through the ancient mark. As stated in chapter one, interpretations of the mark range from a tattoo, horns, an invisible aura, and to what appears as a dance. The Middle English text, The Life of Adam and Eve, circa 1370 A.D., interpreted the mark as a “trembling of Cain’s
limbs (in general and not necessarily on his head).” This remained acceptable in the Catholic Church until as late as 1911 (Mellinkoff 51 and 57). W.T. Lhamon’s research on blackface performance in early Atlantic culture, and the “trembling of Cain’s limbs” truly join the invisible man to Cain, the “performer who made ‘the first black face turn.’” In the Factory Hospital, one of the doctors even exclaims, “Look, he’s dancing” (237). This “trembling” of the invisible man’s legs via electricity mirrors the ancient Catholic interpretation of the mark of Cain and its resurgence in transatlantic blackface performances.

As mentioned in my discussion of Larsen’s *Passing*, the mark also takes on a more universal identity: one’s race. Marked by his own race, the invisible man carries with him the brand of a visibly marked character while paradoxically feeling that his mark makes him invisible. Upon arriving in Harlem, he “was crushed against a huge [white] woman in black who shook her head and smiled” (158). Horrified and “expecting her to scream,” the invisible man realizes the mark of an African American man in the South may mirror the mark of an invisible African American man in the North. Marjorie Pryse connects naming and marking the texts as synthesized elements. “In *Invisible Man,*” she writes, “naming is an analogue for marking: by emerging gradually from one experience after another with people who would keep him anonymous, the narrator earns his self-assigned name” (144). By not naming his narrator, Ellison achieves the thematic importance of invisibility and marking evident in the Cain and Abel lore cycle.

In the prologue, the invisible man introduces himself to his reader and closes with an allusion to Louis Armstrong’s famous recording, “But what did I do to be so blue?” (14) The entire song, “What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue?” rekindles the Cain and Abel motif in another complex layer. The song mentions “the mark of Ham” that “seems to be a curse” (Sundquist 116). Ham’s
son Canaan actually receives the “curse” of slavery, but the folklore tradition conflates Ham, Canaan, and Cain into much of the same narrative. In Genesis 9:25, Noah cries, “A curse on Canaan! He will be a slave to his brothers!” As the story traverses time and space, the story of Ham and his son Canaan parallels cursed and marked Cain with similar features: the mark, the curse, and skin color. Seeding the black race, Ham’s son Canaan supposedly marks the ancestry of slavery. The invisible man’s allusion in the prologue immediately indicates that his story will tell the tales of curses and marks in yet another style within African American folk culture.

The mark of Cain surfaces in those that surround the invisible man as well. Like Irene Redfield and Clare Bellows, Dr. Bledsoe typifies a marked character via a symbolic mask. The self-marking enables Bledsoe to operate between white and black culture and abuse each to acquire his goals. The invisible man, still naïve to such identity facades, reacts with dismay as he witnesses Bledsoe’s transformation prior to entering Mr. Norton’s room. “As we approached the mirror,” the invisible man notes, “Dr. Bledsoe stopped and composed his angry face like a sculptor, making it a bland mask” (102). Ellison’s use of the word “sculptor” indicates the delicate artistry it took for someone like Dr. Bledsoe to achieve success through multiple identities. Pryse’s notion of the “markedness” concept emphasizes that it “…obscures as well as reveals, for the marked individual, for his community, and above all, for the reader who would be an interpreter of signs” (13). As the invisible man views his idol masking and marking himself, the world as he knows it crumbles beneath him. That which was honorable and true to the invisible man becomes a world in which the ancient curse and mark still dominate African American communities.

This revelation also appears in the text through the invisible man’s violent and blood-haunted encounter with Trueblood. A poor African American
sharecropper, Trueblood has apparently committed incest and impregnated his daughter. Now it is Trueblood, rather than the invisible man, who embodies Cain. As I mentioned earlier, committing incest represents the first form of family violence. Nonetheless, Cain commits both crimes. Reversing the Cain and Abel motif onto the sharecropper, the invisible man immediately begins “cursing the farmer silently” (57). Because of Trueblood’s sin, the invisible man judges and curses Trueblood’s existence rather than his own. The invisible man gazes at a “scar on [Trueblood’s] right cheek, as though he had been hit in the face with a sledge” (51). This new turn in the lore cycle makes Trueblood the most archetypal Cain-like marked figure in the text. His facial scar tells the world of his incest, and although he remains in his home, the African American community around him expels him much like God exiled Cain. Ellison’s diction makes it very clear that Trueblood’s scar remains significant so much that Mr. Norton stares at “Trueblood’s face as though reading a message” (51). The message, however, contains endless numbers of interpretations, as Ellison himself notes his many influences:

I wrote what might be called propaganda—having to do with the Negro struggle—but my fiction was always trying to be something else: something different even from Wright’s fiction. I never accepted the ideology which the New Masses attempted to impose on writers. They hate Dosteoevski, but I was studying Dosteoevski….I was studying [Henry] James. I was also reading Marx, Gorki, Sholokhov, and Isaac Babel. I was reading everything, including the Bible (Neal 110).

Ellison’s own words indicate the reigning presence of the Bible in his writing, and although Invisible Man contains a myriad of powerful motifs, the bloodshed in Genesis dominates the narrative. In Genesis 4:10, the Lord asks, “Why have you done this terrible thing? Your brother’s blood is crying out to me
from the ground.” The Lord commences to curse Cain so he cannot farm the soil that “has soaked up [Abel’s] blood.” Both farmers, Trueblood and Cain endure time when the soil will not grow. For Trueblood, “it was cold and us didn’t have much fire. Nothin’ but wood, no coal” (53). For Cain, the blood on the earth causes an immediate supernatural curse by God. The violent dialogue between Trueblood and his wife, Kate, directly alludes to the ancient myth. Trueblood begs her “No blood Kate. Don’t spill no blood” as if he fears the curse upon his own soil (62). Eventually Kate strikes with the axe, causes the mark, and spills the blood. Trueblood bears the mark of his sin, and Kate ensures its longevity.

Bloodshed and the accompanying family violence consume the invisible man’s narrative. During the eviction scene, one of the voices in the crowd asks the white evictor, “What more do you want, blood?” (274). Still naïve to the anger and violence in the African American community, the invisible man witnesses “a woman…her face a blank mask with hollow black eyes as she aimed and struck, aimed and struck, bringing spurts of blood” onto the street (280). The victim, the white man evicting the ex-slaves, represents one of many white pawns obstructing African American livelihood. The reader at once pities all parties involved: the ex-slaves, the angry African American crowd looking for an outlet, and the white man who falls victim to this violence. As the man’s blood “spurts” onto the Harlem sidewalk, the community assembles the couple’s furniture back into their apartment. The bloodshed spills onto the earth and the sacrificed man, like Abel, symbolizes a victim of rash anger and violence.

Named from “blood” root words, Dr. Bledsoe and Trueblood form a pendulum of possibilities for the invisible man. They symbolize adult figures that the invisible man might have become. His banishment to Harlem eventually enables him to espy another kind of life for himself. He does not have to become “the white community’s stereotypical black” or the multi-faced narcissistic black
leader (Busby 48). As he enters his hole, the past bloodshed in people’s identities and violence in Harlem aid him in his discovery of his true self. He becomes a new man, much as Cain does in creating a new city. Both Cain and the invisible man travel afar and create a new life for themselves after a time of aimless wandering.

The invisible man descends into his underground hole after his mentor-brother, Tod Clifton, perishes at the hands of a white police officer. Having been “brothers” in the organized Brotherhood, Clifton’s death put the invisible man into a state of shock. He watches the blood soak Clifton’s shirt and eventually pour onto the sidewalk:

I took a few steps forward, walking blindly now, unthinking, yet my mind registering it all vividly. Across and starting up on the curb, and seeing Clifton up closer now, lying in the same position, on his side, a huge wetness growing on his shirt, and I couldn’t set my foot down….A pool formed slowly on the walk (436-37).

Having just ignored Clifton moments before and claiming, “I didn’t want to see him. I might forget myself and attack him” (434), the invisible man blames himself for Clifton’s death. Perhaps the “attack” he imagines himself performing mirrors the attack of the police officer, as if his imagination had come true. In this instance, Tod Clifton’s separation from the Brotherhood and humiliating act of selling Sambo dolls reflects Quinones’ “shadowy other” of the invisible man. The violence between them exemplifies the same intimate familial violence exhibited between Cain and Abel. Subverting the roles, Ellison intricately makes Clifton and the invisible man at once both the sacrificed brother and the murderous brother. Tod’s death simultaneously acts as a suicide and a murder, just as the invisible man’s role simultaneously acts as murderer and victim. Both members of the Brotherhood, both members of the African American
community, and both men, Clifton and the invisible man both metaphorically die in the intimate street scene. The climactic moment in the novel symbolizes the invisible man’s desire to shed light on his cursed identity. He immediately occupies his underground hole with 1,369 lights hoping to bring his lost identity to the forefront.

Stephen Bennett and William W. Nichols argue that African American violence in fiction serves as a necessary element in the search for self-discovery:

Much Afro-American fiction is soaked in blood; it flatly asserts that the black experience in America is inevitably a violent one. And yet the very omnipresence of violence in black fiction seems to make necessary a search for meaning in the violence itself, a search that leads in at least two important directions: toward self-destruction and toward the creative violence of self-discovery (172).

The paradox between “self destruction” and the risk of “self-discovery” creates a unique tendency in the violent lore cycle of Cain and Abel. This irony materializes when the invisible man accidentally enters the Liberty Paints union meeting. The men simultaneously call to him “How about it brother?” and glaringly “turn violently to look at” the narrator (221). As the story reshapes itself over time, the violence embodies Bennett and Nichols’ “necessary search for meaning” in African American identity. During the invisible man’s prologue dream, he speaks with a woman who poisons her husband. Resurrecting God’s curse again, the woman tells him freedom lies “in loving,” so she loves her husband, “give[s] him the poison and he withered away like a frost-bit apple” (11). This act of intimate family violence alludes to the first act of familial violence and to the first family in Genesis. By subverting the white mythology, Ellison rearranges the elements of the apple, murder, family violence, and more into new African American lore.
This new African American lore comes into being with a new city within a city: Harlem. Mirroring Enoch, African Americans create a city and search for self-autonomy. When Ellison himself arrived in Harlem in 1936, the Harlem Renaissance had been defined and coined since its birth in the early 1920s. The artistic activity in Harlem included musical geniuses like Louis Armstrong in the Jazz movement and literary endeavors of acclaimed writers such as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, and more. The outburst of creativity contributed to upholding African American culture and tradition, all of which alluded to and fused with white mythologies. These creative characteristics parallel Karen Armstrong’s description of Cain’s new city:

By attributing the civilized arts to the descendants of Cain, the restless wanderer, the Bible recognized that civilization is built as well as destroyed by anger and discontent. Much of our God-given energy can erupt in creativity and the life-enhancing arts as well as in uncontrolled hatred and egotism (38).

Like Bennett and Nichols, Armstrong combines anger and discontent with artistic creativity as necessary partners. Ellison’s twentieth-century text and the ancient biblical tale seem like very different stories, but they possess the same essential characteristics. By rearranging and reversing many of the themes, Ralph Ellison exercises his power as creator of a new lore within black and white ideology. After his own artistic sabbatical, the invisible man ascends from his hole aware of his identity and prepared to face the battle that may accompany it.

**Topdog Underdog**

It is within very contemporary literature that we see American writers securely claiming the Cain/Abel motif as their own. This is particularly the case with playwright, Suzan-Lori Parks. Her 2002 Pulitzer-Prize-winning play,
Topdog Underdog, juxtaposes Cain and Abel with President Lincoln and his murderer, John Wilkes Booth. With only two characters in the entire play, Parks focuses on brothers, Lincoln and Booth. Named as a joke by their father, the now-adult brothers live together, down and out. The play collapses American history into the Genesis lore cycle and into contemporary African American issues of family bloodshed, violence, neglect, and more. Like Ellison, Parks rewrites the story of two rival brothers amid an African-American setting, echoing Lincoln’s presidency and African American issues during the Civil War. The play carries the Cain and Abel lore into the twenty-first century, securing its place in an all-inclusive American literature.

In a 2002 interview with Karen Grigsby, Parks claims, “I hope my plays aren’t some sort of a lecture…it’s the character going through an issue. The issue is ‘thirdary’ if that’s a word.” And in her preface to the play, she writes, “This time I would just focus on [Lincoln’s] home life….This is a play about family wounds and healing. Welcome to the family.” Clearly, the play embodies “characters,” “home,” and “family” as stated by the playwright herself. The play also encompasses several Genesis first family elements—twisting the lore once again into its own entity. First, Lincoln and Booth are wanderers. They live in “a seedily furnished rooming house room” (7). Their temporary shelter symbolizes the instability in their relationship as brothers and with their parents. This displacement alludes to post Civil War American reconstruction when many freed African American slaves did not have homes. Many stayed on the plantations because they knew nowhere else to go (Kennedy 480).

On a symbolic level, African Americans have sought for a sense of home in America long before the mid-century civil rights movement. This emphasis on home appears throughout Parks’ play as Booth constantly reminds Lincoln that he is only welcome in Booth’s room for a temporary time. The brothers
periodically refer to their childhood home when they lived with their parents before they were abandoned. In Booth’s words, they were “gathered around the dinner table. Like old times” (13). In Lincoln’s words, “We all thought it was the best fucking house in the world” (64). Because the brothers suffer from familial trauma, one can rarely decipher the truth in their words. For example, when they speak of their childhood home, their words contradict themselves. In Booth’s memory, the house had “a cement backyard and a frontyard full of trash” whereas Lincoln claims they had a “treehouse out back, summers spent lying on thuh grass and looking at thuh stars” (65).

They attempt to make the rooming house room resemble signs of a stereotypical American home. Booth says he will make bookshelves and a modular dining room table (13). He reiterates to Lincoln throughout the play the importance of their family photo album, and even takes a picture of Lincoln in his work uniform to add to the album. Unfortunately, the table is really meant for Booth’s 3-Card Monte practice time, and the only books the brothers possess are pornographic magazines with a secure home under Booth’s bed. As well, the photo album never appears in the play. Like so much in their lives, the photo album is an imaginary “home” object. Their home is a façade, and it lacks permanence on several fundamental levels. Despite their attempts, Lincoln’s blues-inspired song reveals the truth of their home:

My dear mother left me, my fathers gone away
My dear mother left me and my fathers gone away
I dont got no money, I dont got no place to stay (23).

Scholarship on the meaning of home “repeatedly throws up the same basic terms: privacy, security, family, intimacy, comfort, and control” (Morley 24). Lincoln and Booth lack any of the above “home” elements and suffer from child abandonment, one of three currently illegal forms of child neglect. Mark A.
Winton and Barbara A. Mara define child abandonment as “Desertion of a child without arranging for reasonable care and supervision...this category includes cases in which children were not claimed within two days” (78). Winton and Mara emphasize its often “neglected” place in family studies:

The emphasis on sexual and physical abuse has diverted attention from a problem that is just as devastating—child neglect. Child neglect is often ignored in professional research because the indicators of this form of abuse are usually not clear at first. Many excuses for parental neglect can be heard, such as ‘They lost their jobs and have no money,’ ‘They are young and didn’t know,’ and ‘They couldn’t find a baby-sitter and had to go to work or would have lost their jobs.’ As these examples illustrate, neglect is viewed as a less harmful form of child abuse. Yet, according to McCurdy and Daro, ‘Neglect is not only the most frequent type of maltreatment, it can be just as lethal as physical abuse’ (77).

Lincoln and Booth’s parents abandon them at ages 16 and 11, respectively. At such a vulnerable age, each character is stunted by this trauma. Lincoln questions Booth, “Why do you think they left us, man?” and later answers himself, “I don’t think they liked us” (67).

Booth’s aggression and violent nature burgeons out of his stunted and immature character. Embodying jealous Cain, Booth envies his brother’s advantages in life. Unlike Booth, Lincoln excels as a 3-Card hustler. Unlike Booth, Lincoln has been loved and married. Unlike Booth, Lincoln matures after his friend was shot during a street-card hustle. Lincoln quits this new occupation and struggles to fit into regular society. Booth, on the other hand, carries his Cain-like violence and jealousy throughout the play. Foreshadowing the fratricide to come, Booth “whirls around, pulling a gun from his pants” and threatens, “I’ll shoot you!” (9). He metaphorically battles with his brother by
making Lincoln get up and get their food. As soon as they sit down to eat, he immediately demands that they switch meals (15-16). As well, Booth persuades Lincoln to work for the two of them, which includes giving Booth most of their spending money (36). These power struggles, like many Cain and Abel illustrations, place Booth in a dominant position (with weapon) over his brother. Ultimately, Lincoln’s success at the 3-Card hustle threatens Booth the most. He threatens Lincoln with dominance and bravado:

> You scared you gonna throw and ima kick yr ass—like yr boss kicked yr ass like yr wife kicked yr ass—then Ima go out there and do thuh cards like you do and Ima be thuh man and you aint gonna be shit (94).

As the play progresses, the tension escalates. Agitating their rivalry, Lincoln questions, “I know we brothers, but is we really brothers, you know, blood brothers or not, you and me, whatduhyathink?” (103). Minutes before the murder, Booth warns his brother, “Only so long I can stand that little brother shit” (108). Like the Genesis lore cycle and American presidential history, the viewers know the outcome. Booth will murder his brother, Lincoln.

Professors of Sociology at Pennsylvania State University, Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, examine the American family. Their 1997 study, *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*, explores family behavioral studies' outcomes. They find:

> Observational learning and modeling are also important mechanisms of influence….observing of severe interparental conflict may teach children that aggression is an acceptable (or at least tolerable) way of dealing with disagreements, with detrimental consequences for the children’s future intimate relationships (19).

This study directly relates to the familial violence evident in *Topdog Underdog*. Booth and Lincoln witnessed their parents’ adultery, with Lincoln even taking
part in sexual relations with his father’s lovers. Not having a functional way to
deal with the abnormal family structure and the subsequent abandonment,
Lincoln and Booth lack productive “intimate relationships” in their adulthood.
Although Lincoln attempts to function in society and get married (like his
parents), he is bound to fail. His alcoholism and 3-card hustle determine his fall
from being a productive member of society. Moreover, Booth transforms his
abandonment into bravado and aggression. Like a true tragic hero, he (possibly)
murders his girlfriend and definitely murders his only friend and relative,
Lincoln.

Lincoln’s attempted sense of normalcy threatens to abandon Booth a
second time, and although Booth pretends to have a home and girlfriend, he
actually lacks both. As discussed earlier, the “supplied” missing females in
Genesis reappear in these twentieth century American literature texts. The two
female partners in this play never really appear, and one wonders if they ever
even existed. This precarious nature of the brothers’ female counterparts
resurrects another layer in the Genesis lore. Ironically, the first female character
in the play is none other than…Grace. In the exposition, Booth brags to Lincoln,
“I got a date with Grace tomorrow. Shes in love with me again but she dont
know it yet” (10). Booth’s confidence that Grace loves him without knowing it
lessens her place in the play as a real character. By embodying her emotions,
Booth merely admits that she may not exist. Similarly, Lincoln’s ex-wife Cookie,
although more believable than Grace, never appears in the play either. In
Booth’s words, Cookie “threw [him] out” (15).

When criticized for creating one-dimensional African-American
stereotypes in this play, Suzan-Lori Parks reminded her audience that
…these guys are not thugs. Lincoln has, basically, a nine-to-five job. You
know, his brother is trying to find himself. They are not low class. They
actually have a middle-class upbringing. They lived in a house, you know, with their mom and their dad (Parks/Conan Interview). With this in mind, the play comes full circle from an ancient mythical stereotype of the nuclear family to the recent family history among African Americans. Because of real people such as Abraham Lincoln, Lincoln and Booth struggle with issues since slavery in American history. They have internal conflicts about family, success, and manhood that embody a more universal theme. Like Dr. Bledsoe in *Invisible Man*, Lincoln’s job at the arcade as President Abraham Lincoln symbolizes the African American motif of donning a mask in front of a white audience. Reversing the roles, Lincoln “applies cold cream, removing the whiteface” each night he comes home from work (11). In the room with Booth, he represents his true self, without a mask.

The mask and the President Lincoln costume mark Lincoln as an African American character caught in the wake of a tumultuous past in American history. Undoubtedly though, it is Booth who epitomizes the true mark of Cain. Like many characters already discussed, Cain attempts to mark himself. Marking himself with a new name, Booth calls himself “3-Card” in hopes that it will symbolize the success card hustling brought his brother (19). The stigma of one’s name historically indicates a rank or status in society, and Booth hopes his new name will provide such social benefits. Secondly, Booth marks himself with his new suit. He tells Lincoln, “Ima wear mine tonight. Gracell see me in this and she gonna ask me tuh marry her” (28). The mark of the suit further represents Booth’s constant attempts to emulate his brother. If he wears a new suit, just as his brother marks himself as Abraham Lincoln everyday, perhaps Grace will come back into his life.

The mark of Cain intensifies in the play as Lincoln explains the rules of the 3-Card hustle. Raising the Genesis lore cycle as symbol, Lincoln tells Booth,
“Thu customer is actually called the ‘Mark.’ You know why?” Booth responds, “Cause hes thuh one you got yr eye on. You mark him with yr eye” (71). Like their fraternal relationship, the card hustle is also a power struggle. “Marking” the customer with his eye, Lincoln resurrects the notion of the “gaze” as a power motif in literature and history. Jacques Lacan’s studies pioneered a form of the power gaze in which an “other” or an “evil eye” is looking back at us (Rapaport 71). Always identified with power and evil, the gaze motif entered post-colonial literature as it reflects the power dynamic between conqueror and conquered. In 1976, human social behavior psychologists, Michael Argyle and Mark Cook, describe the gaze phenomenon in an African American context:

In humans, at any rate, gaze is sometimes used as a positive signal of hostility, but not always in the same way. Sometimes we look, sometimes we look away. An example of the former is the ‘hate stare’ of white people in the southern states of the USA, directed at Negroes….It is insulting partly because it implies the person stared at doesn’t really count as a person at all (74).

It is no mistake that Lincoln teaches Booth to “mark” his customers with his eye. By marking them, the hustler dominates the scene and metaphorically succeeds in life. Unfortunately, Booth fails to comprehend the intricate complexities of the game and the win-some-lose-some theme in life and cards.

Like so much literature that refers to the Genesis first family, the texts described in this chapter encompass new versions of Cain and Abel that are uniquely American. The ways in which each writer purposely or accidentally modifies the lore cycle adds to the rich tapestry of a diverse American literary canon. The fratricide, the mark, the family bloodshed, and the envy, as initially described by Quinones, now include a wider population of meanings. Due to movements like The Harlem Renaissance, writers like Ellison and Larsen’s voices
were heard. As mid-century America continued to shed its racial boundaries, the civil rights movements enabled more writers to possess the Genesis myth. Laudng Parks’ play with a 2002 Pulitzer Prize is proof of the changing literary dynamic made possible by women’s movements and civil rights strides of prior generations.

Upcoming generations will certainly highlight new challenges and paths for Cain and Abel, which will be further developed in chapter five as I examine the Genesis myth at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Still, the fact remains that no matter how many times the story is told and retold, it never loses its value or uniqueness. Phrases like “Raising Cain” and “My brother’s keeper” will remain in our lexicon amid future American movements and alongside new American issues. The ways writers shift the parameters of the lore represent the shifting social, economic, and often political drama of each writer’s generation. Due to the myth’s immortal status in our literary landscape, Cain and Abel will undoubtedly reappear in American literature for years to come.
CHAPTER 3: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE FAMILY

Barbara Smith’s often anthologized “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” boldly asserts the need for black feminist voices in literary criticism. Published in 1977, Smith’s essay initiated a new theoretical approach to literature, one that marks the place of the black female writer, character, and most importantly, critic. The essay charges:

All segments of the literary world—whether establishment, progressive, Black, female, or lesbian—do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist (Smith 132).

