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## Ferocious Motherhood: The Characterization of the Contemporary Single Mother in Southern Women's Fiction

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FEROCIOUS MOTHERHOOD: THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY  
SINGLE MOTHER IN SOUTHERN WOMEN'S FICTION

By

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## Introduction

In their study of population characteristics in America's families published in 2013, Jonathan Vespa, Jamie M. Lewis, and Rose M. Kreider state that as of 2012 the number of "other family households," defined as a householder who lived with children or other relatives but no spouse, increased to 18 percent from 11 percent in 1970 (5). This study also noted that the percentage of mother-only family groups had risen in America since 2007 (13). As these women grow in numbers, evidence showing that one-parent households tend to be more prevalent in the South than in other regions, the narratives written by and about women have changed as well (Vespa, Lewis, Kreider 15). In the South, this image of a woman taking on all facets of managing a family runs counter to the traditional role lauded in the South of a woman who looks after the home and depends on her husband for financial support. The gender standards in the contemporary South stem from those of the Old South, although somewhat altered for a world in which women attend universities and work outside the home. Despite the strides made in women's position in society, the culture does not look favorably upon single women, in particular single women with children.

In this thesis I explore narratives involving single mothers: from the perspectives of their children; from the view of an adoptive mother; and from that of a pregnant girl who knows she must raise her baby by herself. I selected the postwar period because my research confirms that in the wake of the Civil War the views of a woman's role and work were much more traditional, and there were a large number of women forced to raise their children alone or marry (Culpepper 56). I also plan to look into the difference in the portrayals of social class between the narratives of Civil War widows and those of single mothers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While women of all social classes became widows during the Civil War, and divorces result in

single parent homes within all tax brackets, most single-parent, especially single-mother homes, fall within the lower classes and struggle to support their families financially.

The texts I selected to work with encompass several states that adhere to and challenge my understanding of the term “single mother.” All of the women in these novels have one or more children, whether their own or adopted, born or on the way. Similarly, all of these women support their children, having lost husbands, having children out of wedlock, or as a result of divorce. One notable exception is Anney, the protagonist’s mother in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, who marries the man who later sexually abuses her daughter. I included this novel in my research because, while Anney is married and receives help from her husband, this help is sporadic, and she is left to maintain the household as a unit. Another Dorothy Allison novel *Cavedweller* also features a Delia, single mother who returns to her home in South Carolina with her daughter by one man to reclaim the daughters she left behind when fleeing her abusive husband years before. The novel follows Delia and her daughters Amanda, Dede, and Cissy, as all three grow to understand their mother and come into themselves. Both of Allison’s novels focus on lower-class families, a departure from the planter families in Wilson’s novels. This reflects her intent on showing the class she came from, as Matthew Guinn describes Allison as “a poor-white author not only intent on foraging a literary career for herself but also on dismantling the southern class system through her writing” (31).

In *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver, the protagonist Taylor Greer becomes the adoptive mother of a young girl she calls Turtle when an aunt leaves the girl in Taylor’s car while driving west from Kentucky. Taylor was raised by a single mother and never knew her father. *Pigs in Heaven*, another novel by Barbara Kingsolver, follows Taylor and Turtle during a legal battle between Taylor and the Cherokee Nation over the parental rights of Turtle’s long-lost

grandfather. While the novel focuses on the tension between individual and community identities, particularly as they pertain to racial groups such as Native American tribes, *Pigs in Heaven* also explores what it means to be a mother inside and outside the legal definition of “mother” and parental custody. While neither of these Kingsolver novels takes place in the South, Taylor hails from Kentucky, and her upbringing by a single mother informs the way in which she approaches motherhood and parenting.

Unlike the widows of the Reconstruction era, the single mothers of contemporary literature are not models of bellehood: demure, submissive women willing to sacrifice their families for the livelihood of some greater ideal. Instead, they display fierce commitment to their own, eschewing the South’s characteristic commitment to community for the interest and care of their children, sometimes at cost to themselves. This tendency puts them at odds with a body of literature and a culture that, Robert Brinkmeyer Jr. observes, “[celebrates] those who do not leave the community but integrate themselves into it,” going on to note that one “solitary figure breaking free from the community would, in the fiction of most Southern writers, be less of a hero than a potential psychopath, a person tragically alone and isolated, cut off from the nourishing bonds of family and community” (4). Because single mothers, by virtue of their situation, inherently counter the traditional gender roles in the South, they automatically become these lone figures wresting themselves free from the collective community identity rather than blending into it.