Smith’s claim is a call to action. As a black female lesbian writer, critic, and American, she can no longer ignore her ignored place in literary criticism. This philosophy shares ties to the often neglected female characters in the Genesis first family.

The myth has evolved over centuries and yet, still, “all segments” of its evolution fail to develop the female characters in any depth. Why is Eve not granted any space in the lore for her reaction to Abel’s murder? Why is Eve not granted any space in the lore for her reaction to Cain’s expulsion from Eden? Additionally, as discussed in earlier chapters, the necessary sisters/wives needed to make this myth a creation myth are inferred characters. They are “a given,” a marginalized necessity, and ultimately, like black women writers in Barbara Smith’s opinion, non existent. Perhaps this is why black female writers of the twentieth century have so boldly revised male dominated white mythologies.

As discussed earlier, Suzan-Lori Parks resurrects Cain and Abel, but the three black female writers in this chapter continue to discuss the lore cycle in a broader scope. They “turn” the Genesis lore into larger, thematic formats. First,
I examine Audre Lorde’s poetry and her emphasis on blood and bloodshed, a dominant theme in Genesis. The imagery of Abel’s blood that “crieth out” to God from the earth causes God to cast Cain out of Eden. Both a curse and a blessing, Cain’s expulsion enables him to build new cities and therefore populate the earth. As mentioned in chapter two, the bloodline lineage list of ancestors so dominant in Genesis emphasizes the great importance put on patriarchal bloodlines. By conducting a close reading of Lorde’s use of blood and bloodshed, I examine her use of the female body’s menstruation, bloodlines in families, bloodshed on the earth, and ultimately bloodshed in the community as a symbol of the largest venue of the American family. Next, I move into a discussion of Alice Walker’s well known 1983 text, The Color Purple, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award and later, to Sapphire’s 1997 debut novel, PUSH. These texts start a discussion of family, violence, and incest within the context of African American women. Unlike Genesis’ stark story where one brother “turned on his brother and killed him,” these examples intimately capture and describe the intimate violence that exists amid the American family.

Specifically, I examine these African American female writers as an essential force in bringing about change in American family dynamics. The three texts discussed in this chapter help us understand the American family and its ties to the Genesis myth. Several years after Barbara Smith’s call to action, Alice Walker laments the lack of attention given to fictional African American families in literary scholarship:

It seems to me that black writing has suffered because even black critics have assumed that a book that deals with the relationships between members of a black family—or between a man and a woman—is less important than one that has white people as primary antagonists. The
consequences of this is that many of our books by ‘major’ writers (always male) tell us little about the culture, history, or future, imagination, fantasies, and so on, of black people, and a lot about isolated (often improbable) or limited encounters with a nonspecific white world (261-2). Walker’s words allude to the inherent racism and sexism that dominate much of the family dynamics discussions in African American women’s literature. One cannot examine the African American family without considering historical context in relation to racism and sexism. As I expand upon the families in Lorde, Walker, and Sapphire’s writings, I will pay considerable attention to the historical context of the feminist movement and racism in America. As twentieth century authors, these writers bear a heavy burden. Their fictional families exist amid the ominous cloud of American history, politics, and hidden family secrets. These writers fruitfully fought for African American women to sustain a permanent presence in American literature and its subsequent scholarship.

**Poetry by Audre Lorde**

Decades after the Harlem Renaissance and Ellison’s *Invisible Man* legacy, the Black Arts Movement continued the discussion of artistic achievements of African American citizens, including topics such as community bloodshed, family, feminism, and more. Black Arts poet Audre Lorde is no exception. Her poetry unites the use of bloodshed from Abel’s murder, motherhood, menstruation, and the contemporary violence on the streets of New York City. Highly autobiographical, Lorde’s poetry speaks of her own relationship with her mother, her skin tone, and her place in society as a twentieth-century African American lesbian. Born to Caribbean immigrants who later settled in Harlem, Lorde’s poetry often battles her Catholic upbringing. Initially accepting her conscripted role in society, she married Edward Rollins for eight years (1962-
1970) in which time they had two children, Elizabeth and Jonathan. As a mother and daughter, Lorde’s poetry resurrects the feminine connection to blood and ultimately extends bloodshed to the African American community.

Poetry by fellow feminist, Adrienne Rich, also fought against “the world of children dynamited or napalmed…the urban ghetto and militarist violence … [and the] world of sex and of male/female relationships” (“Blood, Bread, and Poetry” 510). Driven to bring about change for women and minorities, Lorde, Rich, and many others dedicated their careers to social reform. Whether wanting the “cheering mob” or not, Audre Lorde’s themes of “racial injustice,” the “black experience,” and “the black female body” have gained attention and popularity for more than three decades (Ramazani iv). Appearing throughout her poems in a myriad of masks, bloodshed advocates familial pain, love, and feminism. Her metaphorical use of blood symbolizes Lorde’s unique location within contemporary American poetry. The bloodshed in many of her poems symbolizes the sharp history and precarious future for the African American female.

Soil, a symbolic form of earth’s blood, appears in Lorde’s poem, “Sowing.” After she “finished planting the tomatoes” she transforms the soil to blood and furrows of a past lover (Lorde 51). Her metaphor compares the “rich earth” with a mysterious “you” whom the voice mourns. Both the earth and this mysterious “you” share ancient blood. A part of a new form of avant-garde, the Black Arts Movement, Lorde reconstructs the “brown earth” with the black body. She tells us, she’s been there before, just as all black bodies have been present and ignored:

I have been to this place before
where blood seething commanded
my fingers fresh from the earth
dream of plowing a furrow
whose name should be you (51)

Intricately combining a love affair and the earth’s metaphorical blood caused by the plow, Lorde encapsulates the mysterious connection between blood, body, and earth. The image of “plowing a furrow” creates a sense of the torn earth, but also of disruption and unearthing. Lorde disrupts the connotations of the male farmer by supplanting this occupation, commenced by Cain, with a woman. In revising Genesis, she usurps the power Cain has in the story as the first farmer and gives the job to her speaker. She sensually alludes to blood, fingers, and dreams, by insinuating that her lover is the earth that she plows. As a lesbian, the speaker harvests and fertilizes her lover as the farmer literally does to his land. Ultimately, “Sowing,” unearths new blood, and as a lesbian, a new form of lovers.

Highly personal, Lorde’s poems speak directly to her loved ones, current events, and the emergence of the black female poet. This strain on the ties of the nuclear family exacerbate as her strained “blood” relationship with her mother appears consistently throughout her collected poems. The violence she commits on her family lies in her unapologetic identity as an African American lesbian. She violates her family and mainstream society’s belief system that mandates Adam and Eve have the only possible sexual relationship. Early in her career, she composed “Black Mother Woman,” a tribute to “define” herself “through [her mother’s] denials” (Lorde 68). Full of sharp, fleshy imagery, the poem recalls her mother’s attempts to force Audre to assimilate into white society:

I have become
an image of your once delicate flesh
split with deceitful longings.

...
But I have peeled away your anger
down to the core of love
and look mother
I Am
a dark temple where your true spirit rises (68).

Forcing her mother to accept her as “a dark temple,” Lorde celebrates her individuality regardless of the dominant white community in which she was raised. She peels away her delicate flesh and recognizes (in her blood) “the core of love.” Her tone asserts pride and confidence in the face of a scarred mother-daughter relationship. Her mother’s “split flesh” exemplifies the war-like battle between mother and daughter and white and black.

Like many African American women of her generation, Lorde asserts the autobiographical, personal nature of mixing her art with social reform. Although her poetry often negotiates the intimacy between mother and child and lesbian lovers, it also broadens to examine the largest form of family: society. Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison explains the juxtaposition of her work within a “racialized world”:

The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains...My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world (xi, 4).

The theme of wanting to free oneself of the “racially informed...chains” closely relates to Lorde’s poetry, as she navigates a way of understanding crimes against innocent black children and her own black mother’s obsession with whiteness. The blood motif throughout her poetry emphasizes the trinity theme of
bloodshed: as a sign of violence, as a sign of one’s familial (white, black, and/or maternal) bond, and as a sign of female reproduction.

Although Cain’s crime is often decreed as the first act of family violence and bloodshed, it stands to reason that Eve’s childbirth bore just as much blood onto the earth. God tells Cain, “The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10), but the blood shed for their births goes unnoticed in the myth. Passed down for centuries by males for males, the story negates the place of the embodied female. Centuries later, Audre Lorde contends that her mother violates her, cuts her open, marks her, and ultimately, curses her.

Because her mother and two sisters were light-skinned African-Americans, Lorde felt “marked” from the start. She writes in her 1983 essay, “Eye to Eye, “I was always jealous of my sisters because my mother thought they were such good girls, whereas I was bad, always in trouble….Did bad mean black? The endless scrubbing with lemon juice in the cracks and crevices of my ripening, darkening, body” (Lorde 149). Luckily, Lorde’s self-expressive poetry resists this whitening and lightening. As a Black Arts poet, she celebrates and insists on her own identity as a black woman, with or without whiteness.

Lorde opens the wounds between her mother and herself once more in “Outside.” Setting her bloodshed “outside” in the open, Lorde laments her mother’s continual pressure to make her someone she is not. She asks her mother, “how many times have you cut me/and run in the streets/my own blood” (279). The bloodshed appears on the paved earth, the city streets of her childhood. She frankly states, “I grew up in confusion” and blames her mother as the cause. As a child, not knowing what “colored” really meant, she believed they were simply “clothes you couldn’t bleach.” In other words, Lorde herself was unaware that her mother tried in every way possible to make her white. Eventually, the children at school begin to call her “yellow snot,” in response to
her attempts at “bleaching” black skin to white. Cut open and bleeding, Lorde is vulnerable and confused as a child in the supposed safety of a home.

Resurrecting Cain’s curse and subsequent mark, the voice in “Outside” questions her own identity:

Who shall I curse that I grew up believing in my mother’s face or that I lived in fear of potent darkness wearing my father’s shape they have both marked me with their blind and terrible love and I am lustful now for my own name (279).

Having her father’s “shape” and her mother’s “face,” Lorde submerges herself in confusion and “potent darkness.” Revisioning the gendered myth, the poem gives the father and the mother the power to mark their child. One of the most striking revisions of Genesis occurs here as Audre Lorde attacks the source, the deity. Rather than rewrite general Genesis themes of brotherhood, family violence, or a fall from grace, Lorde’s poetry redirects the original power dynamic in this myth in which God, “the father,” has all the access and power. She creates a mother and she redefines what it truly means to bleed.

The blood motif, whether familial or literal, traverses her collected poems. In “Coniagui Women” Lorde narrates the West African myth of Coniagui boys who must become men. The boys “take [their mother’s] blood as a token,” but must become warriors and separate from their childhood longings to sleep by their mother’s side (Lorde 237). Lorde’s provocative first two lines emphasizes flesh and strength, necessary to give birth and then let go:

The Coniagui women wear their flesh like war
bear children who have eight days
to choose their mothers (237).

The process of giving birth and the image of war-like flesh foreshadows the “blood as token” image later in the poem. The Coniagui boys force their mothers to bleed physically in childbirth and figuratively later in life when they must “become men.” Although childbirth is painful and bloody, the separation of mother and son symbolizes a more painful bloodshed as the Coniagui boys must literally sever themselves from their mothers so soon after birth. Both mother and child suffer from this metaphorical family wound.

As if in a state of war, the Coniagui women want to comfort their children, but they must let them go in order to operate successfully in their community. Not wanting to get emotionally attached, the mother “feeds them...in silence.” Later, when they cry “Let us sleep in your bed,” she closes the door “because she has mothered them before.” The simple yet terrifying image of closing the door to one’s own children negates the female bloodline. Having only a “token” of their mother’s blood, the Coniagui sons have little use for their mother’s lineage.

Uniting all black mothers in her ground-breaking poetry, Lorde incorporates African sociology because it reflects her African ancestry. In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde emphasized the importance of all black mothers:

Yes, that the human race is evolving through women. That it’s not by accident that there are more and more women, the—this sounds crazy, doesn’t it—the production of women, women being born, women surviving....And we’ve got to take that promise of new power seriously, or we’ll make the same mistakes all over again. Unless we learn the lessons of the black mothers in each of us, whether we are black or not—I believe this exists (Hall 63).
The “lessons of the black mothers in each of us” stem from Coniagui women and from women such as Lorde’s mother. Consumed with issues of family, race, power dynamics, and women’s rights, Lorde’s poetry reflects a deep desire to prod the mother she becomes as an African American lesbian. In “Now that I am Forever with Child,” she tells her daughter, “I bore you one morning just before spring,” unafraid of the intimate connection she shares with her daughter (8). Although she recognizes that “a new world was passing” between her legs, she doesn’t fear any forced cultural separation like the Coniagui women. As a mother of two, her own bloodline encourages her not to make “the same mistakes all over again.” Those mistakes allude to the silent Coniagui mother who closed the door to her own children and to her own mother who split her flesh and violated her own “black mother” identity.

The motherhood motif dominates African American women’s writing, as many writers traverse the boundaries of new definitions for mothers who work, who are lesbians, who divorce their husbands, and who eventually rewrite the myth that motherhood should be a flat, static character. Adrienne Rich explains her fight with motherhood’s prototypical role in her theoretical personal text, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution:

I became a mother in the family-centered, consumer-oriented, Freudian-American world of the 1950s. My husband spoke eagerly of the children we would have; my parents-in-law awaited the birth of their grandchild. I had no idea of what I wanted, what I could or could not choose. I only knew that to have a child was to assume adult womanhood to the full, to prove myself, to be ‘like other women.’ .... As soon as I was visibly and clearly pregnant, I felt, for the first time in my adolescent and adult life, not guilty (25-6).
Lorde never attempts to live up to society’s gendered expectations like Rich, but immediately set out to redefine them. Although Rich later identified herself as a lesbian and a feminist (Rich 510), Lorde combated familial definitions as a staunch Black Arts movement poet. Lorde’s poem entitled, “Barren” utilizes an extended metaphor to illustrate a new way for a woman to become a mother. The female speaker bleeds naked and alone while the “executioner” doles out his punishment. She bleeds from his lashes, but she does not conceive:

Your lashes leave me naked in the square.

But I have bled on prouder streets than these

so, my executioner beware! (124)

The lashes and consequent bleeding represent the executioner’s routine punishments on his prisoner. The executioner, as a male deity, enables her to menstruate and bleed as if she could give birth but ultimately prevents it. Later, the voice conquers the executioner and refers to herself as, “your tormentor.” By reversing the power roles, the speaker convinces herself that she will overcome being “barren.” In the end, she unites herself with the executioner’s lover and closes with, “She and I have come this way before.” This other female “knows my tune well,” claims the speaker, insinuating a new way to overcome barrenness: as a lesbian couple. The two women do not need the male executioner to make a family and have progeny. Committed to women’s issues, particularly black lesbian women’s issues, Lorde speaks of taboo subjects such as menstruation and lesbianism. As a new avant-garde movement, Black Arts poets chose topics to explore that were primarily considered off-limits.

Determined to bring bloodshed “full circle” in her poetry, Lorde continues to emphasize that menstruation cannot be ignored. In an interview with Dagmar Schultz in Germany, she laments the secretive history of feminine bleeding:
Look how long menstruation was a secret little thing that we didn’t talk about. We thought: we’re going to build the future, we have a feminist vision, and we have a lot of work to do. But nobody mentioned that we should make sure there are always Tampax in the bathroom, because we are women and we do menstruate, right? It’s like there are certain parts of our lives we were cut off from (Hall 135).

Influenced by topics of femininity and menstruation in the works of confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Lorde continued the cycle and opened the doors for future black female poets. The feeling of being “cut off” from certain parts of her life indicates the same metaphorical severing mentioned earlier in the Coniagui communities. In her analysis of Lorde’s work, Cassie Steele comments that “For black women, given the historical silence surrounding sexuality…to speak means to work against history” (119). By not speaking about menstruation and women’s sexuality in general, the female body is violated because the women are not informed. They are ignorant to the causes of their own bloodshed and what it means in terms of their reproductive organs. Steele further relates, “Lorde’s call to the erotic is a call for the coming together of sexuality and spirituality in black women’s history” (119). Ultimately, this indicates awareness of one’s own body, a theme to be discussed in incest victims later in this chapter.

Referring to herself as “a black lesbian feminist committed to radical social change,” Audre Lorde wasn’t afraid of writing love poems to women (Hall 129). “Parting,” a short poem in *The Black Unicorn*, depicts mournful imagery of two lovers separating at breakfast. Alluding to Christ’s sacrifice, lean hands, and blood before dawn, the poem evokes pain and loss:

> Your lean hands are a sacrifice
> Spoken three times
Before dawn
There is blood in the morning egg
That makes me turn and weep (286)

The unknown other lover symbolizes the sacrificed figure, but Lorde mysteriously hides the true sacrifice. In this case, the blood from the morning egg represents the possible broken relationship. As the relationship is torn apart, it bleeds, just as the egg (a form of flesh) would bleed.

Audre Lorde’s open sexuality made her one of the brave few who sought to redefine family dynamics in regards to an open acceptance of homosexuality. When Lorde brought her love poems to her publisher, he asked, “Are you pretending to be a man in this poem?” She replied, “No, I’m loving a woman” (Lorde 99). “Meet,” another female love poem, expresses the sharing of blood between two female lovers. Resurrecting Cain’s blood on the ancient land again, Lorde writes, “I have heard you calling across this land/in my blood” (257). The inherent relationship between these women is ancient, mythical, and blood-binding. Filled with natural imagery of land, rain, trees, and hills, the poem evokes the primal connection these women have with one another. They are bound to one another as the earth is bound to its harvest. Using intimate and natural language of mating and cubbing, Lorde creates a mood of love at its most cherished core. In their love affair, they become lovers and sisters, ultimately connecting through their blood:

we have mated we have cubbed
we have high time for work and another meeting
women exchanging blood
in the innermost rooms of moment
we must taste of each other’s fruit
at least once
before we shall both be slain (258).

In many of her images of bloodshed there lingers a sharp and violent future. The end of “Meet” closes with an uncertain “slain” future for both lovers. As Lorde paves the way for future African American lesbians, she reminds her readers that the road is full of violent consequences. The lovers know that according to a majority of societal norms, they may “be slain” for their intimate relationship. But keeping to her “warrior-like” stance in the Black Arts Movement, she insists they must “taste of each other’s fruit/at least once.” The risk of future bloody punishment is worth the present loving bloodshed shared between them.

Coming full circle from bloodshed in the ancient land in Genesis to the beds of new lovers, Lorde’s poetry now arrives at the violent bloodshed in the New York City streets. This modern bloodshed on asphalt resurrects a new Genesis, a new birth and a new call to action. She has a series of poems dedicated to Clifford Grover, a ten year-old boy shot down in the streets of Queens by a policeman. The police officer was tried and acquitted. Prior to reading “Power” at the Donnell Library Center in 1977, Lorde explained:

This poem is prophetic because it is still going on. Our children, black children are being killed on the streets of New York all the time, not only New York but every city in this nation. And the ways in which we are involved in that never leaves me.

The poem, haunted by the bloodshed of Clifford Grover, incorporates violent bloody imagery of the street, the child’s figure, and the police officer:

I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds
and a dead child dragging his shattered black
face off the edge of my sleep
blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders
is the only liquid for miles
...
thirsting for the wetness of his blood
as it sinks into the whiteness
of the desert where I am lost (215)

Figuratively inserting herself in the nightmare, Lorde enters the scene in her “sleep” and ultimately feels “trapped” and “lost” in response to such a crime. Hinting at the racism involved in his murder, she compares his red blood (coming from a black body) with the white sand in her dream. Compiling the colors black, white, and red, Lorde juxtaposes bloodshed with American racism and violence. Ultimately, the scene is so terrifying, she admits in the final stanza, “I have not been able to touch the destruction/within me.” Like scenes to be discussed later in this chapter from Alice Walker and Sapphire, violence upon a child represents one of the most tragic features amid families and the larger community.

Actively seeking justice, many Black Arts writers like Lorde were fighting racist politics. This poem combats the racism more personally because it creates an image of a child with a “shattered black face.” Hoping to target all audiences and spare no details, Lorde recreates the scene of the police officer standing “over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood.” The scene escalates because earlier stanzas portrayed Clifford alone with his “punctured cheeks.” Lorde builds a slow and political battle with each stanza of this poem. First, she inserts Clifford. Then she inserts herself in the nightmare. Third, she inserts the police officer yelling, “Die you little motherfucker.” Later, she adds the eleven white men and one black woman of the jury. All of these characters metaphorically surround little Clifford’s body as it bleeds on the street. All of these characters have their “shoes in childish blood.”
In “The Same Death Over and Over or Lullabies Are for Children” Lorde once again speaks of the “white cop who shot down 10-year old Clifford Glover” (282). In the poem, a white woman tells the speaker, “It’s the small deaths in the supermarkets,” yet she is unaware of the horrific deaths in the black community. Refusing to acknowledge the validity of this woman’s “pain,” Lorde writes:

[she’s] trying to open my head
with her meat white cleaver
trying to tell me how
her pain met mine
halfway (282)

The “meat white cleaver” creates a sense of violence and torn flesh between these women, always revolving around issues of race. Trying to hear the woman out, Lorde responds, “I’m trying to hear you” and “I’m not fighting with you,” but she can’t help but emphasize the additional terror of “small deaths in the gutter.” Instead, she tries to “open” the head of this woman who knows nothing of “the bloody morning streets of child-killing New York.” Lorde compares the woman’s small death in the supermarket with actual prevalent deaths in a hunt. She explains: “it is open season on black children.” After she specifically mentions Clifford Glover, the poem suddenly ends. The reader will never know whether the white woman understands the comparative deaths in the white community versus the black. Without an ending, one can only assume...she doesn’t.

Another poem Lorde dedicates to Clifford Grover is “A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children.” Packed with the same blood-filled imagery, the poem echoes similar themes as its predecessors. Clifford’s “wasted blood” lies upon the ground in “the early light.” Just as she was confused and lost in “Power,” Lorde is “broken” and “screaming” in this dirge. The horrific image of a child, who is
no longer a child but a “shape” trailing “its” wasted blood recreates the murderous scene beneath yet another lens:

A small dark shape rolls down
A hilly slope
Dragging its trail of wasted blood
Upon the ground
I am broken
Into clefts of screaming (284)

In the last lines of the poem, she reiterates the fact that Clifford is no longer a child, but a murdered sacrificed object. Speaking directly to Clifford, she states, “I am bent/forever/ wiping up blood/that should be/you.” Alluding to Mary wiping up Jesus’ blood, Lorde desires the blood to come alive and be a part of Clifford again. The blood, futile without a human, dies on the street as well.

As a dirge, the poem incorporates a myriad of Christian imagery. Making Clifford a sacrifice, she notes that “it is past time for sacrifice” (284). Ironically, public murder and bloodshed should be a paradox in a supposedly free and enlightened twentieth century setting. Clifford Grover’s sacrifice is unnecessary, yet (like Christ) “there are rumors of the necessity for your death.” Just as Christ’s death was a battle between Jews and Gentiles, Clifford’s murder symbolizes a tumultuous battle between whites and blacks. The poem is a “benediction of fury” and a “sacrifice…taken unchallenged” in a white society.

When speaking of her rage at racism, Lorde writes in Sister Outsider, “How to train that anger with accuracy rather than deny it has been one of the major tasks of my life” (Lorde 145). In response to Clifford’s murder, she can only “yield one drop of blood” to the cause because she is only one black citizen. Sadly, she admits her drop is “instantly lost.” Recreating the “One Drop Rule” from nineteenth century laws against blacks, she resurrects the irony of the
situation. The “One Drop Rule,” claimed that anyone who had a fraction of African American “blood” was African American and subject to any pertaining laws or racism. The rule put great emphasis on one’s black heritage, whereas the “one drop” Lorde gives of herself, as one black American to protect future black homicide, seems fruitless.

Toni Morrison also speaks of the “fetishization” of black blood as one of the “common linguistic strategies employed in fiction to engage the serious consequences of blacks” (67). She explains,

This is especially useful in evoking erotic fears or desires and establishing fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal. Blood, for example, is a pervasive fetish: black blood, white blood, the purity of blood; the purity of white female sexuality, the pollutions of African blood and sex. Fetishization is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery (68).

Audre Lorde continues the fetish of blood by integrating it into African American family dynamics. In response to this political, emotional, and literal battle, she becomes a warrior. She writes in “Chorus” of “a warrior woman” who is “hot to be dealt with” (266). She literally personifies this warrior and even goes so far as to change her identity to prove it. Late in life, Lorde takes the name Gamba Disa, meaning “Warrior: She Who Makes Her Meaning Clear” (Keating 156). Rather than staring at the bloodshed and succumbing to the powers of her nightmares, she fights for bloodshed’s revenge. She fights for new bloodshed, new gendered lovers, and new types of positive bloodshed. Just as her avant-garde predecessors did with poetic form, Audre Lorde engenders a new kind of style: that which welcomes “a black lesbian feminist committed to social change” (Hall 129). Her social change contributed to a new understanding
of African American women, the family bloodline, and the remnants of a male-dominated creation myth.

The Color Purple

Despite the strides made by the Black Arts movement and many feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, the road for American women, black and white, was still paved with many obstacles. As Adrienne Rich notes:

By 1980 a new wave of conservatism—political, religious, deeply hostile to the gains made by women in 1970s—was moving across the country.

Although an ever-increasing majority of families in the United States did not fit the ‘nuclear’ pattern, the ideology of the patriarchal family system was again ascendant (xiv).

Fortunately, Alice Walker’s 1983 text, The Color Purple, helped to combat the rising patriarchal family system. Set in the early years of the twentieth century, The Color Purple transformed the place of African American women in society, particularly within the intimate boundaries of their closest communities: the family. Maroula Joannou’s examination of The Color Purple stresses the importance Walker’s text places on reconfiguring the African American family, not “abandoning” it:

for many black women the family often signified domestic drudgery, male dominance, economic hardship and subordination of their own needs, in much the same way as it did for white women, their hope for a better future lay not in the abandonment of the family but in its transformation so that it became more receptive to their needs. (182)

In Walker’s award winning epistolary novel, Celie Johnson writes letters to God in attempts to unravel her life of constant family abuse. As a child, she is continually raped by her stepfather whom she believes to be her biological
father. She gives birth to two of his children, and almost immediately, her stepfather takes them away from her. Believing her infants to have been “Kilt…out there in the woods,” Celie’s lifetime of tragedy begins (2). Soon after, she marries against her will to Albert Johnson, a local land owner who needs a mother for his unruly children. Albert continues the cycle of abuse by raping Celie and enslaving her in his home and fields. It is not until Celie meets Shug Avery (ironically Albert’s mistress) that she finds redemption, love, and family.

Simone de Beauvoir’s emblematic term, “transcendence,” indicates that a woman has found her purpose and has taken action to realize herself fully. In her 1949 text, The Second Sex, Beauvoir writes that “for a great many women the roads to transcendence are blocked: because they do nothing, they fail to make themselves anything” (1411). Celie epitomizes a woman in a “blocked” life, and because of her place as a black female in a racially and genderized society of the early 1900s, she practically needs a miracle to find transcendence. Fortunately, that miracle comes from her relationship with Shug. The two women become friends, lovers, and eventually, as Shug puts it, “each others’ people” (183). In Cheryl A. Wall’s words, Celie and Shug become “unofficial co-wives” (160). Wall continues to say that the “family that the end of the novel celebrates is a new configuration” (160). This new family of lesbian lovers and surrogate mothers enables “transformation” necessary to redefine the African American family (Joannou 182). The Color Purple outlines a new possibility for African American women and their family relationships.

Like Audre Lorde, Celie Johnson’s transcendence involves facing her sexuality as a lesbian. Uneducated about her feelings, she admits, “First time I got the full sights of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man” (49). Maroula Joannou also points out that “The joy of the relationship between Shug and Celie is that it
evokes no criticism, surprise or excitement, and is depicted as no less ‘natural’ than any of the heterosexual relationships in the novel” (178). When Shug Avery moves into the Johnson home, Celie admits she feels for the first time “just right” (57). The love triangle of Albert, Celie, and Shug operates successfully and actually makes the Johnson home loving and productive. Similar to Audre Lorde’s claim that we can’t ignore “the tampax in the bathroom,” Shug and Celie discuss out loud the taboo topic of the feminine body. Shug even teaches Celie to masturbate, giving Celie the first of many empowering autonomous moments in her life. Prior to Shug’s entrance, Celie’s place in their home resembled Cain, the exiled wanderer. She lives there but fully recognizes, “It not my house” (45). Like Hepzibah Pyncheon in The House of the Seven Gables, Celie is victim to a society that only recently allowed women to own property, particularly black women. Celie’s productivity and permanence in her home depends upon her relationship with Shug. Their love, as sisters and lovers, catapults the household into feeling “just right.” Eventually, when Celie inherits her parents’ home, the permanence of the new home, like Cain’s new city of Nod, literally and symbolically erects her permanent family foundation.

Walker also compares the African family with the African American family as Audre Lorde does in her poems regarding the African Conaigui community. Through Celie’s letters with Nettie, readers learn of the Olinka family structure and way of life. Nettie tells her sister of a little girl, Tashi, who like Celie’s daughter, Olivia, wants to be literate and attend school. Living in a strictly gendered society with specific rules for each sex, Tashi is frowned upon for this. Eventually, she even succumbs to female genital mutilation. Nettie tells Celie, “…the one ritual they do have to celebrate womanhood is so bloody and painful, I forbid Olivia to even think about it” (188). The irony of their missionary status in Africa is that they cannot “save” or change the Olinka tribe.
Although Nettie’s account of Africa represents a minor role in this novel, it highlights the many needs of the African American family from which Samuel, Corrine, and Nettie fled.

These needs include revolutionizing and therefore redefining the African American women’s place in the family and in society at large. Walker notes that despite Celie’s initial passive character, she is alert and intelligent. Nettie sees to it that she learns how to read and write as Celie recollects, “[Nettie] help[s] me with spelling and everything else she think I need to know” (16). Education symbolizes one of the many avenues to solving women’s marginalized place in society and the family. In the act of writing her story, Celie Johnson frees herself from Albert’s chains. Because of her acquired literacy and empowerment from Shug, she usurps the role of God who curses Cain and eventually tells Albert, “I curse you” (206). This is also near the point in her correspondence that she begins addressing her letters to Nettie rather than to God. Walker minimizes the role of God, the father, and hands the story over to the female characters. Now, Celie doles out the curses. Celie writes to Nettie. Celie takes action. In Hazel Rowley’s forward to Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Beautiful Daughter*, she recounts Beauvoir’s (and her partner, Sartre’s) emphasis on taking action:

> Sartre and Beauvoir often discussed the extent to which their friends were free, or not free, to choose their lives. What interested them was to understand a person’s situation—one’s social class, family dynamics, physical constitution, self-image, and so on….They saw these as defining moments, which reflected fundamental choices. Since, according to these two existentialists, choices were demonstrated by actions (it is not interesting to want to write a book; you have to actually write one) (Rowley 3).
Celie certainly writes a book and changes her “situation,” particularly in regards to her family dynamics. She moves to Memphis with Shug, becomes a successful business owner, and eventually owns her own home. She achieves the American Dream. By writing her story in its grammatically flawed dialect, she writes of herself and her own path to transcendence.

Celie’s success story answers the call of another twentieth century feminist, Hélène Cixous. It is as if Walker responds, through her characters, to leading feminists’ direct call to action. Cixous’ famous essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” which appeared in *L’Arc Magazine* in 1975, urges women to write of themselves about themselves:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal.

> Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement (2039).

Cixous’ claim adheres to all three writers discussed in this chapter, and to many twentieth century female writers before and after the small sample of which I discuss. Celie’s letters act as a therapeutic device for her to gain courage in her marriage, admit her desires for Shug, and ultimately communicate with her long lost sister. Alice Walker gives her heroine a voice, the most personal and powerful voice: first person singular, “I.” The power Celie gains through her voice in writing juxtaposed with her literacy and love with Shug and Nettie contribute to her dynamic character. Walker’s helplessly passive heroine is empowered by the act of writing and the presence of familial love.

Despite this success, bell hooks finds flaws in Celie’s act of writing “her self” as Cixous urged. hooks notes that Celie Johnson never appears to write,
never mentions writing, and would not realistically have the time to write while married to Albert. She explains,

Taken at face value Celie’s letter writing appears to be a simple matter-of-fact gesture when it is really one of the most fantastical happenings in The Color Purple. Oppressed, exploited as laborer in the field, as worker in the domestic household, as sexual servant, Celie finds time to write—this is truly incredible. There is no description of Celie with pen in hand, no discussion of where and when she writes. She must remain invisible so as not to expose this essential contradiction—that as dehumanized object she projects a self in the act of writing even as she records her inability to be self-defining. Celie as writer is a fiction. (293)

The final section of this chapter will also discuss the act of writing in order to find self-realization, love, and a sense of family. Precious Jones, the protagonist of PUSH, is encouraged to write of her family abuse by her teacher, Ms. Blue Rain. She and Ms. Rain write back and forth within the novel, and Precious speaks clearly about the act of writing her story. Author, Sapphire, makes it very clear that Precious is learning to write and has pen in hand. Precious’ life mirrors Celie’s so much that Sapphire clearly revises The Color Purple into a 1980s rendition. Eventually, Precious finds retribution in an alternative family at an alternative school: Ms. Rain as mother and her classmates as loving sisters.

The concept of redefining family and distorting the nuclear model exists in almost every family unit in The Color Purple. The mothers, particularly, mother other children sometimes in place of and sometimes in addition to their own. First, Celie’s stepmother raises her and Nettie in their adolescence. Then, Celie raises Albert’s children, but some of Albert and Shug’s children are raised by Shug’s mother. As well, Nettie, Corrine, and Samuel raise Celie’s children, Olivia and Adam. Later, Mary Agnes raises Sophia’s children while she is in
prison, and Sophia raises Mary Agnes’ child while she goes off to sing. Kevin Quashie’s study, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory*, emphasizes the tension between the socially constructed ideas of mothering and the “site of tension between individual women” and their communities (65). Quashie writes that “while every person has an experience with a mother, not every person can be a mother… as in to mother” (65). The sharing of this verb, to mother, indicates that the family lines cross boundaries in order to make love and happiness function. The result of sharing the role of motherhood for these women is successful. They share the responsibility and embrace the community as family. This destroys the notion that the patriarchal nuclear family represents the only successful way for families to function.

Although I have emphasized the Genesis myth and its place in American literature as a live lore cycle, *The Color Purple* combats American myths written and revised by white males for white males. This is evident in Celie and Nettie’s understanding of Christopher Columbus. Nettie tells Celie, “Columbus come here in boats call the Neater, the Peter, and the Santomareater. Indians so nice to him he force a bunch of ‘em back home with him to wait on the queen” (9). Lauren Berlant contends:

*The Color Purple* opens its discourse on the problematic of Afro-American national-historical identity by revealing the manifest irrelevancy of the classic American myth [of Christopher Columbus] to Celie. Her comic reduction of the American origin tale to a matter of garden-variety phonetics not only indicates the vital importance of oral and folk transmission to less literate communities like the one in which Celie lives, but also suggests the crucial role oral transmission plays in the reproduction of the nation itself, from generation to generation (213-14).
Celie, and therefore many black women of her era, probably interpret the 
Genesis creation myth in the same vein as Columbus. Berlant’s emphasis on the 
“transmission” of the American myth captures an important message in this text 
and in my overall argument about American family dynamics. Families recycle 
stories whether in communal history or familial history, but families also recycle 
the social structure and family hierarchies of their predecessors. Celie notes this 
in her observation of Albert, his father, and Harpo:

Old Mr.____ say to Mr.____, Just what is it bout this Shug Avery anyway, 
he say. She black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats. 
Mr.____ don’t say nothing (54).

The cycle of displaced anger at the father manifests in Albert’s abuse of Celie and 
later, Harpo’s abuse of Sofia. The relationship between Albert and his father 
evolves into the same dynamic between Albert and his son, Harpo. This begs the 
question, when will the familial cycles stop? When will anger, hate, and violence 
in families cease? The twentieth century has been pivotal. Writers like Lorde, 
Walker, and Sapphire contribute to a much needed revolution in American 
family dynamics.

Despite her criticism, bell hooks ultimately describes *The Color Purple* as “a 
book of the people—a work that has many different meanings for many different 
readers” (284). I agree with hooks’ assessment, and for me, the story is one of 
African American sisterhood, of women. It is a new creation myth, hijacked by 
Alice Walker herself from the white male oppressed myths created by men for 
men. This story is a creation myth of a *new* first family, one that incorporates all 
the twentieth century historical issues of American civil rights, feminism, and 
sexuality. The nuclear family created by the white male dominated Genesis 
myth of father, mother, and two sons in order to pass on the name—is no more. 
Those sons need wives in order to, by definition, make a creation myth *create*
descendants. Everyone knows they linger in Genesis beneath the large shadow of male characters, God, Adam, Cain, and Abel. *The Color Purple* is their story: the neglected and forsaken: African American women.

**PUSH—“Preshecita Push”**

Sapphire’s simple title of her 1997 debut novel, *PUSH*, should in no way indicate a simple plot or character development. The short novel explodes with family violence, incest, rape, and more. Protagonist, Claireece Precious Jones (or Precious as she likes to be called), opens the text by informing her reader that she is pregnant by her father for the second time. Since she was in diapers, Precious’ father has raped her, beaten her, and neglected her basic needs. Additionally, her mother also sexually molest her, beats her, forces her to eat, and essentially enslaves her in their 1980s Harlem apartment. Family violence in this text charges at its reader in a bold new light. The explicit details combat the barren imagery in Genesis and redefine family violence once again. Just as lore cycles continue to reshape themselves over time, the *way* writers manifest and react to family violence evolves like the living organisms it affects. In 1997, Richard J. Gelles explained that “inattention” to family violence does not mean family violence failed to exist in prior generations (19). Sapphire’s text modifies the boundaries of what familial secrets can be disclosed and how far one can push that line.

Ultimately, Precious Jones represents a newer version of Fitzgerald’s Nicole Warren and Walker’s Celie Johnson. Updating and revising a “Celie” character, Sapphire speaks to Walker’s text by making their last names, Johnson and Jones, coincide. Raped by their fathers, tormented, and haunted, Nicole, Celie, and Precious appear on the page in vastly different styles. Fitzgerald softens the light of the abuse. He lets the incest filter into the novel in tiny
fragments that allude to father and daughter being “lovers.” Walker commences her novel, like Sapphire, by stating the incest, but still withholds atrocious details. Although the explicit imagery stops after page one, Walker’s first page boldly decries Celie’s stepfather’s rape:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it (1).

Sapphire, on the other hand, asserts image of the abuse over and over again, in a multitude of images:

My clit swell up I think Daddy. Daddy sick me, disgust me, but still he sex me up. I nawshus in my stomach but hot tight in my twat and I think I want it back, the smell of the bedroom, the hurt—he slap my face till it sting and my ears sing separate songs from each other, call me names, pump my pussy in out in out in out awww I come (111).

Precious wavers in her diction as she sometimes calls her father “Daddy”, “Carl”, and “Carl Kenwood Jones” (58). This indicates Precious’ overall psychological confusion with her familial role. She straddles the functions of daughter, mistress, housekeeper, cook, and overall sexual slave to her parents’ whims. Although her parents physically spend a lot of time with her and eat meals with her, she truly suffers from child neglect per its definition:

Psychosocial indicators of [child] neglect include delayed intellectual, motor, and language development; poor school performance; attachment problems (i.e. lack of parent-infant bond); apathy; withdrawal from social interactions; passivity; aggression; and affection problems (Winton and Mara 82).
Precious appears to have the classic nuclear American family of a father, mother, and child. Because there “remains a strong sense of nostalgia for this form of familial configuration” (Morley 77), texts like *PUSH* help dissolve its façade of perfection. The twentieth century witnessed changing definitions of “fatherhood,” as it came to indicate less power, less responsibility, and less obligations (Griswold 92). This is also when the term “family violence” entered our common lexicon. Picking up on this evolution, *PUSH* hyper-modifies the role of the father as well as the term “family violence” in all its latest definitions.

Essentially, Sapphire conjures up the most tragic character she can possibly create, one that hyperbolizes Alice Walker’s earlier character, Celie Johnson. Precious Jones’ life typifies everyone’s worst nightmare for a child. She is a contemporary tragic hero, finding salvation in education only to have it spoiled by the knowledge that she has AIDS and will not be able to find success as an adult and a mother. This markedly contrasts with Celie Johnson, who reunites with her children, magically inherits her own home, lives with her loved ones, and operates her own successful business. Sapphire diverges from Walker’s character and combats the fairytale ending of *The Color Purple*.

Claireece Precious Jones’ name indicates that within the Jones family, this character is “precious.” Ironically, Claireece’s name fails to match the ultimate outcome of her life. She is inherently good, inquisitive, and smart, but she is the victim of family violence. According to *The Los Angeles Times* Book Review:

Sapphire gives the fictional Precious something that surveys and case studies do not—a mind, a heart and a ferocious rage to survive that ignite the book and make it strangely compelling for all of the horror Precious relives in the telling (Woods 1).

The literacy Precious gains at the alternative school symbolizes a form of success for Precious, but the trauma caused by her parents’ abuse juxtaposed with her
contraction of AIDS add to the “mind” and “heart” mentioned in the above review. Her character makes sociological studies of family violence more acute. As discussed in chapter two, home conjures six basic themes: privacy, security, family, intimacy, comfort, and control (Morley 24). For Precious, her home disables any of those terms. Like Huck Finn, the home meant to protect and comfort her becomes the one that causes her harm.

In such a contemporary setting, one might find it hard to believe that such child abuse still goes on unnoticed in America. Why don’t Precious’ teachers report anything? Why don’t Precious’ neighbors report anything? Why don’t the nurses’ reports receive full investigation after Precious gave birth to her first child? Like Barbara Smith’s claim that African American women go unnoticed in literary criticism, Precious goes unnoticed in American society like the ignored female characters in Genesis. Further, the theme of turning a blind eye to family abuse has historical precedence. Although “the mid-1800s brought unprecedented publicity to the plight of maltreated children,” certain circumstances caused a drop in the reformation:

The nineteenth-century outcry for the protection of children began to diminish in the early twentieth century. National attention was diverted to more immediate crises such as World War I, and, consequently, financial support for the SPCC [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children] agencies was considerably diminished. Despite the social reforms which had occurred during the 1800s, child welfare and protective services for children remained dismal” (Iverson and Segal 4-5). In other words, the country had bigger issues at hand, and child abuse and its sociological needs were put to the wayside. This theme occurs throughout PUSH as Precious Jones often feels lonely, invisible, and un-real. She writes, “I talk loud but still I don’t exist” (31). Paralleling the historically racial lines of white
needs versus black needs, Precious imagines that in order for her to be seen, and therefore valid, she must become white:

I sometimes look in the pink people in suits eyes, the men from bizness, and they look way above me, put me out of their eyes. My fahver don’t see me really. If he did he would know I was like a white girl, a real person, inside (31-2).

The predominantly white-driven media influences Precious so much that she fantasizes living in “Weschesser” with her white math teacher (6). She covets the happiness of the white families on television who are “smiling and kissing” and “running on the beach sand” (20, 21). Her image of beauty and familial perfection is a white aesthetic.

Fortunately, African American characters exhibiting love and happiness appear in Precious’ life at the age of sixteen. The safety and security Precious needs are discovered at the alternative school and in her own imagination via her journal. Precious’ teacher, Ms. Rain, and her classmates, represent a new and functional family for Precious Jones. She informs the reader: “School something (this nuthin’!). School gonna help me get out dis house” (35). Once she starts to attend school, the signs of comfort, intimacy, and family appear for the first time in Precious’ worldview:

These girlz is my friends. I been like the baby in a way ’cause I was only 16 first day I walk in. They visit at hospital when I had Abdul and take up a collection when Mama kick me out and bring stuff to ½way house for me—clothes, cassette player, tuna fish, and Cambull soup, and stuff. They and Ms. Rain is my friends and family (95).

Prior to this turning point, Precious’ life has been one of bringing food to her mother while being forced to eat unhealthy, greasy, over-sized portions alongside her. This additional abuse facilitates Precious’ obesity and subsequent
withdrawal from society. Sapphire inverts this with other female characters that bring Precious food in a healthy manner. Tuna sandwiches and soup symbolize stereotypical comfort foods. Precious’ friends and Ms. Rain, provide her with the three basic needs: food, clothing, and shelter. These details foil Precious’ dysfunctional home life and highlight new strides for her.

Precious’ mother and father distort the familial roles from the commencement of their faux family. “Mama” allows Carl to supplant Precious’ place as the baby by breastfeeding him and giving bottles to Precious. She explains, “I give her a bottle. I still got milk in my bresses but not for her but from Carl sucking. I give him tittie, Precious bottle” (135). By severing this mother/child symbol of intimacy in infancy, Mama eventually places her daughter on a competitive, parallel plane. Forcing her to eat, she forces Precious to look like her and symbolically compete with her for Carl’s sexual attention. Precious remembers, “she hit me so hard on back I fall on floor. Then she kick me in ribs. Then she say, ‘Thank you Miz Claireece Precious Jones for fucking my husband you nasty little slut!’” (19). Late in the book, we realize that Precious’ mother agrees to allow Carl to rape Precious in order for him to move back. We also learn that he never actually married Mama, and that he has another family somewhere else. His lack of commitment to Mama and Precious in a marital contract symbolizes his view on their familial unit. For him, Mama and Precious are not his legitimate family unit. This allows him to abuse Precious (and Mama as his mistress) because they are not his real family.

Confused by her mother’s passive reaction to the abuse, Precious exposes hints of her own personal destruction:

She say I took her husband, her man. Her man? Please! Thas my mutherfuckin’ fahver! I hear her tell someone on phone I am heifer, take
her husband, I’m fast. What it take for my muver to see me? Sometimes I wish I was not alive (32).

Precious’ suicidal feelings materialize in her self-abuse. Robbed of any sense of family or home, Precious admits that after her father rapes her,

I go bafroom. I smear shit on my face. Feel good. Don’t know why but it do. I never tell nobody about that before….Get Daddy’s razor out cabinet. Cut cut cut arm wrist, not trying to die, trying to plug myself back in. I am a TV set wif no picture. I am broke wif no mind (111-2).