My interest also stems from my own encounters with these women: my mother was single for almost three years, until my parents got remarried. The Virginia suburb of Washington D.C. my family lived in for six years, including part of the time my parents were divorced, while not poor, was filled with townhomes, many of them inhabited by single parents and their

children. My classmates with married parents often lived in the more expensive single-family homes in other neighborhoods. Growing up alongside and under the care of these women, I viewed them less as a social anomaly and their singleness something awkward to be glanced over, than women who provided for their children, played with them, and helped them find the tiara lodged behind the couch, while leading lives of their own.

While a woman in a monogamous heterosexual relationship maintains an air of cohesion despite the truth, society forces single mothers to publicly acknowledge their perceived disobedience: like Hester Prynne's scarlet letter, the children of single mothers display the supposed incapability of these women to maintain a "proper" family. Ruth Sidel, in her book *Unsung Heroines: Single Mothers and the American Dream*, notes that "any family that does not include a man is faulted as deficient, defective, disrupted, broken" (26). Single motherhood, a state often regarded as an anomaly to be avoided at all costs, is now a part of normalcy. I aim to investigate how the portrayal of these women has changed between the Reconstruction-era South and the contemporary South in novels written by Southern women writers.

These single mothers are a far cry from the more typical vision of the Southern woman: at once ditzy, pious, energetic, loyal (Wright 136). Instead, they are determined, practical, stubborn, and dedicated to their children. In creating a new image, that of the Southern single mother, authors have given her a new set of characteristics, and have also begun to represent people from lower social classes. Because the single mother does not fit the typical vision of the Southern woman, she does not possess the Southern woman's characteristics either, taking on those more befitting her difficult position. The place did not exist for them, so these women made room for themselves.

Contemporary Southern women writers, according to Barbara Bennett, “identify, empower, and legitimize all kinds of female lives that have been seen traditionally—in both a literary and a social sense—as marginal” (446). This qualification “marginal” certainly applies to single mothers who are often women of lower socioeconomic status, and who are often seen as diverging from a prescribed family structure (Nelson 32). Because of this marginal status, single motherhood and single mothers as characters were not a major focus in literature until recently. Although the circumstances surrounding Confederate widows and contemporary single mothers are vastly different, I chose to explore the treatment of single women in both in order to examine the treatment of single mothers in literature. While widows of the Civil War became single mothers under drastically different circumstances than most single mothers today, the aftermath of the Civil War was the first point at which the South had to accommodate these single mothers socially and culturally (Censer 32). Rather than tracing the history of Southern women’s literature through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, my aim is to garner how the depictions of Southern single mothers have changed during the two time periods, as indeed it has. Now, single mothers who divorce or have children outside of marriage are not solely the pitiable-culpable women who linger on the periphery of the novel’s scope. Instead, they are fearsome protagonists, mothering forces that drive plots and exist at the center of the fictional worlds these writers create.

### **Augusta Evans Wilson and the Confederate Widows**

After the Civil War, the low number of men forced the South to make social and cultural allowances for large numbers of unmarried women at the same time men returned from the

battlefield to their homes. During this particularly turbulent moment and during the years after, Southern writers often used female characters to depict the South within the parameters of idealized womanhood. The Southern belle, Weeks claims, “was used by conflicting means to perpetuate the ideals of southern culture” (131). In similar fashion, the Confederate widow acted as a symbol for the trampled but persevering South and became a sympathetic figure audiences associated with the South. Augusta Jane Evans Wilson’s novels *Macaria* and *A Speckled Bird* both depict single women and widows during the period just before, during, and after the Civil War.

*Macaria* details the lives of Irene, Electra, and Russell during the years leading up to the Civil War and ends shortly after the Confederacy’s surrender. Before the novel begins Russell’s father killed a man in a moment of rage, was sentenced to death and killed himself before he could reach the gallows. Russell’s mother, then, is a widow through shameful circumstances, not a sacrifice for the good of the Confederacy, but his father’s selfish avoidance. The way in which she bears her burden, though, prevents her from being vilified. Mrs. Aubrey is humble and docile, taking in sewing to support herself, her son, and her niece Electra. Wilson’s depiction of Mrs. Aubrey, a widow whose husband commits suicide to avoid execution, also fits the image authors cultivated of widows in the wake of the Civil War. Loyal servants to the cause, Southerners “collectively imagined all Confederate widows as good and noble women who had sacrificed for the cause” (Gross 135). Although she does not sacrifice for “the cause” of the South that takes men later in the novel, her humility and adherence to expectations, her behavior as a thoroughly “good” and “kind” person, allow her to be a part of society.

The descriptions of Mrs. Aubrey reveal that these expectations were simply those from before the war, as all descriptions of her occur before the Civil War begins, yet they match this

ideal of the pious and humble woman. Following her husband's death, Mrs. Aubrey works to "become resigned at last," to her situation, and focuses her energies on her son Russell, whom she refers to as "my child, my boy, my all" (7). Wilson emphasizes the role of the mother: even without a husband, Mrs. Aubrey's identity is directly linked to a woman's rightful place through her position as mother, and in particular through her dependence on Russell to support the family as her eyesight deteriorates.