Punishing herself, Precious indicates that she somehow feels responsible for the abuse. She admits she feels shamed for having orgasms while her father rapes her (24), but her self-destructive acts of smearing feces on her face and cutting her wrists indicate an additional need to cause her own demise. According to The Expanded Family Life Cycle, a text on family social issues, abused children are often “made to feel that they have caused the abuse themselves” and “children in abusive homes are often impaired in their emotional and psychosocial development” (Carter and McGoldrick 481). Obviously, Precious Jones’ illiteracy and outcast status at her former schools indicate an emotionally and educationally stunted individual.

In the same vein, Precious suffers from a stunted concept of proper familial affection. Precious has been so abused that when she experiences affection from strangers, she resists, unable to comprehend its intentions. At twelve years old, she fails to understand why the nurse is so nice to her at the hospital where she has been taken after giving birth to her first child. She writes that Nurse Butter is “tryin’ to hole me in her arms. I don’t want that” (17). Later, she begins to recognize what she always wanted and needed from her mother and father. She laments, “I crying for me who no one never hold before. Daddy put his pee-pee smelling thing in my mouth, my pussy, but never hold me” (18).
Ultimately, she just wants her mother to protect her: a stereotypical motherly animal instinct. She dreams of an imaginary day when her mother tells her father,

‘Carl Kenwood Jones—that’s wrong! Git off Precious like that! Can’t you see Precious is a beautiful chile like white child in magazines or on toilet paper wrappers. Precious is a blue-eye skinny chile whose hair is long braids, long long braids. Git off Precious, fool! It time for Precious to go to the gym like Janet Jackson. It time for Precious hair to be braided. Get off my chile nigger!’ (64).

Unfortunately, Precious’ mother never fulfills the role of protector and nurturer even though she claims until the end of the novel that “I’m a good mother” (133). Her trauma permeates her life so much that Suzanne Lego, author of *The American Handbook of Psychiatric Nursing*, argues that Precious was “pre-schizophrenic.” She explains:

It is easy to see how close Precious is to moving over into schizophrenia. In fact, these thoughts might be viewed as ‘pre-schizophrenic’, the references to noise pictures, colors without a name, feeling not human, the loneliness and need to be loved, the laughing evil eyes, and music playing louder and louder….Yet Precious does not become schizophrenic. Thanks to Ms. Rain, she is pulled into the world and given a task that channels her anxiety, focusing it on describing her thoughts and feelings, a process identified by Hildegard Peplau 45 year ago. What is the task? In popular parlance it’s called ‘journaling’.….For Precious, as for everyone who keeps a journal, there is the benefit of expression of thoughts, feelings, hopes, wishes, fears, and the reflection that leads to self-understanding (29).

Lego asserts that both Ms. Rain and Precious’ newfound literacy and journaling save her from total psychological destruction. I would add that Ms. Rain and
Precious’ literacy supplant the vacancy Precious formerly held in her family life. Rather than having Mama become a dynamic character and ask Precious for forgiveness, Sapphire reroutes Precious’ familial needs into a new, contemporary, alternative family. This family consists of other family violence victims, an African American lesbian teacher from California, and a journal with which she can tell all her atrocious truths.

Ignoring family violence in our past exemplifies an embarrassing aspect of American history. Vice President of Family Nonviolence Inc., Richard L. Davis notes:

Although it is most often hidden from public view, violence in our homes is a problem that we all should be universally conscious of. Yet many of us, both men and women, often deny its existence. While most women are acutely aware of the problems created by domestic violence, many men remain in denial (2).

Undoubtedly, *PUSH* exposes the horrific details behind closed doors in American families. Precious’ story is hard to swallow, much like Sapphire’s taboo lexicon. It emphasizes the theme that we can “deny its existence,” as the dirty words and dirty family secrets go hand in hand. According to sociologist, David Morley, “privacy is now widely assumed to be a key feature of home life, enabling family members to live as they please without the scrutiny of others” (29). Unfortunately, exposing the Jones family to the “scrutiny of others” is exactly what family violence victims need. Sapphire and Walker seek to expose truths of the twentieth century African American family. Shug comes into Celie’s home to save Celie from Mr’s abuse. Mrs. Lichenstein, a teacher from Precious’ former school, comes via intercom into Precious’ home to save her through education.
It is not surprising that Sapphire rewrites and revises *The Color Purple* much like authors discussed in earlier chapters have rewritten and revised *Genesis*. Just as American writers like Willa Cather wrote detailed versions of Abel’s murder into their own texts (to combat the sparse imagery in *Genesis*), Sapphire asserts the atrocious details of paternal rape in response to the rare mention of it in *The Color Purple*. bell hooks claims Celie’s incest and rape is “trivialized as the novel progresses,” whereas Precious’ memory of her incest and rape is constantly resurrected in her writing process.

Precious epitomizes a newer, more comprehensive Celie Johnson. Both Precious and Celie are raped by their fathers and birth two children by them, cook well by demand, suffer physical abuse, find freedom in literacy, suffer from the world’s aestheticism (Celie as ugly, and Precious as fat), and ultimately find sorority with other African American female characters. They are both virtually homeless in their own homes and eventually find permanence in their new, alternative families. Ironically, Precious’ half-way house (by definition a temporary home) symbolizes the only sense of healthy, loving home she has ever known. Both Celie and Precious find familial love through what E. Ellen Barker terms, in her study of *The Color Purple*, “a network of female relationships” and “a community of women for support” (61). Celie has this at first through her friendship with Sofia and their quilt making. Later, she has a “community” with Shug Avery, and eventually with the return of her sister, Nettie, and her two children. Precious has this in her alternative school where her classmates (all women) also harbor shame and family trauma. In one climactic scene, Precious attends an incest survivors’ group and is flabbergasted by the union of women who have fallen victim to incest. Although Barker terms this a “community” and a “network,” I would argue that these are terms that indicate a family.
The theme of African Americans and their community as family reverberates in Walker, Lorde, and Sapphire’s voices. The African American families highlighted in these selections suffer from the ancient theme of ignoring female characters in male dominant myths. In their place, Lorde, Walker, and Sapphire challenge American literature to include issues of the African American family, motherhood, sexuality, and feminism by listening to each other and choosing to rewrite and pass down themes and stories from their own mothers. Alice Walker notes that one of her biggest muses was “the years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life” (Walker 240). In true lore cycle evolution, Walker writes her mother into her self, just as Sapphire does in the next generation by revising *The Color Purple* into *PUSH*. The three African American writers sampled in this chapter are by no means an exhaustive study on the vast amount of retellings that exist within African American women’s literature. They are simply three of what Audre Lorde would gladly term, “warriors.”
CHAPTER 4: FAMILY VIOLENCE AIN’T WHAT IT USED TO BE

The family violence evident in Cain’s fratricide greatly contrasts the tranquility set forth in the initial Edenic creation. The scenes in the Garden of Eden prior to mankind’s fall from grace represent the calm exposition prior to the announcement of the conflict. The Genesis myth follows this traditional plot structure very closely, creating a dichotomy between the utopian family prior to the fall and the familial horrors (stated and unstated) that also exist in the story. This mirrors the American belief that “WE hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal” (53). At the time The Declaration of Independence (1776) was written, all men were not equal as exemplified by America’s use of slavery. The utopian words of this beloved document conjure hope and freedom but also maintain slavery and patriarchy. In this iconic document, women are not named or mentioned and are once again omitted from American cultural history. They remain a missing yet necessary element in both our most popular creation myth and our American Revolution.

It is not surprising, then, that behind closed doors prior to the twentieth century, the American family and the United States legal system never came in contact with one another. Simply put, the twentieth century defined the already present, but never recognized, term family violence. Because of this virtual revolution, the theme of family violence permeates much of twentieth century American literature, becoming more comprehensive as time progresses. Due to the changing family dynamics in the twentieth century caused by the women’s movement, civil rights, and scholars like Sigmund Freud, writers no longer accept the barren imagery of family violence set forth in the Genesis creation myth. At the root of the Genesis myth, which enables societies to form despite the fratricide, lies the ultimate family secret: incest. The Genesis myth can only
exist if Cain and Abel reproduce with their own sisters or own mother. With modern awareness in mind, I examine Genesis and argue that the first act of family violence is not Cain’s fratricide, but rather Cain and Abel’s own sexual incest with their unstated sisters.

The three texts discussed in this chapter offer a few models for examining the theme of family violence in twentieth century American literature. First, I introduce a new reading of Mina Loy’s *Songs to Joannes* (1917), establishing that the common view of the poem as a sexual awakening bears witness to obvious domestic violence. Following, I examine family violence in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1934 novel, *Tender is the Night*. Fitzgerald’s fiction demonstrates similarities with Mina Loy’s poem in that both texts secrete family violence in coded, secretive language. In fact, the incest occurs so fleetingly in *Tender is the Night* that the closest of readers may finish the text and still wonder what exactly plagued Nicole Diver. Many scenes occur in the novel depicting Nicole in front of a mirror, and based on Lacan’s theories, Nicole can mend her repressed family trauma. Both texts exemplify the desire to speak of family violence to a readership still coming to terms with its burgeoning definition.

Finally, I examine E.L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* under the influence of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Much of the explicit nature of family violence in literature owes its awakening to the studies of psychoanalysis, and Doctorow’s novel illuminates these attributes. Like *Songs to Joannes* and *Tender is the Night*, *The Book of Daniel* also secretly emits family trauma through the protagonist, Daniel Isaacson. The secret, however, lies in Daniel’s own repressed subconscious. Having endured his own parents’ murder as a child, Daniel now commits domestic violence upon his own wife. Thanks to twentieth-century psychological breakthroughs in psychoanalysis, the hidden and therefore repressed violence of Daniel’s childhood resurrects itself in his marriage and in
his relationship with his son, sister, and adopted parents. Scholars like Freud and Lacan revolutionized our views on family studies, and by creating new terms in our lexicon concerning family dynamics, we have a more informed gauge with which to understand family violence.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the twentieth century has enabled a voice to appear in American literature that candidly speaks of family violence. This combats the parameters set forth in Genesis. First, the incest between Cain and Abel and their sisters is an unmentioned yet necessary part of this creation myth. Second, the fratricide happens in one small line when “Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and slew him” (Gen. 4:8). The three texts in this chapter depict family violence much like these inferred biblical scenes. Rather than omit the family violence, however, the authors in the following texts contribute to a twentieth century understanding of family dynamics that demands our legislation and lexicon recognize terms such as spousal abuse, rape, incest, and more. The ignored status of family violence prior to the twentieth century correlates with American literature’s ties to the female characters in Genesis who lack both a voice and a role. The following texts highlight family violence as one of the most pivotal American resurrections of the Genesis lore cycle.

**Mina Loy: Victim’s Advocate in Songs to Joannes**

The modernist movement in the early decades of the twentieth century opened its doors to newness, to the unknown. It welcomed anything out of the traditional Victorian or Romantic ordinary. Mina Loy’s poetry was no exception. Her famous 1917 epic length poem, *Songs to Joannes*, is said to be inspired by her love affair with the Italian Futurist Giovanni Papini. The poem, in the words of William Carlos Williams, caused “really quite a stir in the country at large” (Weiner 5). Most scholars refer to *Songs to Joannes* as a form of “scandal”
(Sheffield 1), emitting a “cerebral chill” (Kouidis 172), “causing quite a splash” (Shreiber 53), and an overall sexual “shocker” (Morse 14). Carolyn Burke, Loy’s biographer, even notes that “The influential Amy Lowell had threatened to withdraw her support for Others,” the magazine which first published poems 1-4 of the sequence (191).

Thanks to the renewed interest in Mina Loy over the past fifteen years, scholars have written about her connection to the Italian Futurist movement, Loy’s cutting satire, her sexual diction, her free verse and punctuation, and her striking depiction of the modern woman. When it comes to Songs to Joannes, however, scholars have limited their arguments to discussions about the failed lovers’ relationship and Loy’s supposed sexual awakening. No one has yet explained the source of the failure nor countered the argument that it awakened the speaker’s sensual self. In one fruitful close reading, Eric Selinger has alluded to an abortion forced on the speaker (31). He argues that the failed relationship results from the aborted child who “haunts the Love Songs to Joannes” (Selinger 32). I do not disagree, but offer an alternative reading. I contend that Songs to Joannes presents images of a physically and sexually violent relationship. Rather than reading the often-mentioned “failed relationship” as a result of an abortion, I argue the speaker miscarries because of physical and/or sexual violence. Songs to Joannes contain a series of specific “battles” and quickly transitions to better days. Unlike the victimized women in Genesis, Loy gives her speaker a voice, in fact, an epic voice. Her female voice speaks in physical, fleshy language that does not awaken a sexual equality in the speaker. It is most certainly not Mina Loy’s autobiographical voice and maintains intentional ambiguity. This poem is not a sexual awakening for a woman in touch with her physical self, but a description of an abusive relationship spoken of by a series of fragmented women’s voices.
This poem, resurrected in recent scholarship, represents the archetypal image of a female modernist perspective. Mina Loy wrote with all of the male modernists’ tools such as disjointed language, Freudian influences, collage-like structure, complex vocabulary, verbal ambiguity, and more. She even incorporates Italian Futurist elements thanks to her love affairs with Giovanni Papini and Filipo Marinetti. Then, she subverts her mentors’ techniques and defies them all by using their tools against them in *The Love Songs*. The modernist concept of “the artist as hero” turned Mina Loy into the artist as outcast for a while—but not for long (Perloff 158). This poem is crucial for modernism because its heroine is Mina Loy’s uninhibited feminist voice who dares to speak the violent truth.

If a feminine modernist awakening does exist in the poem, it is the freedom Loy exercises in a sexual and violent diction. Her honest and sometimes disturbing images tear down walls of ancient female silence as established in Genesis. Sex and domestic violence, things normally kept behind closed doors, frankly announce their presence. Song I, over-read and misunderstood, introduces Loy’s collage-like structure, erudite vocabulary, and sexual frustration. The voice’s premier cry is one of contempt for the male sexual organ. She opens:

Spawn of Fantasies
Silting the appraisable
Pig Cupid his rosy snout
Rooting erotic garbage
“Once upon a time”
Pulls a weed white star-topped
Among wild oats sown in mucous-membrane (Loy 53)
“Silting” also means choking or obstructing, so the subject taking the verb “to silt” is “Fantasies.” In other words, the speaker’s fantasies are being choked. Cupid, a muse for all lovers, is a pig “rooting erotic garbage.” Her imagery of weeds, garbage, wild oats, and a river of saliva all reflect negative physical experiences. She separates the line “These are suspect places” to warn her female readers who have been bred to believe in “Once Upon a Time.” Stories that begin with “Once upon a time” are mythic fiction, like Genesis. As a critical modernist voice, Loy claims fantasies and “Once Upon a time” fairytales are “erotic garbage.”

All entities that would make this a positive love poem are obsolete. In 1917, the year Love Songs was published, the phrase domestic violence didn’t exist. Mina Loy spoke about these matters in the only frame available for honest communication at the time: poetry. Women in this situation didn’t have refuge houses, hotlines, or even friends to talk to regarding domestic violence. In fact, the discovery of wife abuse was a traditional grassroots effort. Attention to the problem of wife battering came from women themselves. A women’s center in the Chiswick section of London founded by Erin Pizzey became a refuge for victims of battering. Pizzey wrote the first book on wife abuse, Scream Quietly or the Neighbors Will Hear (1974), and produced a documentary movie of the same name. Both captured the attention of women in Europe and the United States. Women’s groups began to organize safe houses or battered wife shelters as early as 1972 (Gelles 33).

Five decades earlier, women didn’t have the tools necessary to speak about family violence. They didn’t have a sociological definition of “Domestic Violence,” and Mina Loy merely used the lexicon available to her at that time. Although her opening is a “shocker,” it is only because she speaks about such a
secretive and taboo topic. This method shocks her readers and begins to unpack the imminent violence to come.

It is generally assumed that the sexual union between the speaker and her lover creates a child who has died. Like the archetypal battered woman, she loves the man and often battles within herself to love him or to hate him. Peter Quatermain first noticed these binaries in his essay, “The Tattle of Tongueplay: Mina Loy’s Love Songs.” Most intriguing is Quatermain’s argument that the binaries are unresolved:

Binaries include, then, speech/silence; and also body/mind; two-ness as a conjoined/severed; dissonance/resonance; day/night, sun/moon, etc; production/destruction, birth/death. These binaries are not resolved, they do not cancel each other out….The poem, and indeed the whole sequence—despite, or perhaps because of, its rage—is finally a-positional, and refuses to move toward the sort of conclusion binary oppositions customarily offer (81).

I agree with Quatermain’s “a-positional” claim and his eye for the obvious “rage” in the poem. The speaker constantly fluctuates in her courage and weakness to live in the abusive relationship. In song 28, she states, “The steps go up for ever / And they are white...Forever” (Loy 64). Symbolizing her constant struggle, the stairwell is unending and blank. Unfortunately for this dismal and hopeless speaker, life looks bleak.

But, she loves him, right? Poem 12 nicely delineates the binary between love and hate and physical love-making and physical abuse. With fleshy, bloody imagery, the lovers physically fight during physical pleasure:

Voices break on the confines of passion
Desire Suspicion Man Woman
Solve in the humid carnage
Flesh from flesh
Draws the inseparable delight
Kissing at gasps to catch it (Loy 57)

It is not surprising that the poem was considered extremely avant-garde even for the avant-gardists. Mina Loy speaks freely and frankly of a dangerous, yet highly sexual, partner. Multiple "voices break" in passion, but Loy qualifies "passion" with "confines." In other words, someone is confined in his or her passion, and I would argue it’s hers. Battling the binary, the lovers simultaneously desire and suspect one another in "Suspicion."

Most harrowing is the phrase "humid carnage." In the lovers’ heated state, physically and symbolically, someone is slain. Loy has implied blood without having to say "blood," and the carnage could be the child, the speaker, or both. As in Genesis, her own words are sparse, but core elements like blood remain. The following lines paradoxically combine this slain victim with "inseparable delight." Like the white staircase, the couple physically tears "flesh from flesh" and just as quickly "kisses at gasps." One of Loy’s own letters during the time she wrote Love Songs boasts "Papini has read some of my stuff—& says delightful things when he’s not in a bad temper" (Burke 192). Many scholars have suggested the voice could be Loy herself speaking of her affairs with Italian Futurist, Giovanni Papini. Her letter implies Papini says un-delightful things and has a temper, which also applies to the male characters throughout Love Songs. We will never know their sexual secrets unless we connect Loy’s art to her autobiography.

According to Dr. Richard J. Gelles, this paradoxical love/hate relationship is common in violent love affairs:

Perhaps the saddest and most revealing finding from the research on dating violence is how the individuals perceive the violence. In a study
conducted by the sociologist June Henton and her colleagues (1983), more than one fourth of the victims, and 3 of 10 offenders, interpreted the violence as a sign of love. This is a sobering extension of the elementary school yard scenario where the young girl recipient of a push, shove, or hit thinks that it means the boy who hits her likes her. Rather than the violent episodes shattering the romantic images held by the participants, one get the impression that violence serves to protect the romantic illusions of dating or vice versa (73).

Loy’s thirteenth poem in *Love Songs* echoes Dr. Gelles’ school yard metaphor. She opens the sequence by telling her lover “Come to me There is something/I have got to tell you… Something taking shape.” Most scholars agree this is the point at which the voice desires to tell her lover of their expected child. She romanticizes their union with an allusion to the holy trinity:

Where two or three are welded together

They shall become god

Oh that’s right

Keep away from me Please give me a push

Don’t let me understand you (Loy 58)

The hyphens between the biblical allusion and “Oh that’s right” signify a major tonal shift in this sequence. The voice tells her lover of the pregnancy and her lofty aspirations, but she doesn’t get the reaction she expects. Rather, she contradicts her original “come to me” with “keep away from me.” She snaps back into reality and speaks with a frank, sarcastic voice as if she wants the “push” just like the school yard girl in Gelles’ illustration. Her sarcasm symbolizes her wisdom: she should have expected his response. As in most battered relationships, this is a recurring event.
When most battered women tell their lovers of a pregnancy, they are usually more at risk of violence. At some point, the child that “might have been” or the trinity of parents and child that “could have been” was destroyed by abortion or miscarriage. Ignorant of sociological studies to come in the latter half of her century, this voice can only verbally lament her situation. If she had only known of R. Barri Flowers’ 2000 study:

Battered women tend to be pregnant nearly twice as often as women who are not battered, are significantly more likely to have pregnancy end in miscarriage or abortion, and have a greater likelihood of being pregnant at the time they are beaten than nonbattered women. Self-report data has revealed a significant relationship between domestic violence and abortion. In a study of the prevalence of battering among women seeking an abortion, Susan Glander found that nearly 4 in 10 women seeking elective pregnancy termination reported being abused by their partner (89).

Mina Loy can only represent battered women’s voices by slipping this language into her poetry. I am certain that no one has contended this poem depicts domestic violence because it seemed so unheard of at the time. American women could not even vote at this time and were seen as possessions by their lover and/or spouse. Forcing one’s spouse to have intercourse was both acceptable and legal. It was a male’s secret privilege, and unidentified and undefined until the 1970s. Women with voices and enabling terminology reflect on it now and may criticize Loy and her speaker. But we can no more blame African-Americans for being slaves in the Americas than we can women for enduring domestic violence. Williams was right that Loy “caused quite a stir,” but the stir was not the sexual stir Amy Lowell so despised.
Poem 17 represents one of many sequences that portray signs of physical violence. The first indication is the location of the speaker. Her worldview, like an illustration of a children’s book, is only of the bottom half of her home:

I don’t care
Where the legs of the legs of the furniture are walking to
Or what is hidden in the shadows they stride
Or what would look at me
If the shutters were not shut (Loy 59).

The tone establishes hopelessness in “I don’t care” and darkness in the furniture’s “shadows.” A physically abusive home has three basic characteristics: the family (usually man, woman, and possibly children), the flailing “legs” of the furniture, and the knowing presence of windows and neighbors. The tired and hopeless voice doesn’t care what neighbors “would look at me” if her shutters happened to be open. Her words anticipate the same scenario in Erin Pizzey’s 1974 documentary, Scream Quietly or the Neighbors will Hear. Loy and Pizzey tear at a crucial truth in domestic violence: the neighbors finding out.

Selinger notes that the “poem never mentions a specific source for her pain…but the impact of loss is unmistakable” (32). Like Eve, who lost her son, Loy’s voice appears to lack an outlet with which to express her pain. But this is a façade, for beneath the fragmented, unpunctuated language lies an answer. Writing in the present tense, Loy brings her readers (particularly women) right down on the floor with her. Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that the Love Songs is “the equal meeting of the partners on a sexual terrain” (54). If the partners are equal, why isn’t her lover there with her? He is not mentioned whatsoever in this sequence as observer, speaker, or subject. In an attempt to create her own
feminist awakening, the voice reiterates to herself that she must have the courage to leave him:

I store up nights against you

Heavy with shut-flower’s nightmares (Loy 61).

Replaying the nightmares of their relationship, her subconscious mind aids her in the courage to leave. This poem “causes a stir” because sex was not a topic to discuss for a female poet in 1917, let alone sex with an abusive partner.

The remaining lines in Poem 17 evoke more imagery of an abused woman. Again, without saying the word blood, she insinuates “Red a warm colour on the battle-field / Heavy on my knees.” Why is there blood on her knees? Certainly it could be an abortion, but the previous lines and the word “battle-field” infer she’s bleeding from some form of physical confrontation. Like other texts discussed in this dissertation, Loy creates a blood-filled scene in a “battle-field,” much like Abel’s murder. Although she figuratively uses the term “field,” she resurrects Genesis and rearranges it by making this battle in the privacy of a home, behind closed doors. As she slowly enters her subconscious dream state and faints in poem 18, she laments, “Count counter / I counted the fringe of the towel.” Fringed towels are usually kitchen towels, whereas hospital towels are usually folded with a hem on the edge. Counters aren’t usually in hospital rooms, and if they are, they’re much smaller than they are in a kitchen. Chances are she’s more than likely in her own home than a hospital room. Imagine being victimized and on the kitchen floor. You can’t get up. The voice’s narrow focus upon the fringes of a kitchen towel illuminate her mind still working inside her broken body. In the end, her hopeless voice says, “Let the square room fall away.”

The battle imagery also appears in poem 10, a haiku-like sequence describing, on a literal level, a badminton game:
Shuttle-cock and battle-door
A little pink-love
And feathers are strewn (Loy 56)

DuPlessis claims Loy’s spelling of “battledore as “battle-door” insinuates a sexual “site of penetration” (56). Although correct, DuPlessis misses the vital strand in these lines: a battle occurs at the point of penetration. The metaphor is a “cock” literally battling for “a little pink love.” This poem is complex because the voice constantly wavers between sexual affection and sexual repulsion for her lover. After all, she lives with him and as she states in song 15, “I had to be caught in the weak eddy…to love you most” (Loy 59). In the badminton battle, the male lover attempts sexual union. It fails and “feathers are strewn.” Having set up so much bird imagery in poem 4 with “bird-like abortions,” “goose’s wings” and “sweeping the brood clean out,” the feathers strewn about can only be read as the voice’s human feathers. DuPlessis, on the other hand, considers the feathers “comic…a triumph perhaps of the woman, or perhaps mutual release in plucking” (57). The three lines in no way indicate the woman has triumphed. In fact, it remains ambiguous who triumphs in this battle. Loy leaves that for later sections.

In Song 4, set in the Italian “mezzanino”\(^2\) and the “unimaginable family,” Loy brings her reader straight into the intimate home of her fantasized family. This fictional family symbolizes our deep tie to the ancient nuclear family in Genesis passed down through centuries of lore. The first stanza explains the voice’s dream-like desire to be a part of this family whose only abortions are “bird-like” by cracking an egg for breakfast. They have “human throats / And Wisdom’s eyes” and the color “red” only appears in the fabric of “lamp-shade

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1 Brood is the young of an animal or a family of young, especially birds or insects.
2 Mezzanino is Italian for an apartment a half story up from the ground floor.
red dresses” (Loy 54). In addition, this family has “woolen” hair—strong and sturdy. Unfortunately, like any perfect family in exposition, a fall from grace is imminent.

By giving her female voice such power in this epic, Loy has updated Genesis to give a voice to formerly voiceless characters like Eve. Overshadowed by Cain’s relationship with God, “the father,” Eve never has a chance to speak about the tragic loss of her son, Abel. In contrast, the next stanza of Song 4 refers to a lost child who appears frequently in Songs to Joannes. Because the voice dreams of this utopian family, one of them (presumably herself in the fantasy) “bore a baby…and tied with a sarsenet ribbon / To her goose’s wings” (Loy 54). The fantasy of silk and soft goose feathers doesn’t last long. With a transitive “But” the speaker snaps back into reality:

But for the abominable shadows
I would have lived
Among their fearful furniture
To teach them to tell me their secrets
Before I guessed
—Sweeping the brood clean out (Loy 55)

Facing her own reality, the speaker ultimately acknowledges that she does not belong to this mythic and imaginary family. She is so imbedded in an abusive relationship that she can only imagine the furniture is “fearful” of some violence. The past conditional verb tense would have, could have, and might have appears in almost every section. If her lover was not abusive and if the child hadn’t died, she constantly imagines what could have been. In fact, I agree with DuPlessis for claiming “The final loss is not between them, only or exclusively, but between her and the missing child” (63). The voice merely imagines that if the baby had
survived, she *could have* established the perfect family so ingrained in her fantasy.

She identifies the child as a “boy” in Song 5, though she gives him wings as if he’s both angel and mortal. Unfortunately, one wing is tainted and “will never be clean any more.” The insinuated blood stain is an obvious wound from his past both as a character embodying Abel and as a victim of child abuse while in the speaker’s womb. The lost child represents a side-effect of the domestic violence which may have caused the miscarriage. The scene in which the boy appears evokes a dark, tainted trinity and contains more wounds:

Midnight empties the street  
Of all but us  
Three  
I am undecided which way back  
To the left a boy  
—One wing has been washed in the rain  
The other will never be clean any more—  
Pulling door-bells to remind  
Those that are snug  
To the right a haloed ascetic  
Threading houses  
Probes wounds for souls  
—The poor can’t wash in hot water—  
And I don’t know which turning to take  
Since you got home to yourself—first (Loy 55)

This scene signifies a blurred reality between the speaker’s real life and her subconscious mind. She has repressed their memories, and according to Freud, repression “produces unpleasure instead of pleasure” and “lies simply in turning
something away, and keeping it at a distance from conscious” (569-70). Loy stuffs this tiny section with incredible precision and intimacy, but at the same time, keeps her distance much like the space between the conscious and unconscious. In the white space, in what she leaves unsaid, the lovers’ true relationship unfolds. This is where many female writers have penned their place in the American canon. The white space created by Eve and her daughters establishes the criteria with which to seek the silent female perspective.

In Filippo’s “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature” he warns Italian Futurist followers, “Be careful not to force human feelings onto matter” (58). The scene takes place outdoors and includes the child/angel, an alternate “haloed ascetic,” the female voice, and male lover. Writing in true Italian Futurist form, she writes as if her words are stage directions: “to the right a haloed ascetic” and “to the left a boy.” Clearly separating herself from “those that are snug,” she and her would-be family are outsiders. The final line captures further separation as she speaks directly to her lover and claims, “you got home to yourself—first.” Now she, the boy, and the angel are the only ones remaining on the midnight empty street. Everyone else is “home” and “snug.”

Furthermore, her wavering mindset appears twice in this selection. At first, she states, “I am undecided which way back” and later “I don’t know which turning to take.” On her left appears the boy who has one wing washed in the rain and “the other will never be clean any more.” Perhaps because she lost this child via violent miscarriage, his unwashed wing depicts the permanent wound he carried to heaven. The “haloed ascetic” then appears on her right “Threading houses” and “Prob[ing] wounds for souls.” Like most battered women caught in the torment of love for and fear of her lover, she cannot decide her destiny. The selfish male lover “got home” to himself “first,” so his decision was made long
ago. The female lover still mourns the loss of the child—she cannot escape it even in her dreams.

Rob Sheffield’s 2003 review of *Songs to Joannes* slightly implies the dangerous reality this poem depicts:

Her secrets expressed in her poetry, were dangerous, often obscene, sometimes merely eccentric, sometimes actually illegal. She looked for ways to make these secrets visible—not only visible, but seen (6).

Sheffield’s vague use of the word “secrets” implies that there’s more to be said about *Songs to Joannes*, but he never posits an actual solution to these supposed secrets. What are Mina Loy’s secrets that make this Modernist relic so valuable? Yes, it is her dangerous, obscene, illegal language. But that language dangerously, obscenely, and illegally *speaks* of a dynamic between men and women that was taboo and forbidden: domestic violence. Song 7 exemplifies the physical juxtaposition of flesh and object once again as “My pair of feet / Smack the flag-stones / That are something left over from your walking” (Loy 55). As the flesh of her feet meets the stones, she recognizes her existence in her lover’s life as a simple bystander to his “walking.” The fresh wind as the speaker walks “stuffs the scum of the white street / Into my lungs and my nostrils.” Echoing the choking and obstructing imagery of song 1, she chokes with the scum of the street. She closes with an image of a bird, like herself, who has never fulfilled its flight:

Exhilarated birds

Prolonging flight into the night

Never reaching— — — — — — (Loy 56)

A pattern appears in the speaker’s relationship with birds. She and birds symbolize the “could have been” so often mentioned in the poem. She could have flown. She could have been free. She could have “hatched” differently.
She could have been a bird. Subverting Darwin’s later-published *Theory of Natural Selection*, poem 29 calls for “Unnatural selection” and asks to “Breed” a new kind of “sons and daughters” who “shall jibber at each other / Uninterpretable cryptonyms / Under the moon.” So rather than having the more powerful and physically stronger species survive and rule, she hopes for men and women to speak a new kind of language, perhaps a language based on equality. Whatever their language may be, it is a secret to herself and her contemporaries who cannot imagine the world any other way. It is only now, in the twenty-first century that we can decode her desires and recognize domestic violence for all its evil worth.

As she concludes *Songs to Joannes*, the biblical imagery strengthens in her triple-repetition of the word “Crucifixion” in song 31. In a crucifixion, someone is sacrificed, and in this crucifixion, it is the female lover. She describes her lover’s torment on her as “an illegal ego’s / Eclosion.” A synonym for *hatching out*, the man’s eclosion is not only illegal, but a product of his ego. Loy’s satire attacks men like Freud for developing the ego theory in the first place, who support the powerful framework designed by men for men. Their egos are sexually hatching out illegally against womankind. The final “Crucifixion” stanza echoes the suffering of the speaker has endured throughout this tumultuous relationship:

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Crucifixion
Wracked arms
Index extremities
In vacuum
To the unbroken fall (Loy 67)
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Her use of the word “fall” incorporates two meanings. On a literal level, the woman has fallen due to another physical encounter with her lover. She has
“Wracked arms” and extremities, like Christ, due to their battles. She has fallen “unbroken” because the man is not there to support her physically or emotionally. On a figurative level, the man’s “illegal ego” has fallen, as in, fallen from grace. With language like this, Songs to Joannes speaks for women whose legal needs have been secreted since Genesis. In only a matter of decades, the relationship described in Songs to Joannes should be considered illegal. Often compared to Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, she was postmodern before postmodernism was defined. Frankly speaking about women’s bodies, physical encounters, and sexual violence, this poem is a crux of the modernist period like The Waste Land and The Cantos. Renewed interest in her work must delve into the razor sharp vocabulary and battle-like imagery that enables The Love Songs to redefine a woman’s “sexual awakening” amid a new understanding of American family dynamics.

Dancing around the topic of physical danger, no scholars have boldly asserted the appearance of physical violence in Songs to Joannes. Eric Selinger asserts that “Far from being liberated by sexual frankness, this speaker chokes on it” (27). Rob Sheffield contends that “she rebelled against the tight-assed institution modernism had already become by 1913” (3). Marjorie Perloff writes that Loy’s view on marriage is an “indictment of marriage as an institution” (12). Samuel Morse describes the collage-like series as “ugly, clumsy, and brutal” (19). Virginia Kouidis vaguely suggests that that “the failure of her marriage and her disillusion with women’s traditional roles are probably significant” (169). And finally, Rachel Blau DuPlessis vaguely speculates that “the poem negotiates separate pulls toward sexual pleasure and emotional danger” (51). What I want to ask these scholars is: How? Why? Where? They hint around the diction of “danger” and “failure,” but they never make the leap from their close-readings to actual physical abuse. Lurking in the shadows—it is there.
Tender is The Night: The Code of Family Violence

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1934 novel, *Tender is the Night*, portrays the marriage of Nicole and Dick Diver in their expatriate life along the Riviera. Nicole Diver, formerly Nicole Warren, suffers from mental illness and meets psychiatrist, Dr. Dick Diver, in one of the hospitals in which he works. The couple’s relationship wavers on the edge of destruction as Nicole suffers from her incestuous past and Dick manages an affair with the young American actress, Rosemary Speers. The novel disguises intimate family violence in a similar fashion as Loy uses in *Songs to Joannes*. Signs of incest, attempted infanticide, and a possible abortion exist deep within the dinner parties, love affairs, and gossip of the Diver family and their entourage of friends.

Although the novel spans 315 pages in the Scribner edition, Fitzgerald dedicates a mere handful of lines to the reason for Nicole’s mental state: an incestuous relationship with her father in her teens. The most blatant admission occurs well into Book 2 as Mr. Warren admits his trespass:

‘People used to say what a wonderful father and daughter we were—they used to wipe their eyes. We were just like lovers—and then all at once we were lovers—and ten minutes after it happened I could have shot myself—except I’m such a Goddamned degenerate I didn’t have the nerve to do it’ (129).

Like the sparse details of Abel’s murder and the obsolete details of Cain and Abel’s incest, this passage lacks description. It merely refers to the act of being lovers and then “it” fades away as a pronoun in the next phrase—never to be mentioned so overtly in the novel again. This monumental act of family violence occurs so briefly, so quickly, only attentive readers can figure out what the ominous cloud really is that haunts this novel. Mr. Warren’s crime is almost invisible, yet it’s a necessary ghost (like Cain and Abel’s sisters) in order to
propel the plot of a psychiatrist who marries one of his patients. After a lifetime of hospitals and breakdowns, Nicole Diver eventually releases the incest by speaking of it late in Book 3. As the family sings a new American jazz song referring to fathers, Dick tells her to pick a different song. She responds, “Oh play it….Am I going through the rest of my life flinching at the word ‘father’?” (290). This act first enables her to combat Dick’s medical empowerment over her wellness, and second, to admit out loud that she has a past that need not be a secret any longer.

Fitzgerald’s detailed descriptions of the Diver home symbolize the irony of their tumultuous family life amidst the merriment of dinner parties and friends. E.W. Pitcher explains the Diver home’s association with Nicole herself:

Her world in the garden is bounded by domestic and familial routine (the house), on one side, by a general socio-cultural heritage (the village), on two sides, and by the perilous and precipitous nature of her psyche (the cliff fallings by ledges to the sea) on the last (74). The dangerous cliff looms behind the family, the party guests, and the Diver children—always remaining a threat to the aesthetics of the perfect nuclear family the Divers hope to portray. Choosing the home’s dangerous locale represents the first of many dangerous situations Nicole poses for her children. Fitzgerald informs us that Nicole is “bringing up children she could only gently pretend to love, guided orphans...[and] she had not much memory for people and forgot them easily” (180, 279).

Contemporary readers easily comprehend that Nicole suffers from trauma and shock as a victim of family violence. Unfortunately, Nicole’s era failed to possess any terms, definitions, or self-help for victims of family violence. What Nicole has endured is obviously child abuse, and “Prior to the 1960s, research in this area was almost nonexistent...[and] the lack of any prior concern is very
alarming” (Choy 60). Rather, Nicole’s family casts her out of America to Europe in order to keep the secret or pretend it did not exist. Her treatment finds her alongside mentally ill patients who have completely different illnesses and needs. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Richard J. Gelles notes the newness related to family violence data:

The question of whether we are more violent now than during previous times in history is difficult to answer. The selective inattention to the problem of intimate violence meant that official records of family violence were not kept until the past three decades. Similarly, until the past few decades, researchers were reluctant to conduct surveys and ask questions about violence or abuse (19).

I would answer Gelles’ question by saying that we were certainly violent amid our families in the past, as evidenced by stories since Genesis. Family violence is not new. It is only the way we respond to it and write about it that has evolved. The way Mina Loy and F. Scott Fitzgerald write about family violence still reflects Genesis with very few details of the abuse itself. *Tender is the Night* revolves around intimate family violence that occurs well before the novel begins, as if to erase the horrific details of the past. This style of writing, as exemplified in Chapter Three, explodes in later parts of the 20th century with novels like Sapphire’s *PUSH*. Fitzgerald and Loy gently break the silence regarding family violence. The revolutionary awareness would come in later decades.

College catalogues of the past depict a world deaf to the needs of the family violence victim. Doctorate degrees in the social sciences prior to the 1960s failed to require any courses in child abuse or neglect (Choy 60). Although education about these issues has increased dramatically over the past few decades, it does not necessarily mean family violence has decreased. As
discussed in Chapter Three, Claireece Precious Jones in Sapphire’s *PUSH* represents a 1990s victim of rape, incest, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and more. Both Nicole and Precious Jones suffer the consequences of a life filled with memories of incest and abuse. Fortunately, these two American characters do find self-realization by their own means of empowerment and self-will.

*Tender is the Night* breaks the ice between the budding field of psychoanalysis and its ties to family violence. Aware of the times, Fitzgerald quickly mentions “some man of Freud’s” will most likely be in attendance at one of Dick Diver’s medical seminars in Munich (194). One of the most monumental studies to come out of Freud, and later Lacan’s, psychoanalytical studies was Lacan’s theory of The Mirror Stage. He presented this theory to the sixteenth International Congress of Psycho-analysis at Zurich in 1949, although he had previously published most of the ideas in 1936 (Ragland-Sullivan 17). Lacan explains in *Écrits:*

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development (Lacan 4).

Throughout *Tender is the Night*, Nicole Diver views herself in a variety of mirrors which carry Nicole from a “fragmented body-image” to her eventual “totality.” The mirrors signify her progression from a powerless and voiceless family violence victim to a powerful and well adult.

Nicole’s first moment with a mirror happens as she “pause[s] fractionally in front of the hall mirror on leaving a restaurant” (137). Her association with
mirrors reflects her youthful vain nature. The mirror transposes a “beautiful and rich” girl who lacks the depth and trauma later discovered in the novel (137). The next mention of mirrors parallels her father’s abuse with a symbolic form of infanticide with her own children. After causing an automobile accident in which she could have killed the entire family, including herself, Nicole calmly “took out a compact, looked in its mirror, and smoothed back the temple hair” (193). In this case, the mirror reflects two worlds for Nicole: the well and the sick. In the sick world, Nicole suffers from the trauma of incest caused by her father. He murders a part of her much as she attempts to murder her family in the car accident. Prior to getting in the car that night, “Evil-eyed, Nicole stood apart, denying the children” (191). Separating herself from Dick and indicating her own suicidal tendencies, she taunts Dick, “You were scared….You wanted to live!” (192).

Slowly, the mirror scenes begin to point out Nicole’s moments of personal triumph over the dominant males in her life, including her father, Dick, and Tommy Barban. After an unhappy night out in which Dick is profoundly intoxicated, Nicole “coolly” speaks to Dick and “carr[ies] her face to the mirror” (275). As she sees her reflection, Fitzgerald tells us that “for the first time in [Nicole’s] life—[Dick’s] awful faculty of being right seemed to have deserted him at last” (275). This separation from Dick as the always-right paternal figure to the fallible spouse enables Nicole to look at herself in the mirror and view a symbolic victory. In this mirror scene, Nicole lacks the need for future mirrors to facilitate her totality. Now that she sees herself as well, she is well. In the final pages of the novel, she tells Tommy Barban, “I have no mirror here…but if my eyes have changed it’s because I’m well again. And being well perhaps I’ve gone back to my true self” (292).
The final mention of a mirror and Nicole appears in the final few pages of the text. Fitzgerald writes, “The mirror in front of Nicole reflected the passage between the men’s side and the women’s, and Nicole started up at the sight of Tommy entering and wheeling sharply into the men’s shop. She knew with a flush of joy that there was going to be some sort of showdown” (307). The “joy” attached to this mirror scene indicates Nicole’s triumph over Dick as she shifts the Diver love triangle to include Tommy Barban in lieu of Dick’s lover, Rosemary Speers. Although she fails to love Tommy, he represents Nicole’s newfound ability to be “lovers” with a man in her own terms without a paternal figure haunting her. She controls the space of adultery in her marriage, and this socially acceptable common occurrence indicates the family violence wound from her past has started to heal. It represents a crucial point in her development, and the mirrors symbolically carry out the process. Although Nicole’s mirrors are tangible props in the novel, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan emphasizes Lacan’s metaphorical purpose for the mirror stage:

Lacan’s mirror stage has been misconstrued by literalist attempts to render it inseparable from the experience thereby implied: an infant’s recognition of its own shape in the apparatus of a mirror. Lacan never intended to link the appearance of a human ego to a looking glass, nor even to the fact that –like Narcissus—an infant could see its reflection on the surface of a body of water. The scenario of the infant at the mirror is the index for something that has always occurred, with or without that apparatus: The mirror serves as a metaphor and a structural concept at the same time that is points to a crucial experience in psychic development. (29)

Lacan’s metaphor of the mirror makes Nicole Warren’s route to totality via a tangible literary symbol. As I will discuss in the following section concerning
The Book of Daniel, the mirrors (in whatever metaphorical device) illuminate the “psychic development” for the character. In Tender is the Night, it is Nicole Warren who must traverse the mirror scenes in order to move beyond the mirror stage in her human development. In The Book of Daniel, Daniel must write his dissertation and mirror scenes from his past and present in order to heal from his stunted development due to his parents’ execution. Both Daniel and Nicole must escape the infant mirror stage and therefore free themselves from prior family trauma.

The nuclear family stereotype of Dick, Nicole, Lanier, and Topsy, only exists for aesthetic purposes in Dick and Nicole’s social circle. Although this biblical family is ingrained in our cultural consciousness, it does not fit the Diver family nor the majority of contemporary American families. In reality, the Diver family unit consists of Dick, Nicole, and Rosemary—which then transforms into Dick, Nicole, and Tommy—and later, into Dick and Nicole’s divorce. Because the children play such a small role, and due to Nicole’s distaste for their presence, the spotlight for the majority of the novel remains on the trio of Dick, Nicole, and Rosemary. Highlighting the family façades in their social circle, Fitzgerald writes:

The trio lunched downstairs in an atmosphere of carpets and padded waiters....Here there were families of Americans staring around at families of Americans, and trying to make conversation with one another (100).

Whether in gossip along a beach or in a European mental hospital, families study other families through gossip. In the Diver’s case, their family suffers from Nicole’s attachment to her past and Dick’s attachment to his present: Rosemary. Like a true romantic affair, Dick and Rosemary share the hardship of being apart, living separate lives, and accidentally meeting at various times in the novel.
Their relationship parallels that of Adam and Eve, as the latter suffer the death of Abel and the former may have suffered the loss of a child as well. During one of Dick’s final encounters with Rosemary, she stops Dick in the crux of their intimacy and states, “No, not now—those things are rhythmic” (210).

Rosemary’s reference to her menstrual cycle indicates that on this particular day she is either able to get pregnant or currently menstruating. Although Dick exclaims that it “doesn’t matter,” Rosemary says, “That would be poetic justice if it should be you” (211). It is unclear if Rosemary means, “it should be you” as her first lover or as the father of her first child.

In the same conversation, Dick asks her if she is a virgin and she tells him, “No I’ve slept with six hundred and forty men—if that’s the answer you want” (211). Dick immediately responds, “I guess you’ve taken a few shots at love,” to which she states, “It’s all been—abortive” (211). Their verbal irony shades the truth, as most would assume that Dick and Rosemary already had a sexual affair four years earlier. Their coded conversation is disturbing and surreal. When Dick tells her that she has probably taken a few shots at love (now that she is 22 years old), the reader aptly infers she has, because at 18 years of age she had an affair with Dick Diver himself. It is as if they both want to pretend their prior life together didn’t exist, and their conversation ironically emits serious truth through coded, playful language. Most disturbing is the line that her former attempts at love have all been “abortive.” The hyphen in her dialogue indicates a pause in her speech. The aborted love may simply symbolize the death of her affair with Dick years earlier. But, because she’s conscious of her menstrual cycle, she may attempt to admit a truth to Dick. She may have had an abortion due to her affair with Dick. Fitzgerald, like Loy, writes with such precision that details in the characters’ dialogue cannot be ignored. William F. Hall claims,
Fitzgerald reveals in his dialogue both what his characters consciously know and communicate to each other, and what lies buried beneath the surface of their own and others’ consciousness where the truth about themselves and their relationship is to be found. And this buried knowledge is revealed only in the dialogue (620).

Although it is factual that Mr. Warren raped his daughter, it is probable that Rosemary Speers aborted Dick Diver’s child. Ultimately, like the dates and settings of *Tender is the Night*, much is left to the unknown. The novel exemplifies, as Arthur Mizener claims, a “puzzling and unparaphrasable” sample of American literature (166).

Both Fitzgerald and Loy intricately frame discreet forms of family violence within more obvious and acceptable themes. The contradictory language and overall complexity of the texts create works born out of American Modernism. They captured the need to speak of family violence in terms to be explored only later in the twentieth century. Ultimately, the demise of these families reflects a growing knowledge of American writers that utopian themes of perfection and Eden no longer correlate with twentieth century American family needs. Milton Stern captures this final sentiment in his article entitled “*Tender is the Night and American History*”:

In *Tender is the Night* Fitzgerald was writing out of his own mature power and experience, knowing yearningly that there never was an American Eden, knowing sadly that the corrupting actualities of human life had always betrayed what Nick Carraway had called that ‘last and greatest of all human dreams’ (115).

Stern declares an important position regarding Fitzgerald’s fictional families: the one in Eden cannot begin to capture the one in twentieth century America. Eden’s little secrets of violence juxtaposed with supposed perfection must be
brought to the forefront. As well, America must recognize its own fictional obsession with Genesis, and particularly, the family violence embedded in it.

**Doctorow’s Daniel: A Psychoanalytical Suspension**

E.L. Doctorow’s 1971 fictional version of the famous Rosenberg trial and family violence, *The Book of Daniel*, illuminates the potential danger of family trauma during childhood. The family violence evident in the Genesis lore cycle evolves in this postmodern text amid two generations that pose family violence in very different realms. Just as lore cycles span generations and evolve, so do the ways in which family violence appears in literature. This postmodern text explores the intimate connection between two generations. It traverses the adolescence and young adulthood of Daniel Isaacson, the son of executed American spies, Paul and Rochelle Isaacson. Bottling the memory until writing his dissertation years later in graduate school, Daniel weaves in and out of first and third person narrative like a ghost. Daniel’s repressed memories and lack of power regarding his parent’s execution lurk in the shadows of his unconscious. He asks his alter-self in the novel, “Maybe he abuses Phyllis because of his egocentric thoughts regarding protest and disobedience?” (72). Unable to successfully “protest” his parent’s murder, the adult in him will not forgive the child’s helplessness. By analyzing family violence in this text via models set forth by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, we see Daniel’s domestic violence and erratic behavior surface through projected mirrored scenes. Unlike the palpable mirrors in *Tender is the Night*, Daniel’s doubling appears through duplicitous symbolic scenes throughout his life. The final “orthopaedic totality” of Daniel’s being occurs through delayed mirror projections of Daniel’s past and present (Lacan 4, 1288).
Repression, according to Freud, occurs as a “primary mechanism of defense, comparable to an attempt at flight” (18). Daniel’s initial defense mechanism in approaching the subject of his parents’ demise begins with his own syntax. Separating himself from the text, he begins in third person, “Daniel Lewin thumbed his way from New York” as if the story he recreates for his readers lacks the personal voice used in first person singular (3). In a way, Daniel creates his own story, his own version of family violence, as if he, not Doctorow, plays a part in the theme’s evolution. The text wavers as it gains courage and then loses it during moments of intense emotional strife. In one of many acts of physical abuse against his wife, Phyllis, Daniel narrates, “Daniel took his foot off the gas pedal and turned on the windshield wipers…He ran his right hand over her buttocks…Daniel leaned forward and pressed the cigarette lighter” (60). Breaking his narration and jolting the reader through the fourth wall, his next sentence asks, “Shall I continue?” (60). Immediately, the narrator and reader, who were both separated from the atrocious abuse on “the tender white girlflesh of [Phyllis’] ass” enter the scene, unwillingly or not. Like many postmodern pieces, this text is aware of its narration. It reflects on its role as a voice in the family violence conversation.

Daniel sees plenty of flesh as a child, for Rochelle and Paul established a home in which they were comfortably naked around one another. He writes, “I remember his cock…I remember the hair around her slit, sparse and uneven” (30). Spying on them during intercourse, he claims, “They used to make the whole house rock. They really went at it, they balled all the time” (42). These are the days in the Isaacson household prior to the fall. Mirroring Adam and Eve’s naked utopia in the Garden of Eden, Paul and Rochelle create temporary safety and familial comfort—prior to their execution. Unable to come to terms with his exposure to their sexual relationship, the adult Daniel denies his wife, Phyllis,
any sense of sexual equality or normalcy. As discussed in Chapter Two, Daniel shares similarities with brothers, Lincoln and Booth in *Topdog Underdog*. The brothers witness both their mother and father having intercourse with people outside their marriage. The impact of this for Daniel, Lincoln, and Booth is detrimental. In “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes,” Freud explains the importance placed on sexual development after witnessing one’s parent’s sexual relations:

Finally, analysis shows us in a shadowy way, how the fact of a child at a very early age listening to his parents copulating may set up his first sexual excitation, and how that event may, owing to its after-effects, act as a starting-point for the child’s whole sexual development (672).

Rochelle and Paul have honorable intentions regarding exposure and nakedness, but they withhold from their children the physical parental hugs and kisses present in most healthy family units. Daniel consistently witnesses affection between his parents but lacks affection from them. Rochelle buys clothes too large for Daniel and his sister, Susan, symbolizing her blindness to their physical presence. Rather, Rochelle and Paul focus on their own relationship, excluding the children. Rochelle’s final letter to Paul prior to their trial speaks of nothing but her physical relationship with him: “Can you find how difficult I will find it to concentrate on the legal goings on! Just as in our meeting with Jake I have to pull myself way from the contemplations of you, which each time is like drinking water after a long thirst” (192). Stripped of familial affection and later orphaned after his parents’ execution breeds in Daniel a volatile adult. Freud clarifies this neurosis in his “Theory of Sexuality”:

One of the clearest indications that a child will later become neurotic is to be seen in an insatiable demand for his parents’ affection. And on the other hand neuropathic parents, who are
inclined as a rule to display excessive affection, are precisely those who are most likely by their caresses to arouse the child’s disposition to neurotic illness. Incidentally, this example shows that there are ways more direct than inheritance by which neurotic parents can hand their disorder on to their children (289).

Although Rochelle and Paul fail to “display excessive affection” on their children, the juxtaposition of their nakedness with lack of affection fosters a warped sense of the familial sense of touch.

John G. Parks’ reading of the novel claims that Daniel “inherits not a legacy of power but of powerlessness…Daniel must find a way to recompose history after a great wounding” (456). The lack of agency Daniel renders as a child creates in him an adult unable to handle the massive memory of his parent’s death. Witnessing Susan’s suicidal demise and writing his dissertation help him clarify his suppressed feelings and conditioned powerlessness. His “great wounding” unfortunately must subconsciously wound others before it can mend the wound in himself. Like Cain, Daniel’s rage is taken out on his innocent family members. The Genesis lore cycle has an important theme of transference. Having characters redirect their anger onto family members pervades American literature. This is a basic human feeling, and Daniel Isaacson is no exception. He wounds his adoptive parents and his sister, Susan, with outward indifference to his parents’ memory. While “Daniel drank his drink,” Susan emphatically pleas for his support of “The Paul and Rochelle Isaacson Foundation for the Revolution” (79). Hiding his energies in graduate school and his abusive marriage, Daniel denies himself any mental connection to his familial past. He moves his family far away from Brooklyn, his childhood home, and essentially exiles himself. Freud noted that “By introducing the process of repression into the genesis of the neuroses we have been able to gain some
insight into this connection. Neurotics turn away from reality because they find it unbearable” (300). At this point in the novel, Daniel has yet to face reality, for Susan is still alive and he has yet to finish his dissertation.

Just as Freud argues in “The Material and Source of Dreams” that “Hamlet is able to do anything except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father’s place,” Daniel too renders himself inoperable concerning his parents’ death (922). Unable to execute vengeance on the unnamed Americans for the conviction and murder of his parents, Daniel’s repression surfaces in an adult who abuses both his wife and infant son. In addition to burning his wife with a cigarette lighter, Daniel commits acts of marital rape as well. He writes, “here is soft Phyllis from Brooklyn suffering yet another penetration and her tormenter Daniel gently squeezing handfuls of soft ass” (6). The use of words such as “suffering” and “tormenter” indicate the family violence displayed in Daniel’s displaced lack of affection from his childhood. By using third person again, Daniel attempts to separate himself from the abuser—another form of transferring family violence.

As soon as Daniel and Phyllis encroach upon any sense of “an attractive young family” (131), Daniel destroys the normalcy with his repressed rage. As the family strolls in a park Daniel admits, “I tossed my son higher and higher, and now he laughed no longer but cried out. Still I did not stop and I threw him higher and caught him closer to the ground…I can’t bear to think about this murderous feeling…I enjoyed the fear in his mother” (131). Foiling this scene, Daniel later recalls a memory of holding his sister “at full arm’s length over my head” while “she shrieked merrily” (159). Unable to save Susan from also being an orphan, Daniel’s murderous endeavors in the park emulate the same powerlessness he felt as a child and now feels as an adult. Daniel’s son, Paul, named after the child’s grandfather, represents an innocent victim caught in the
transferred aggression between husband and wife. Just like the infant’s named predecessor, the elder Paul Isaacson also fell victim to the larger aggression between America and the Soviet Union.

This mirroring of scenes and characters dominates Doctorow’s text on both personal and political levels. Just as Genesis has been told and retold amid different contexts, the mirror scenes in *The Book of Daniel* evolve and reappear in different ways, like a lore cycle. After Freud’s revolutionary writings on the role of the family (amongst other related topics), Jacques Lacan led the second wave of psychoanalysis with his introduction of the “imaginary: the infant’s recognition of its image in the mirror. The baby forgets how weak it is and identifies jubilantly with the wholeness of a reflected form. The human self thus comes into being through a fundamentally aesthetic recognition” (Lacan 1281).

Framed within Doctorow’s voice lies the construction of Daniel’s voice framed yet again within other voices created by Daniel himself. Unaware of his own mirrored image, Daniel’s preliminary chapters transfer the recognized self onto others. As he sits next to his sister, Susan, at the psychiatric hospital, he tells her, “You were in dread of yourself and it was dread so pure that one glance in the mirror scorched the heart and charred the eyes” (9). Ironically, Daniel’s use of second person narration (rather than the appropriate first person plural) indicates his initial attempts to separate himself from facing his image in the mirror, an image that will define his reality as an orphaned and violent adult.

Fortunately, through a series of mirrored scenes in the text, Daniel eventually comes to terms with his own image. These duplicated spheres project the mirror image from Daniel’s generation to his parents’. Figuratively, the mirror image that enables Daniel’s awakening from stunted infant is the delayed image he finds later in life that conjoins him with Paul and Rochelle Isaacson. At the Worcester State Hospital, Daniel carries his son “in the baby rig” while
noting that the patients “carried brown paper bags rolled tight against their stomach” (5). Later, in his memory of his parents’ house, “…one couple has an infant in arms” and everyone has “brought their lunch in brown paper bags” (44). By recollecting his memory and mirroring it within his newly constructed family, Daniel commences to recognize his own reality. According to Lacan, “the function of the mirror-stage…is to establish relations between the organism and its reality—or as they say, between the [inner world] and the [outer world]” (1287). If Daniel wishes to connect his inner world, one of repressed anxiety concerning his parents’ execution, he must come to terms with the reality of his suspended memories.

Daniel skews his helpless childhood memories with his aggressive actions as an adult. Mirroring his constant confusion between his wife, Phyllis, and his mother, Rochelle, Daniel’s narrative contains two burn scenes. First, “three concentric circles of heating element” burn his wife and reincarnate his mother’s burn many years earlier (60). “My mother” he recalls, “is lying down on the couch with a wash cloth across her head. Her left forearm is bandaged. While ironing she gave herself a terrible burn” (107). The suspension of time between Daniel’s childhood and his adult decisions enable him, through writing, to create a mirror into his past. By writing his dissertation, he transforms himself “from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality” (Lacan 1288). Because Daniel constructs the story subjectively, his suspended mirror image (having transgressed generations) illuminates his reflection because the narration appears through Daniel’s own eyes. T.V. Reed emphasizes Daniel’s solo gaze by pointing out that “this particular narrator is hardly likely to give us an objective account of events in which we find he is deeply enmeshed” (290). Daniel forces the reader to view his reflection of reality via his mind’s eye and subsequent dissertation.
In Daniel’s singular view, Dr. Duberstein plans on shocking Susan with volts as a form of psychological therapy. After Dr. Duberstein claims, “We’ll get her all settled… and then we can go to work,” Daniel immediately recognizes the “work” as “just a few volts” (26-7). Unaware of Duberstein’s true meaning of “work,” the reader must accept Daniel’s outrage as verifiable truth. In his analysis of E.T.A. Hoffman’s “The Sandman,” Freud describes this process as his right:

The writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into a real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation. He has, of course, a right to do either (937).

Daniel fails to reach his totality until the scenes are repeated and the mirror image is doubled. He duplicates Susan’s supposed shock therapy with the memory of his mother’s “buzzing sputtering dance” from electrocution years earlier (298). Adamantly refusing Dr. Duberstein’s help years later indicates that Daniel subconsciously fears similar results from two different doctors. Both Dr. Mindish and Dr. Goldstein send his loved ones to their ultimate demise.

The mirrored scenes escalate, penetrating the unconscious repression of his parents’ execution. As a child in Brooklyn, he witnesses a woman “smashed” through the schoolyard fence across the street (87). As he looks at the woman, he notices “she had been carrying bottles of milk in her grocery bags, and the bottles had broken and the milk was mixed with her blood, and glass was in it” (88). The maternal nourishment the milk and the woman conjure juxtaposed with the horrific bloody scene foreshadows Daniel’s mother’s ultimate death. Aware of his own burgeoning mirror reflection, he notes at his parents’ funeral, “It is one of those peculiar days… like blood in milk” (300). Daniel suppresses both his helplessness with the unknown woman’s accident and his own mother’s murder.
Once the original scene of the woman with her groceries joins the complementary scene at Rochelle and Paul’s funeral, both the reader and Daniel may view the mirrored images; therefore viewing the completed reality of Daniel’s being.

Paul and Rochelle’s marriage parallels Daniel and Phyllis’ marriage as many intimate and violent scenarios between the couples reflect their similarities and differences. Prior to burning his wife, Daniel asks Phyllis, “Will you do me a favor?” (58). Later, in order to protect his wife, Paul asks Rochelle, “Do me a favor, Rochelle. Get what you need and go home” (104). Having distorted the mirror image from his parents’ generation to his own, Daniel’s request harms his wife rather than comforts her. Additionally, both Paul and Daniel speak to their wives about protecting their children in political rallies. “Phyllis,” Daniel asks, “...you didn’t really intend to take your baby into that. Troops with bayonets. Tear gas. Did you? You can’t be sure what’s going to happen” (254). On the other hand, Paul fully supports bringing Daniel to the Paul Robeson concert. He argues, “There is nothing to be afraid of, Rochelle! If I thought there was the slightest chance of violence, do you think I would allow you to go, let alone the kid?” (46).

As it turns out, both son and father are harmed at the Robeson concert. Daniel “swallowed bits of his teeth…and was lifted by the limbs” (256). Paul “silently experiences the breaking of his arm” (51). By this late point in the novel, Daniel begins to view his past with a much clearer lens. Having appropriately learned from his parents’ mistake, he cautions his own wife and attempts to protect them in the most normal familial sense. Knowing he no longer resembles the helpless boy in the mirror, Daniel takes action not to repeat the mirrored scenes from his past with the same detrimental results. Freud’s
phenomenon of “the double” depicts Daniel’s process of reaching his totality through doubled scenes:

In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names though several consecutive generations (940).

The final monumental mirrored moment occurs at the very end of the novel when Mindish kisses Daniel at Disneyland. Daniel recounts, “he found the back of my neck and pulled me forward and leaned toward me and touched the top of my head with his palsied lips” (293). This kiss mirrors the kiss Paul gives Daniel in the prison shortly before his death: “He held my face in his hand and pulled me toward him and kissed the top of my head” (249). The striking similarity of these kisses appears in their unspoken sorrows. Both Paul and Mindish kiss Daniel as if to ask for an apology. Paul knows he will be leaving his son with tragic memories that may take a lifetime to heal. Mindish knows (beneath his senility) that he sits before a man caught up in the tragic memories that have taken a lifetime to heal. The final affectionate kiss from these paternal figures enables Daniel to construct his own identity without the ominous memories between the two figures who kissed him. Through their kisses, he separates himself from the political triangle that bound him between his father and Dr. Mindish.

Now free to unearth the complete story that is his family’s tragic past, Daniel Isaacson Lewin may reach his totality. He recognizes the mirror images for their lessons and for their tragic losses. Determined to resuscitate himself fully, he challenges the reader, “I will show you that I can do the electrocution” (296). Like many American writers who have taken the torch in a lore cycle,
Daniel writes his own version of the electrocution, and as Freud said, “has a right” to take his reader into fantasy or reality (937). By writing his own version of his parents’ murder scene, Daniel finally recreates his final mirror image: the electrocution scene. Whether this last duplication reflects the truth or not is not important. Daniel sees what he wants to see and writes the details how he chooses them to have happened. The violence of his parents’ death is really a mystery to him, much like the mystery of Abel’s death. Doctorow follows authors like Cather and Ellison who recreate the Genesis violence in their own modified domain.

Published in the early 1970s, The Book of Daniel expresses family violence with periodic shocks of violent imagery. Unlike the previous texts discussed in this chapter, The Book of Daniel includes the reader in the violence, breaking the fourth wall as if to place the reader in the car when Daniel Lewin burns his wife with a cigarette lighter. It creates uneasiness and tension, feelings family violence discussions are bound to arouse. As the century continues and closes, the shock turns into elaborate description. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the simplicity of “provided wives” supplanting incestuous details and “Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and slew him” are no longer acceptable means of portraying family violence. With changing social awareness comes a shift in the ways in which we speak and treat family violence. The progress made by psychoanalysis and social activism exposed a need to examine the family in all its functions, even those highly personal, private, and secretive.

The texts in this chapter address the ways in which writers choose to depict family issues such as incest, rape, murder, and physical abuse. These writing styles reflect our cultural movements over the past century in response to and recognition of family violence. Cain and Abel’s incest is overlooked and ignored, much like family violence has been for prior centuries. The Genesis
incest and family violence were considered unstated, acceptable necessities. This, as I have argued, often creates powerless female characters in American literature who are relegated to the place of a silent-but-necessary character. They lack a voice in the story and elicit their cries of violence through coded language and white space. They have also been ignored in scholarship, as characters like Dick Diver often over-shadow their female counterparts like Nicole Warren. The doors must be opened to silent characters in American literature who represent clues regarding silent issues such as family violence. I have provided a close reading of these voices and juxtaposed them with psychological terms and sociologically advancements in order to give voice to the victimized and voiceless.
Hush now, don’t explain
I know you raise Cain
I’m glad you’re back, don’t explain
—Billie Holiday

Alice Walker claims that “It is our ‘familial’ relations with each other in America that we need to scrutinize. And it is the whole family, rather than the dark or the light, that must be affirmed” (311). Walker’s address asserts the need for certifiable family studies in all disciplines relating to American studies. Her cry is all-inclusive and emblematic of the twentieth century civil rights movements that support a new understanding of family by means of race, gender, and sexuality. With that at heart, I enter into my fifth and final chapter about the American literary family. Although its title alludes to the “future” American family, the contents of this chapter examine two pivotal points in time concerning American literature and the family: the turn of the century, specifically the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first.

I begin the chapter with a close reading of Henry James’ intricate novella, *The Turn of the Screw*. Published in 1898, this turn-of-the-century text (no pun intended on “turn”), represents a model for understanding changing family dynamics in American (and English) societies. The novella presents an unnamed governess and housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, who are left in an English estate, Bly, with two orphaned children. A distant uncle is ultimately the guardian for the children but has given the governess strict instructions to handle everything and not bother him. This environment creates a new nuclear family with two mothers and two children. Their temporary family unit, chaired by the
governess and Mrs. Grose, is an alternative family—much like those that will receive much attention in the coming century.

The “family” in *The Turn of the Screw* conjures society’s opinion of social class, homosexuality, and adoption at the dawn of the twentieth century. The text waivers in its dedication to and emancipation from Victorian family values and serves to help readers understand the American family at the turn of the twentieth century. I include it in this dissertation not to resurrect Genesis per se, but to evaluate the larger issue: American family dynamics. We cannot fully understand the Genesis lore cycle within American family dynamics without a dedicated investigation into historical and literary data that texts like these provide. The themes in Genesis, such as violence, incest, bloodshed, sibling rivalry, curses, and more are still evident in these texts, but they address the burgeoning need for American literature to redefine the family.

In addition to *The Turn of the Screw*, I close with two pieces that represent the turn of the twenty-first century. These texts are Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) and Jodi Picoult’s *My Sister’s Keeper* (2004). After a century’s time, the family is still the epicenter of American literature. The revision of Genesis and therefore revision of the family concerning gender, class, and race are still active investigations. Allison’s text gives the memoir of “Bone” Boatwright, a young girl who has been beaten and molested by her stepfather since she was in elementary school. Picoult’s text tells the story of Anna Fitzgerald, a stem cell research miracle baby who is born in order to save her older sister from Leukemia. Both texts continue the ever-present theme of blood and the family, as discussed in many texts in this dissertation since Abel’s bloodshed in Genesis.

*My Sister’s Keeper* is the perfect text to close this dissertation. It is only appropriate that my study of the American family open with an overt allusion to
Genesis through John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* and close with the lore cycle’s endurance evident in Jodi Picoult’s *My Sister’s Keeper*. The latter is truly a contemporary version of the former. It exemplifies the true power of the Genesis lore cycle, as it successfully spins Genesis into contemporary issues regarding the family such as stem cell research, cloning, and cancer studies. The novel closes this dissertation by opening the discussion of the *future* American family. What will be examined at the turn of the next century? It is my contention that Picoult’s topic regarding the conflict between “God-made” babies and “scientifically-made” babies will envelop family studies much like civil rights did in much of the twentieth century. *The Turn of the Screw* clearly combats a certain mindset from Victorian family values, so contemporary texts, in addition to *My Sister’s Keeper*, will prove monumental to American literary criticism. In the same vein, Dorothy Allison’s emphasis in *Bastard out of Carolina* on the safety and “home” of Bone’s lesbian Aunt Raylene will most certainly continue to be resurrected in fictional American families. The fused, adopted, gay, biracial, genetically formed family must continue to evolve and inform American literature. Without these subjects, without these cultural analyses, we are at a loss in the future American literary canon.

**The Turn of the Screw**

Henry James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* just as society began turning away from oppressive Victorian family values and approaching the modern days of the twentieth century. Published in 1898, the novella captured critics’ attention for its narrative ambiguity, ghost story genre, and psychologically repressed governess. Scholar Edmund Wilson argued “the story is primarily intended as a characterization of the governess” (121), whereas John Lydenberg argued the story should be read as “Christian myth, suggestive of archetypal
religious experiences” (273). In most cases, the story unfolds between two arguments: whether the ghosts of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint appear in the governess’ imagination or whether they truly appear to haunt and possess Flora and Miles (Reed 189). Although all of these arguments contain fruitful evidence and close readings, they fail to address the novella’s important connection to Victorian family dynamics at the turn of the century. This story depicts a Victorian family core ruptured, neglected, and displaced in its most vulnerable places.

According to Joseph Hawes, “The nuclear family [consists] of father, mother, and children living together within a privatized household” (1). The nuclear family portrayed by James consists of the governess as father, Mrs. Grose as mother, and Flora and Miles as their children. Having been given “supreme authority” over Bly, the governess represents a new female form of the head-of-household (27). Consulting on matters regarding the children’s welfare, the two women rear the children as if they were their own. The governess consults Mrs. Grose on Mile’s performance at school, on Flora’s illness, and more. When Flora appears missing, the governess assumes, “As she was nowhere about she would surely be with Mrs. Grose” as if the two women share parental responsibility for Flora (97). Mrs. Grose represents the female figure as the hysteria-prone Victorian spouse who has less education and is often one to “burst into tears” (52). As Miles’ and Flora’s symbolic parents, the governess and Mrs. Grose correlate with modern lesbian women and their children. In a most provocative scene, Mrs. Grose tells the governess, “I’ll stand by you. We’ll see it out.” The governess responds and repeats, as if in a marriage ceremony, “We’ll see it out” and gives Mrs. Grose her hand “to make it a vow” (37). After their vow, the women kiss and consecrate their covenant.
In his critical introduction to *The Turn of the Screw*, Peter Beidler claims the “early hypothesis about James’s reason for not marrying, however has been replaced with an alternative one: that James was homosexual” (8). Because of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, James knew the price he might pay under Victorian law if he revealed his sexuality to society at large (Pascoe 9). Although the current speculation about his homosexuality lacks empirical proof, the “marriage” evident between the governess and Mrs. Grose indicates that James comprehended Victorian nuclear family dynamics and surely saw its ominous presence coming to an end. Throughout *The Turn of the Screw*, James challenges the traditional nuclear family through examples of homosexuality and adoptive family households.

As a would-be mother and masculine head-of-household figure, the governess consistently portrays herself as hero of the story, saving the children from the evil ghosts of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint:

Her concern, she would insist, is only for them. But to the reader it often seems that her real concern is with herself. She paces the sunny paths and the dark halls of Bly as if always holding a mirror before her, in which to observe with care and admiration her displays of heroism, and in which to catch in the shadowy background the lurking figures visible to someone with her preternatural acuity (Lydenberg 279).

This selfish determination to save the children while simultaneously making herself hero-mother appears clearly in section XXI. The governess tells Mrs. Grose that if Miles “confesses he’s saved. And if he’s saved—,” Mrs. Grose finishes her sentence, “Then you are” (110). Without the ghosts interfering in their family unit, the governess will continue to maintain her head-of-household post. She must “save” Miles from the supposedly sinful ghosts while also saving her newly established nuclear family.
The governess occupies a paradoxical space in the text as middle-class governess and aristocratic head-of-household figure at Bly. Like an English aristocratic mother, she answers to no one. Like a governess, she spends many hours with the children on their activities and lessons. This defies the standard Victorian realm of class distinction and duty. According to Joan Perkin, aristocratic children did not spend very much time with their parents who “rarely expressed any guilt” on the matter (96-7). In addition, the “governess, one of the few occupations open to middle-class women, was envied by no one” (Perkin 249). The governess in *The Turn of the Screw* straddles both hemispheres and ruptures the Victorian sense of domestic place in the home. Like a modern woman, she embodies the infamous super-mom concept to come about in the twentieth century: a woman who works, cares for the children, and still maintains the house and hearth. James manages to turn the dynamics of the Victorian era on its head, so *The Turn of the Screw* symbolizes yet another “turn” on the family unit so heavily doted on in the nineteenth-century mindset.

Like a true mother, the governess initially sees Miles and Flora as perfect angels who can do no harm. In her opinions, Miles “was only too fine and fair for the little horrid unclean school-world...[and] was therefore an angel” (43). As well, Flora “was the most beautiful child I had ever seen” (30). Over time, her word choice becomes more possessive as she strengthens her parental rights and loosens her regard for her original occupation as governess. She eventually refers to them as “my little charges” (64), “my pupils” (72), “my children” (44), and even goes so far as to call Miles “my boy” (51). The governess must know, as did everyone in Victorian society, her social class. This makes her possession of the children unlikely to happen, even as their step-mother. Obviously, as a middle-class governess, becoming a spinster was much more probable than marrying the uncle and becoming the true Lady of the house. Given her
unchallenged solitude and authority at Bly, she fantasizes that she meets the “handsome” someone on an afternoon stroll:

One of the thoughts that, as I don’t in the least shrink now from noting, used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet some one. Some one would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve. I didn’t ask more than that—I only asked that he should know; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face (39).

Having described him as “handsome and bold and pleasant” in her opening remarks, we know that this “handsome face” must belong to the children’s uncle (26). Through her fantasy relationship with the uncle, this meeting seems possible, and he would “approve” of their nontraditional union. Because so many Victorian women “suffered through the agonies of labor only to die shortly after the baby was delivered,” the governess certainly knows that stepmothers embodied a Victorian reality (McKnight 1). This enables her to construct a false family mindset that Miles and Flora are her own children.

As we know, the uncle fails to appear on her stroll, so the governess procures the only other spousal option: Mrs. Grose. In one of the governess’ fits, she states, “I fairly threw myself into her arms” (55) and often refers to Mrs. Grose as her “companion” (56, 57, 77, 90, 98, and 99). As partners rearing their children, they decide not to mention Miles’ behavior to the uncle or to Miles himself. They discuss matters of the family in each other’s private bedrooms and perpetually finish each other’s sentences. Eventually the governess’ word choice slowly separates their children and their conversations from the other servants:

It was not till late next day that I spoke to Mrs. Grose; the rigour with which I kept my pupils in sight making it often difficult to meet her
privately: the more as we each felt the importance of not provoking – on the part of the servants quite as much as on that of the children – any suspicion of a secret flurry or of a discussion of mysteries (72).

Her diction insinuates that, like a married couple, she and Mrs. Grose discuss the children’s affairs in hopes that the servants stay out of their aristocratic business. In Mike Hepworth’s recent article, “Privacy, Security and Respectability: The Ideal Victorian Home,” he reminds us that “private spaces of the home were not always sacrosanct and were often open to the scrutiny of other members of the family, especially…servants” (18). By not considering Mrs. Grose and herself as servants, the governess once again asserts her dominion over the household.

With this masculine authority, the governess defies the segregated spaces demanded in her society. In the Victorian era,

Middle and upper-class homes subdivided domestic space into male and female areas. Women inhabited the drawing room, while men had the library, the billiard room and smoking room (Kleinberg 148).

Ignoring sexuality and economic class, the governess regularly enters the library and borrows from “the roomful of old books” (66). She and Mrs. Grose have conversations by the fire, in the dining room, in the governess’ bedroom, and more. James describes the library as a space filled with “last-century fiction,” so the governess’ newly formed Victorian family highlights the “last century” rules regarding domesticity. As paid servants at Bly, this figuratively married couple plays house with the space at Bly and with “their” children. Newly formed characters like the governess and Mrs. Grose erode domestic laws present in the former Victorian century.

As the mother of her newly formed family unit, the governess becomes obsessed with protecting Miles and Flora from the “detestable dangerous
presence” of Quint and Jessel’s ghosts (67). Her obsession reeks of both self-congratulation and possession:

I confess I rather applaud myself as I look back!—that I saw my response so strongly and so simply. I was there to protect and defend the little creatures in the world the most bereaved and the most loveable, the appeal of whose helplessness had suddenly become only too explicit, a deep constant ache of one’s own engaged affection. We were cut off, really, together; we were united in our danger. They had nothing but me, and I—well I had them (53).

Because Henry James fails to provide any proof in the text that Jessel and Quint represent dangerous characters, the governess’ assumption that she must “defend the little creatures” symbolizes her forced motherly position to protect one’s own child. In the Victorian era, “children [were considered] innocents to be carefully nurtured and protected from evil by their all-loving mother” (Ruether 83). The governess clearly manifests herself into that role by constantly referring to the ghosts as evil, horrific beings. Viewing herself in this maternal light, she hopes the uncle might notice her as the heroic mother she poses herself to be.

This violated role between middle-class governess and aristocratic Lady appears in the governess’ own speech as she recollects her time with the children. Separating herself from her own character, she speaks of herself in third person. The following passage sounds like a mother watching her children play with their governess:

I mean – though they got their lessons better and better, which was naturally what would please her most – in the way of diverting, entertaining, surprising her; reading her passages, telling her stories, acting her charades, pouncing out at her, in disguises, as animals and
historical characters, and above all astonishing her by the “pieces” they had secretly got by heart and could interminably recite (65).

Miles and Flora play along with the governess, but on two occasions, assert their class superiority. First, they reject the governess’ make-believe house by writing letters to their uncle. Because sending the letters to London would insinuate an authoritative parental unit outside of Bly, the governess secretly, “kept them myself” and boasts, “I have them to this day” (82). Later, Miles tires of the routine at Bly and insists, “I want my own sort.” The governess dismisses his request (85). Her obsession with Miles and Flora depends upon their residence at Bly as well as their total seclusion from the outside world. Ironically, the obsession with having children eventually endangers the children’s lives.

The desire to create a proto-Victorian family appears when the governess first moves into Bly. The governess claims she recognizes the “faint and far…cry of a child” (30). Swept up in the power and prestige of her position at Bly, her unconscious mind enables her to hear the child and symbolically give birth to her faux-children, Miles and Flora. The “large impressive room, one of the best in the house” and the “great state bed” given to her at Bly only worsen her warped sense of family (30). The uncle should most certainly occupy the large estate room, but he has abandoned the house, his adopted niece and nephew included. Without seeing this as a problem, the governess relates, “He never wrote to them—that may have been selfish, but it was a part of the flattery of his trust of myself” as if to excuse his poor parental behavior (82). She prides herself on her staunch protection of the children and dismisses the uncle’s obvious child neglect. The governess and Mrs. Grose possess neither legal guardianship nor temporary custody of Miles and Flora. In fact, contemporary law would prosecute the uncle with charges of child neglect. The uncle is guilty of three counts of child neglect: abandonment, inadequate supervision, and inadequate
nurturance and affection. Winton and Mara’s *Child Abuse and Neglect, Multidisciplinary Approaches* defines the terms as follows:

- **Abandonment**: Desertion of a child without arranging for reasonable care and supervision. This category includes cases in which children…were left by parents/substitutes who gave no (or false) information about their whereabouts (78).
- **Inadequate Supervision**: When a child is left unsupervised or inadequately supervised for extended periods of time or allowed to remain away from home overnight without the parent/substitute knowing (or attempting to determine) the child’s whereabouts (78).
- **Inadequate Nurturance/Affection**: Marked inattention to the child’s needs for affection, emotional support, attention, or competence (78).

The uncle left the children, and for all he knows, the governess could have moved them to Australia. His main condition “that she should never trouble him…and take the whole thing over” indicates that he relinquished his parental responsibility to a twenty-year old middle class woman (28). He neither writes nor visits the children, although he lies and claims to have gone “down himself, whenever he might, to see how they were doing” (27). His neglect further emerges when he fails to open the schoolmaster’s letter regarding Miles.

The uncle hands over so much power to the governess that one cannot blame her for the distorted sense of family she constructs in her mind. “Prior to the 1960’s, research in this area [of child neglect] was almost nonexistent,” so James’ contemporary readers may have thought nothing of the governess’ predicament (Choy 60). On the other hand, James’ ties to his psychologist brother, William, may have made him more sensitive to the burgeoning topic of child abuse. The often-argued debate over Miles’ truancy has what readers today can easily perceive as an attention seeking mechanism. Miles tells the
governess in section XI, “I am bad...[and] How otherwise should I have been bad enough?” in order to prove to her that he deserves to be expelled from school (75). This, he hopes, will get his uncle’s attention. Later, he asks the governess, “I mean does he know?” The governess questions, “Know what?” to which Miles responds, “Why, the way I’m going on” (85). Blinded to Miles’ desire for his uncle to embody a parental figure, the governess once again dismisses Mile’s request by saying, “I don’t think he much cares” (86). This proves a critical point in the novella. Miles finally realizes his uncle does not care whether or not he goes to school, stays at Bly, or goes to the moon. The family dynamic Miles has always imagined disappears before him.

Miles and Flora have been deserted three times: by the death of their biological parents in India, by their uncle who neglects them, and by the only true family they had known: Jessel and Quint. Their ghosts, who supposedly haunt and possess the children, symbolize family structures of the Victorian past. This four-person Victorian nuclear family appears in the mystic past, represented in James’ novellas as ghostly apparitions. The lovers supposedly have another child on the way (insinuating growth of the Victorian family dynamic) when disaster strikes and each mysteriously dies. This system signifies the closest Miles and Flora ever get to the true Victorian family experience. Although displaced and not biological, the Jessel-Quint partnership provided the much needed stability for Miles and Flora. Symbolically, Miss Jessel foils the governess and possesses all that the latter lacks: a heterosexual relationship, two happy children, a grand estate, servants to work for her, and a baby on the way.

Feeling threatened by their past parental presence, the governess tells Mrs. Grose, “They’re not mine—they’re not ours. They’re his and they’re hers!” (76). With that awareness, she vows to protect her “lovely babies” and rid the estate of anyone who challenges her authority. Although the governess assumes the
ghosts come with evil intentions, it is possible that they merely arrive to protect and look after their former children. The governess acknowledges that Peter Quint “had come for some one else,” but ignores the possibility that his arrival may not be malicious. When Jessel appears at the lake, the governess laments, “She gave me never a glance. She only fixed the child” (57). Even Mrs. Grose recognizes their familial continuity when she tells the governess, “The four, depend upon it, perpetually meet” (76). Priscilla Walton claims Jessel’s “sexual orientation is in question,” but her actions as a heterosexual lover, pregnant woman, and mournful ghost indicate otherwise (312). She and Quint, as Miles and Flora’s symbolic Victorian parents, signify one heterosexual family in the novella.

As an American living in England while writing this piece, James obviously knew of the slowly changing social rules of Victorian society. He kept in close contact with his brother in the United States and certainly knew of the family dynamic evolving as it depended more on love than social caste. Across the Atlantic, Victorian Americans, mirroring the governess and her household, were slipping away from the past:

Victorian Americans held up an ideal that some historians have called “companionsate” marriage. According to these historians, companionsate marriage differed from traditional marriage in significant respects. Companionsate unions were based on attraction between spouses rather than parental arrangement, and in them, at least according to the ideal, women were idealized as nurturant mothers and sexually pure moral guardians (Pascoe 18).

The governess, having obviously read Jane Eyre when she mentions “an unmentionable relative,” knows the rarity of a governess actually marrying the handsome master of the house (41). Still, her hope and fantasies become an
obscene reality as she acquires the master’s house in some way and not in others. This rupture of the Victorian family nucleus exemplifies the true nature of this story. The text calls into question whether two middle class employees have the right to raise aristocratic children and cross social lines only valorized in fiction like *Jane Eyre*. It also questions whether two married women can supersede the heterosexual Victorian family successfully without being tormented by the ominous cloud of its perfection. In this text, the lines between servant and master and husband and wife deteriorate and fade. Ultimately, the characters in *The Turn of the Screw* and Henry James, their creator, turn the screw toward the twentieth century.

**Bastard out of Carolina**

Dorothy Allison’s renowned novel, *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), tells the first person account of “Bone” Ruth Anne Boatwright, a young girl constantly beaten and molested by her stepfather, “Daddy” Glen. Unlike James’ turn of the twentieth-century text, Allison’s text is set in 1950s Greenville, South Carolina. It addresses new family themes regarding lower-economic white families like the Boatwrights, homosexuality, and family violence. This is a topic Allison also analyzes in other texts such as *Trash* (2002) and *Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature* (2005). Through the eyes of Bone Boatwright and Dorothy Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina* investigates the nature of class and family violence in 1950s America from a 1990s American perspective. In Leigh Gilmore’s words, the text is “situated in the borderland” between fiction and autobiography (46). Bone and Daddy Glen are based on real people from Allison’s own childhood, herself included. The abuse is depicted in forthright and honest diction, much like its contemporary, *PUSH*. Bone speaks, like Precious Jones, from an adolescent perspective:
If I went home when he was there and Mama wasn’t, he was always finding something I’d done, something I had to be told, something he just had to do because he loved me. And he did love me. He told me so over and over again, holding my body tight to his, his hands shaking as they moved restlessly, endlessly, over my belly, ass, and thighs (108).

As an adolescent, Bone lacks the power to verbalize and therefore end the physical and sexual abuse. Although her mother, Anney, knows about the physical abuse, she appears to be unaware of the molestation. For Glen, and many child abusers, the forms of abuse merge into one realm. Glen’s sexual abuse is violent and his violent abuse is sexual. Even Bone figures this out when she claims, “He had been pinning me against his thigh when he beat me. Had he come? Had he been beating me until he came in his trousers? The thought made me gag” (253). Bone’s awareness in youth indicates that as an adult, Anney must have known her daughter was being molested. She is often cited as the most villainous character in the novel for allowing the abuse, but I contend that she too is made mute by abuse.

Initially, Anney hopes Glen will “make a good daddy” to her daughters, Bone and Reese (13). She marries him, despite her family’s disapproval, in hopes to give her daughters an ideal American family still clinging to Genesis: two parents and two children. At the close of chapter three, she tells Bone and Reese, “come on up here for Alma to get a picture of the four of us together” (39). This familial equation never equalizes, and the family’s lack of stability is evident in Daddy Glen’s systematic removal from the only sense of love and family Anney knows: her own. The first step Glen takes in his abuse is not toward Bone but toward Anney. He separates Anney from her family by slowly moving her further away from her home town and the Boatwright family. In Bone’s words,
“We moved and then moved again. We lived in no one house more than eight months” (64).

In domestic violence, one of the first signs of violence appears in the spouse’s attempt to blockade his/her spouse and remove any assistance from the rest of the world. In my experience while working in domestic violence shelters, the victims often told stories of slowly having items and rights taken away from them such as their cars, house keys, and cell phones. If they were permitted to have them, it was always monitored. This abuse disables the spouse much like it disables Anney. She is a helpless character, one who readers often curse for her supposed apathy. What many readers fail to recognize is that Anney is just as much a victim of family violence as Bone. Although Glen never physically abuses his wife, his systematic control over her also represents violence. Anney’s strong maternal Boatwright family with many sisters and one spitfire mother (the men are rarely mentioned) symbolizes a feminine matriarchal system that threatens Glen’s dominance. The premiere spousal abuse enables Anney’s total acceptance of child abuse.

“At the enigmatic center of her text,” writes Leigh Gilmore, “Allison places the daughter’s love for the mother who cannot save her (67). The passivity of mothers who fail to protect their children started in Genesis when Eve fails to respond to her son’s murder. She also disappears from the myth when her (unstated) daughters are forced to marry their brothers and commit incest. As discussed in the previous chapter, Precious Jones and Nicole Warren also lack their mother’s protection from family violence. The father figures possess the power, from God’s place as “father” in Genesis to twentieth century fiction. The female characters lack a voice, names, and presence as exemplified in Cain and Abel’s sisters. Without protection and a home, these characters ultimately lack care from mothers who also lack the power to provide it.
Dorothy Allison’s characters are no different. Because Anney Boatwright never leaves Glen, the text closes with Bone admitting, “My mama had abandoned me…I had lost my mama. She was a stranger” (302). Although Anney never saves herself from family violence, she does eventually save Bone. Her ultimate sacrifice is giving her daughter to her sister, Raylene, in order to maintain her relationship with Glen. His control is so deep that even after witnessing the climactic scene when Daddy Glen rapes Bone, Anney still returns to him. Only minutes after the crime, Anney allows Glen to crawl to her and place his arms around her with his head on her stomach. Bone recognizes at that moment that “I hated her now for the way she held him, the way she stood there crying over him. Could she still love me and still hold him like that?” (291). Anney does love Bone, and by giving her to Raylene wants her to know the maternal love and warmth in the Boatwright family that no longer exists for herself.

Although Raylene is an unmarried lesbian, she provides a healthy, functioning home for Bone. Although Henry James’ intentions are unclear to contemporary readers regarding the presence of homosexuality, Dorothy Allison makes it very clear in her work that homosexuality must enter family studies. Productive and healthy alternative households like Raylene’s pervade 20th century American family dynamics and its subsequent literature. A lesbian herself, Allison vehemently claims, “I am sick to death of people who think that lesbians don’t have family” (Salon Interview). Throughout Bone’s childhood, all of the aunts’ houses symbolize normalcy, love, and appropriate family affection, despite their lower class “white trash” status. After all, it is Aunt Raylene who pulls “trash” out of the nearby river and sells it as art. In her aunts’ homes, Bone expresses, “I always feel safe again” (22). Bone describes the warm Boatwright family images in relation to her “home” with Daddy Glen:
It was alive over at the aunts’ houses, warm, always humming with voices and laughter and children running around. The quiet in our house was cold, no matter that we had a better furnace and didn’t leave our doors open for the wind to blow through. There was something icy in Daddy Glen’s houses that melted out of us when we were over at our aunts’ (80).

Bone’s diction indicates that she considers her home addresses merely “Daddy Glen’s houses.” Ultimately, Bone is homeless—a cast out wanderer in her own family. When Anney finally allows her to live permanently with Raylene, Bone assumes a permanent residence. She lives by the river with Raylene, where trash becomes treasure and alternative families are welcome. In this newly formed family, Raylene adopts Bone as her own child. In the final passages of the novel, Raylene’s language indicates her possession, much like the governess’ adoptive language over Miles and Flora. Raylene calls Bone, “Oh, my girl” (297), “My girl” (298), and “my poor little girl” (298).

Bone and Raylene share character traits, and Raylene reveals to Bone, “I made my life, the same way it looks like you’re gonna make yours—out of pride and stubbornness and too much anger” (263). This forecast indicates the possibility of Bone’s lesbian sexuality and her character is often read as an embodiment of Allison herself. Mary M. Wiles’ essay, “The Fascination of the Lesbian Fetish: A Perverse Possibility across the Body of Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina,*” argues that “Bone discovers both a voice and a vision through Raylene, formulating the origins of a lesbian subjectivity. It is Raylene’s voice that enables Bone to recast her own image” (157). Wiles also asserts the need for Bone to have her own space within a family, in this case, within a maternal family. By alluding to Bone’s name and her displaced status regarding her home, Wiles writes,
*Bastard out of Carolina* begins by proposing an absence. The space of the central character and narrator of the fiction is circumscribed by a surplus of names that paradoxically signify her lack of identity. Ruth Ann (or Ruth Anne or Ruth Anna) is nicknamed Bone and branded by the state as a bastard out of South Carolina. Bone is thus “marked” from the outset, situated “outside” of the symbolic structures of institution and paternal family (147).

Without saying the words, Wiles’ argument resurrects the theme seen throughout this dissertation of the “outsider” like Cain who is “situated outside of the…family.” Bone exists in this space, marked by her lower-class status, the “bastard” stamp on her birth certificate, and her lack of a healthy home. When the book closes, the stigmas are finally removed, because she receives a new birth certificate and a new home. In essence, Ruth Anne Boatwright is reborn.

In Genesis, Cain as murderer is the marked character, but Dorothy Allison (like her literary predecessors) scrambles the roles. The marked characters in *Bastard out of Carolina* are not necessarily the villains. Bone and the Boatwright family are branded as “*No-good, lazy, [and] shiftless*” (3), but Daddy Glen, who is obviously the true villain, comes from a class of business owners. Glen’s abuse of Bone causes her to see herself as evil when she admits she may have tempted him: “It was just me, the fact of my life, who I was in his eyes and mine. I was evil. Of course I was” (110). Bone internalizes her role with Glen as the evil, tempting snake, when in all actuality, Glen is the evil snake. The mirage of Genesis symbolism is distorted much like their relationship. Glen functions as neither father nor husband to the Boatwright women.

During the climactic rape scene, Bone notes upon first seeing Daddy Glen that he has been marked with “a scar over his left eye” (280). This scar indicates that now Glen is branded. His crime as a child abuser warns the world of his
sins. Allison foreshadows this scar with Bone’s first impression of Glen years ago with “wide hands marked with scars,” but it is the facial scar after the family finds out he physically abuses Bone that most warrants a connection to Cain. Glen’s evil stigma contrasts that of Lyle, Anney’s sweet-natured first husband who dies in a car accident where “there was not a mark on him” (7). This contrast makes the Glen/Lyle relationship foil Cain/Abel. Although Glen did not murder Lyle, Lyle’s death enables Glen to marry Anney and commit family violence. The image of Lyle’s death mirrors Abel’s murder as Lyle “lay still on the edge of the road” in an open, outdoor setting like Genesis (7). This violence evolves from Lyle, to Anney, to Bone, and eventually (many readers infer) to her sister, Reese.

Allison carefully uses the word “blood” thirteen times as the rape scene between Glen and Bone unfolds. In only a few short pages, the word carries a heavy burden. It conjures the family violence between Cain and Abel. The blood is so important that the creation myth gives it voice when “the blood crieth out” to God (Gen. 4:10). The blood also denotes Bone’s tragic loss of her virginity. It largely encompasses the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse Bone has suffered throughout her years with Glen. The blood is ultimately the climax itself. It symbolizes the boiling point in Bone’s relationship with Daddy Glen. Because of the bloodshed in this rape scene, Bone is going to be strong. Her nickname, “Bone,” also symbolizes the importance of blood in this text, for blood is literally created in one’s bone marrow. Ironically, it takes this tragic blood-filled scene to solidify the point that Bone will be safe now. She has bled, and now she can heal.

The ending of the novel proclaims justice for everyone, except Anney. Anney and Bone are twin tragic figures in this text. Bone, however, is able to escape and ultimately gain familial safety. The trauma Anney Boatwright
endures is endless: she admits, “I’m so ashamed” and moments later tells her sister, “Oh God. Raylene, I love him” (246). This paradox is a shared concern for many twentieth century American women writers who seek to challenge the family violence in their own culture by writing about it. Although family trauma is an unsettling topic, it needs to be discussed in order to be stopped. Deborah H. Horvitz’s analysis of *Bastard out of Carolina* and Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* emphasizes this united front in American women’s literature:

> Exploring the sexual violence of rape and incest, Allison and [Gayl] Jones highlight the fact that trauma is rooted simultaneously and inextricably within cultural, historical, domestic, and psychological forces. Fiction persistently offers the acquisition of story as a means by which the repetitive cycle of violence or pain and its repression can be stopped.

American women writers such as Willa Cather, Frances Ellen Harper, Zora Neale Hurston, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Edith Wharton present varied, complex, straightforward and encrypted views of individuals struggling against the convergence of political and cultural as well as personal psychological victimization (55).

Allison’s role in the lot of American women writers mentioned above is considerable. At the dawn of a new century, she maintains stamina to write about family trauma and women’s victimization, despite the struggle. Allison herself claims, “I don’t believe you can be any good as a writer if you’re trying to hide yourself. So, I get told a lot that I’m brutally honest” (Dietzel Interview). As discussed in Chapter Four regarding Sapphire’s *PUSH*, Dorothy Allison’s brutal honesty demands that readers face private family violence in public settings. As a self-proclaimed working class lesbian feminist writer, Dorothy Allison joins canonical writers like Cather, Hurston, and Wharton in the battle to reexamine and therefore redefine the American family.
**My Sister’s Keeper**

Anna Fitzgerald, the adolescent heroine of *My Sister’s Keeper* (2004), is what the Associated Press would call a “baby born with a mission.” Her character addresses the recent debate over children who are born as stem-cell donors for ailing older siblings (Oransky 1743). In Anna’s case, she is created to save her older sister, Kate, who suffers from acute promyelocytic leukemia. Although it is only cord blood Kate initially needs, the demands on Anna eventually expand when she is later expected to donate one of her kidneys. In response to this, the text relates a short period of time in the Fitzgerald household during which Anna, now thirteen years old, acquires an attorney, Campbell Alexander, and sues her parents for medical emancipation.

In her initial meeting with Campbell, Anna provides him with the necessary technical exposition:

The first time I gave something to my sister, it was cord blood, and I was a newborn. She has leukemia—APL—and my cells put her into remission. The next time she relapsed, I was five and I had lymphocytes drawn from me, three times over because the doctors never seemed to get enough of them the first time around. When that stopped working, they took bone marrow for a transplant. When Kate got infections, I had to donate granulocytes. When she relapsed again, I had to donate peripheral blood stem cells (21).

Stem cell research and genetically designed babies like Anna have created ethical discussions around the world. With stem cell research comes the ability to clone animals. With the ability to clone animals, such as the renowned Blackfin Scottish Ewe, Dolly, comes the ability to clone humans. When it comes to cloning humans, every scholarly discipline on the planet wants to have a say.
Glenn McGee’s article, “Human Cloning will Redefine Families,” points out the lack of certain scholarly presence in the discourse concerning cloning:

Within a year of the birth of Dolly, the odd, marginal, and unlikely problem of human cloning had been elevated to one of the most hotly debated issues in 20th century science and health. Oddly missing from the debate were sexologists, scholars of the history of sexuality, or researchers in deviance and in family demography (79).

Because family studies most certainly involves stem cell research, it must have a place at the table with scientists and philosophers. The fictional presence of the Fitzgerald family indicates that this topic is an integral part of the American home. Although McGee refers to the debate as a late 20th century issue, it will most certainly constitute one of the defining family studies topics of the 21st century as well.

Through this contested scientific connection, Anna and Kate Fitzgerald are truly the twenty-first century Cain and Abel characters in the Genesis lore cycle. As a result, Anna and Kate resurrect a new form of Steinbeck’s Adam/Charles and Aron/Cal relationships, for their names flawlessly coincide with both Genesis and East of Eden characters. Anna, like Abel, Adam Trask, and Aron Trask, symbolizes the sacrificed sibling who is often dominated by a Cain-like sibling such as Kate Fitzgerald, Cain, Charles Trask, and Cal Trask. These are the obvious connections, but as I argued in Chapter One, Cathy (Kate) Ames in East of Eden rightly represents another Cain-like character. Kate Ames and Kate Fitzgerald depend on the sacrifices of others in order to gain success. Kate Ames abandons her children and makes rearing them Adam and Lee’s responsibility. As well, Kate’s health depends upon Anna. Although each “Kate” has different intentions, both characters need others to suffer so they may reach their goals.
The Kate/Anna dynamic inaugurates a new discussion to come in family dynamics in which children are genetically created to become foes. The violence and bloodshed in their case comes not from any physical violence or abuse, but from medicine and technology that sustains life for one of the siblings. This debate exists today, as many conservative Americans believe this constitutes medical abuse. Anna sheds blood through a controlled environment at hospital. The blood travels to Kate which makes Anna believe they are Siamese twins. She writes, “you just can’t see the spot where we’re connected” (92). Like many twenty-first century themes, the Genesis lore cycle has evolved so that the human connection, the human violence—is virtual. My Sister’s Keeper attempts to address the fading human emotions in the fury of advanced science. Active in the discussions of her novel, Jodi Picoult addresses this debate:

When I started to look more deeply at the family dynamics and how stem cell research might cause an impact, I came up with the story of the Fitzgeralds. I personally am pro stem-cell research – there’s too much good it can do to simply dismiss it….I believe that we’re all going to be forced to think about these issues within a few years...so why not first in fiction? (Picoult Homepage).

Picoult’s determination to catapult this debate into American literature is appropriate and valuable to family studies. At the core of this story, like many I have discussed in this dissertation, is whether the mother can truly protect and care for her children. This is reminiscent of my discussions of Cathy Ames in East of Eden, Mrs. Jones in PUSH, Anney Boatwright in Bastard out of Carolina, and more.

Sara Fitzgerald, Anna’s mother, is initially viewed as the villainous mother who is unable to nurture and protect all of her children. Sara is consumed with Kate’s illness and neglects the welfare of her other children,
Anna and Jesse. She no longer practices law and has resigned herself to a lifetime commitment to Kate’s medical care. It is Sara who ultimately expects Anna to donate her kidney. Despite this data, Picoult warns her readers that Sara is an “easy culprit to blame in this nightmare” but “not to rush to judgment” (Picoult Homepage). I agree. Sara’s obsession with Kate’s welfare naturally clouds her parental responsibilities for the other children, but this is what makes a story about science solidify a point about humanity. Sara Fitzgerald is only human. She does what she has to do, she thinks, in order to save her child(ren).

In Genesis, Eve is often blamed for the fall because she “took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband” (Gen: 3:6). As I contended earlier, it is easy to blame Eve for causing the fall and also for not taking a larger role in response to the death of Abel and the curse on Cain. But given what we know about patriarchal history, what choice did she have? The myth was not written by her or for her. Like Sara Fitzgerald, who suffers the same judgmental gaze, Eve has a powerful presence in the story just by definition of her absence. Her absence defines the myth as a patriarchal story in which female characters played little or no role. My Sister’s Keeper combats Eve’s stereotypical flat character by making Sara Fitzgerald a character who sacrifices one child out of love for both children. During her closing remarks at the trial, she tells everyone, “...this lawsuit was never really about donating a kidney...but about having choices” (406). The choices to which she refers are not just Anna’s choice to have an operation, but a mother’s choices in the wake of sibling bloodshed.

When a woman asks Sara if she has any names picked out for Anna, she admits, “It strikes me that I don’t. Although I am nine months pregnant....I have only thought of this daughter only in terms of what she will be able to do for the daughter I already have” (100). During the delivery scene, Sara refers to baby
Anna as an “it.” When the doctor walks in, she tells him, “Get it out now.” In her own narration, she relates:

The baby’s head slips through the seal of my skin. The doctor’s hand holds her, slides that gorgeous cord free of her neck, delivers her shoulder by shoulder. I struggle to my elbow to watch what is going on below. “The umbilical cord,” I remind him. “Be careful.” He cuts it, beautiful blood, and hurries it out of the room to a place where it will be cryogenically preserved until Kate is ready for it (104).

Sara’s describes the birth of the “cord” and not necessarily the birth of her baby. The blood from this “it” will bestow life-giving blood to Kate, who is named and mentioned in this passage, unlike Anna. Sara’s honesty is admirable, but she knows she will have to live with her decisions and their subsequent consequences. At the trial, she also relates her situation to a mother outside of a burning building “and one of my children was in it.” She explains,

…the only opportunity to save her was to send in my other child, because she was the only one who knew the way. Did I know I was taking a risk? Of course. Did I realize it meant maybe losing both of them? Yes…Was it legal? Was it moral? Was it crazy or foolish or cruel? I don’t know. But I do know it was right (407).

The questions Sara poses also appear in the debate over stem cell research regarding law, morality, and religion. Ivan Oransky’s review of the text urges the U.S. President’s Council on Bioethics to “not only study physical ailments that may affect test-tube babies, but also psychological effects” (1743). Clearly, Anna suffers from the turmoil to aid and love her sister, yet to live a life of her own.

In the preface material, an unidentified voice, who has to be either Kate or Anna, recollects, “In my first memory, I am three years old and I am trying to kill
my sister” (3). Like Cain, who exhibits the first account of jealousy, Kate and Anna envy each other for what the other has. Kate has Sara’s undivided attention and was created out of love. Anna has her health and a supposed future, but was created out of scientific advancement. Both sisters possess Cain’s jealousy, so both sisters could be the voice in this narration. Anna wants Kate to die, in a way, so she can live her own life. She admits, “I am a monster…That I want Kate alive, but also want to be myself, not part of her…Kate’s death would be the worst thing that’s ever happened to me…and also the best” (391). Ultimately, it is Kate who symbolically murders Anna. Although the homicide is symbolic, like many texts in this dissertation, the memory described in the preface does happen for one of the sisters: Anna Fitzgerald dies in a car accident on the afternoon in which she wins her case. With this complex sorority in mind, I would add to Oransky’s argument that Anna and Kate’s “psychological effects” must be addressed in future academic discussions.

In Genesis, Cain and Abel offer sacrifices to God. Cain offers “the fruit of the ground” and Abel “the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof” (Gen. 4: 3-4). After the flood in Genesis, Noah also offers one of “every clean beast and every clean fowl” to God (Gen 8:20). Later, God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac “whom thou lovest…and offer him there for a burnt offering” (Gen 22:2). All of these sacrifices have different outcomes: God favors Abel but rejects Cain, God “is pleased” by Noah’s sacrifice and vows never to curse mankind again, and God tests Abraham and ultimately stops him from sacrificing his only son. In My Sister’s Keeper, Anna Fitzgerald symbolizes the sacrificial figure. She knows that in order for Kate to have life, she must give life. She tells the courtroom, “I’ve always been the one who can give [Kate] what she wants” (389). Eventually, and unfortunately, Anna does. The fatal car accident enables Kate to get a kidney and have the future Anna so desired.
Anna’s father, Brian Fitzgerald, works for the local fire/rescue department. Like Anna, his job in life is to sacrifice himself in order to save others. It is no coincidence that Brian and Sara meet during a flood in which Brian saves Sara’s life and brings her to safety (313). Like Noah and many other Genesis characters, Brian and Sara are all too familiar with floods and subsequent sacrifices. Brian, like Sarah, wants to save Kate’s life by creating Anna, and ultimately, they do—at the cost of truly sacrificing Anna. In Brian’s profession, he trains and prepares for car accidents, floods, fires, and more in order to save lives. Ironically, the one car accident in which he cannot save a life is Anna’s. At the hospital, Campbell, Anna’s newly-appointed power of attorney, quickly announces that Anna’s body will certainly donate a kidney to Kate.

Despite Anna’s role as sacrificial figure amid a Cain and Abel relationship in her own relationship to Kate, Picoult bestows the most overt verbal connection to Genesis on Kate and Anna’s eighteen-year-old brother, Jesse. When Julia, Anna’s Guardian ad litem, asks Jesse of Anna’s whereabouts, he retorts, “Am I my sister’s keeper?” (190). Reversing the gender back to a male-dominant story, this highlights the fact that Jesse is actually the one who is most “cast out” of the Fitzgerald nuclear family. Because of Kate’s illness and Anna’s importance as a necessary sacrifice, Jesse was forgotten long ago. In Jesse’s own words, “Anna’s on their radar, because she plays into their grand plan for Kate” (192). Without parental supervision, he eventually becomes an arsonist, starting large fires all over town. Like most neglected children, he hopes for any attention from his parents, even if only in the form of scolding or argument. The fires exemplify a removed form of attention from Brian, who attends them when on-call at the fire department.

As an arsonist, Jesse transfers the violence he feels towards his sisters onto the community, much like Cain’s anger at God is taken out on Abel. Extending
the sibling violence to incorporate a third sibling makes this revised version multi-faceted and able to address many details concerning sibling violence. Harvey Wallace’s text, *Family Violence: Legal, Medical, and Social Perspectives* (2008), relates some shocking information concerning sibling violence:

Sibling abuse is probably the most common form of family violence in the United States....If sibling abuse is in fact the most common form of family violence, why is there such a reluctance on the part of society and professionals to discuss it? Very few texts are devoted exclusively to this topic. Most academic articles dealing with child abuse may include as an afterthought a discussion of sibling abuse (106).

Although Wallace refers to sibling violence’s place in “academic articles,” it also fails to appear in literary criticism. For such a pervasive form of family violence, it receives little or no attention. Like many texts discussed so far, one sibling does not kill another sibling in *My Sister’s Keeper*. Writers, like Steinbeck and Twain establish this metaphor by creating fictional symbolic versions of one sibling murdering another. On the other hand, writers like Suzan-Lori Parks create overt homicides between siblings. Whether symbolic or literal, sibling violence exists and warrants critical attention.

A question that remains is whether or not scientific advancement hinders or enhances sibling relationships. Anna’s attorney, Campbell Alexander, has epilepsy and uses his dog, Judge, to warn him of an oncoming episode. The scientific advancement that uses animals to help epileptic people mirrors the scientific advancement that created Anna to aid leukemia patients. Science works for Campbell who explains, “It’s supposed to have something to do with scent or electrical impulses that an animal can sense before a human can” (386). Although stem-cell research carries heavy ethical baggage, the two forms of science quite possibly save people. Judge might actually save Campbell’s life.
Anna might actually save Kate’s life. Does that make stem cell research okay, despite the virtual violence it commits upon one sibling? The point of the novel is not to decide for the reader:

That’s the thing about Jodi Picoult. She can present both sides of a human dilemma with such honesty and compassion that your beliefs may change. She allows you to look at all aspects of the issue, seeing human beings who may not be perfect, but have the best intentions at heart. The world is not black and white, but many, many shades of grey (Dressel).

The shades of grey encompass Brian and Sara’s decisions as parents and stem cell research developments in the twenty-first century. Clearly, there is no easy answer to the debate. Picoult informed me that “the Fitzgeralnds offer a look at what happens when the political (stem cell research) becomes personal – when public ethics collide with personal morality” (Picoult Interview). The merger of one intimate family with society’s domain reflects the evolving themes of family violence and parenthood as introduced in Genesis.

As exemplified throughout this dissertation, American authors continue to update the Genesis lore cycle by rearranging the roles, changing the parameters, and revising the issues. Why is this so important and this lore cycle so powerful? My Sister’s Keeper answers these questions by pointing out the discrepancies in the myth. Anna commences one of her chapters with a direct reference to Genesis. She asks her reader, “Did you ever wonder how we all got here? On earth, I mean. Forget the song and dance about Adam and Eve, which I know is a load of crap” (249). As a young woman in the twenty-first century who was created in a laboratory, Anna Fitzgerald is so far removed from Genesis that she can only view the story as “a load of crap.” It is only natural that the fraternal struggle between brothers who sacrifice items to please “the father,”
appear to Anna as absurd fiction. Jodi Picoult paradoxically creates Anna Fitzgerald in order to resurrect Genesis and simultaneously reject it as well.

In only one century, we have seen an explosion of new possibilities for the American family. During Henry James’ tenure, the governess can only dream of fictional fantasies in which she might cross class boundaries and marry the wealthy uncle. At the same time, she symbolically marries a woman and crosses the boundaries of sexuality but also stays within her own class. At the dawn of the next century, the issues have changed drastically in some cases and not in others. Genesis themes such as family violence and incest are still at the forefront, but new topics have added to our understanding of American family dynamics such as technology and family violence laws. With advancements in science and new legislation, the American family maintains the Genesis lore cycle—weaving the challenges it bears into another century of mythology.
CONCLUSION

Although the term “Family Studies” has entered academia in colleges and universities across America within Sociology, Counseling, Psychology, and Education programs, it has yet to assume its deserved role in literary criticism. Specifically, the power of the Genesis lore cycle within American family dynamics deserves appropriate and intricate scholarship with close readings of literary families, as I have provided throughout. The way this small sample of American writers has revised and rearranged Genesis motifs contributes to a more inclusive understanding of the constantly evolving American family. Ultimately, the nuclear family founded by Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel must intersect with American families that alter this dynamic. American families that contain interracial marriage, homosexuality, adoption, and single parents have demanded respect in the twentieth century, despite their unacknowledged presence in prior centuries. As well, the family violence established in Genesis regarding incest must come forth in this lore cycle, despite the fratricide between Cain and Abel that dominates Genesis connotations.

Texts like Songs to Joannes, PUSH and Bastard out of Carolina intimately portray family violence via domestic violence and incest—combating the absent details regarding Cain and Abel’s necessary incest. Texts like O Pioneers!, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and Topdog Underdog create imagery-packed scenes of sibling homicide—combating the absent details regarding Cain’s crime. This dissertation seeks to uncover these absent details of Genesis through close readings of literary families that recreate and therefore add to our understanding of the contemporary American family. Many of the new versions contain uncomfortable, often disturbing details, yet play a vital role in arranging a place for family studies in literary criticism.
Those uncomfortable issues are evolving, like lore cycles, into new issues as we enter the twenty-first century. Jodi Picoult, writing about the difficulty in families concerning stem cell research, speaks of the ways in which literature can accommodate difficult topics:

I think that sometimes when we don’t want to talk about issues that are hard to discuss or difficult to face, it’s easier to digest it in fiction instead of nonfiction. I mean, no one goes into their bookstore and says, “Hey, can I read the most recent book about the sexual molestation of kids?” but if you pick up a novel that has that as its center, you will become involved with the characters and the plot and find yourself dissecting the issues without even realizing it. Fiction allows for moral questioning, but through the back door. (Book Browse Interview)

Although Picoult’s description above speaks of very contemporary issues, this dissertation explores sensitive familial subjects such as child abuse in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, class in The Turn of the Screw, incest in Tender is the Night, The Color Purple, and PUSH, and fratricide in Topdog Underdog. This is only a small sample of the sensitive familial subjects this dissertation addresses, but it allows other disciplines to view, through literature, monumental historical changes in the way we respond to child abuse, incest, class, and more. The answers concerning most of these subjects, particularly current debates over gay marriage and stem cell research, have yet to be answered.

This is why American writers have exposed and expanded the Genesis lore cycle, because its austerity “reproduces a certain ideology to empower the few and dis-empower the many,” as mentioned in my introduction. A Christian ideology brought to the Americas via European colonization, that was passed down to African Americans and women who would later question its patriarchy, must come to terms with its limitations. Because of Sigmund Freud and Jacques
Lacan’s twentieth-century groundbreaking studies of the family, doors opened to evaluate uncomfortable family issues. Still, Freud and Lacan’s analysis of the family are often clouded in literary criticism by individual character studies and not family studies as a whole. For example, I have provided a close reading of the Isaacson family from *The Book of Daniel* in order to exemplify a much-needed new approach to literary family studies. This approach uses scholarship from psychoanalysis in order to fully investigate one complete American “family.”

The Genesis myth is not just a creation myth, but as I have said, it is a certifiable lore cycle. As we have seen, the Genesis lore cycle will “rise and fall” much like W.T. Lhamon’s transatlantic blackface performances (71). Although the Genesis motif has certainly not fallen, it appears in American literature much like a wave, rising amid important revolutions concerning family dynamics. One of those revolutions was certainly feminism. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards’ approach to feminism insists that twenty-first century feminism must rely upon family dynamics:

> Revolutionizing the family, not just mothers and daughters, is necessary if we are to have any chance at women’s liberation. After all, the home is still the most powerful and primal seat of patriarchy, housing and teaching the most basic inequalities between the sexes. (213)

Historically overlooked, both American women and African American characters have a place in the Genesis lore cycle, despite their literal absence. As discussed in Chapter Three, the forgotten space of the African American female in literary criticism must be addressed. The disregarded women in Genesis also parallel the overlooked women in the white male American canon such as Cathy Ames and Nicole Warren. Often shadowed in literary scholarship by male protagonists, Dick Diver and Adam Trask, these female characters resurrect new ways to “raise Cain.”
The revisions of Genesis explored in this dissertation make serious historical and cultural comments about the American family and its ties to the Genesis lore cycle. The thirteen American authors in this study navigate the first family in response to historical movements since abolition, Victorianism, civil rights, and modern science. The Edenic promised land of the United States created families that demanded the Genesis first family maintain a presence in American culture. The texts in this dissertation provide a more inclusive, holistic understanding of the family, utilizing the past to help address the future. I hope American literature and family studies will eventually gain the correlations they most certainly deserve.
December 14, 2007

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Heidi Ann Marshall was born in Nashua, New Hampshire and later relocated to Jacksonville, Florida. She holds a B.A. and M.A. in English from the University of North Florida. In 2004, she began the Ph.D. in literature program at Florida State University. She currently teaches writing and literature at Florida Community College at Jacksonville.