The financial woes of single mothers' novels are similar to those of the widows in Wilson's novels who must depend on whatever income they can manage. After the war and the South's economic collapse, many Southern widows "held less property or significantly depreciated property than they had before their husbands' deaths" (Gross 136). For instance, Mrs. Aubrey "found her husband's financial affairs so involved that she relinquished the hope of retaining the little she possessed, and retired to a small cottage on the outskirts of the town, where she endeavored to support herself and the two dependent on her by taking in sewing" (9). Mrs. Aubrey is "a woman bowed down with many sorrows" (16), her lack of a husband leading to her life in poverty. Unlike contemporary female protagonists, her situation as a widowed mother caring for two dependents is not a position of strain and power, but one which emphasizes her powerlessness.

Often, the legal system in the South worked against women left as the heads of households. For instance, in Virginia if a man died without leaving a will that specifically named his wife as his beneficiary, his widow would receive only one-third of any real estate interest and one-third of any personal property (Gross 137). For many households one-third was not a significant sum, particularly for a woman with children to provide for. Many widows felt compelled to remarry for financial considerations, but some childless widows also viewed a

second marriage as a chance to become a mother, which Southerners considered “one of the most important tenets of Southern womanhood” (Gross 138). Then, as now, the jobs available to women were mostly low-paying occupations: for nineteenth-century women, often sewing or teaching (Censer 17), making it difficult for widows to support their families alone.

Significantly, despite the obvious disparity in numbers of men and women in the South following the Civil War, a Confederate widow who could not or did not remarry “came up short when measured against the norm of the patriarchal family” (Gross 144). Despite their status as women who had sacrificed for the good of the Confederacy, and despite their dedication to raising their children, a family without some male figure to head it—a father, a grandfather, an uncle—was not quite a proper family. Oftentimes one or more children lived with aunts or uncles who did not have children.

The terms in which the omniscient narrator describes Mrs. Aubrey’s death exemplify the fragility expected of women: “the still mouth had breathed its last sigh, and the meek brown eyes had opened in eternity” (44). Her penance on Earth—her adherence to the Southern ideal of womanhood—allows her to reach “eternity,” a theme which often comes up during the death of a righteous Southerner. Moreover, Wilson describes the widow’s mouth as “still” and her eyes as “meek,” emphasizing a docile and unassuming nature.

Following Mrs. Aubrey’s death the novel focuses on Irene and Electra. Irene lives with her father, whom she idolizes. Despite her devotion to her father, Irene refuses to marry the man he arranges for her to marry, and works extensively with the poor despite her father’s wishes otherwise. Meanwhile, Electra studies painting in New York and turns down a suitor, and both girls foster feelings for Russell Aubrey. The rest of the novel follows Irene and Electra as they grow, until they are women in a South beset by the Civil War.

Neither woman has a husband or children by the end of the novel, but Irene's father enlists to fight for the Confederacy, as does Russell Aubrey, whom both Irene and Electra love intensely by this point in the novel. In *Macaria*, both Irene and Electra relocate to Virginia during the war to provide medical assistance, but return to their home after the war has ended, and throw their efforts into immortalizing the Confederate soldiers who fought and died as well as into the future of the South. Following the devastation the Confederate armies faced on the battlefield, many men took up their places of authority in the home, feeling as though these positions of power confirmed the masculinity their loss in war threatened. In the wake of the Civil War, however, white Southern men "wished their wives and daughters to provide stability in their home lives, and often that meant preserving the ideals of antebellum southern culture" (Weeks 130). In obedience to the reconstruction of Southern society, both Irene and Electra, despite remarkable educations and abilities, voluntarily confine themselves to domestic, often passive roles.

The novel ends with both Electra and Irene vowing to take Christ as their model for "faith, strength, and resignation" (272). Following their oath, Irene considers her life, and "[dedicates] herself anew to the hallowed work of promoting the happiness and gladdening the paths of all who journeyed with her down the chequered aisles of Time" (273). Here, Irene, after continually going against her father's wishes earlier in the novel and asserting her own will, looks outside herself to others to give her agency. Here, Wilson creates a realistic portrait, as "Southern women also discovered important new roles as they [endeavor] to commemorate the lives of their fallen heroes (Culpepper 231). Although neither Irene nor Electra marries, both are symbolically widowed by Russell's death, and both commit themselves to serving the men returning from war and from commemorating the heroics of the Confederacy embodying the new

duty of women “to be the comforter, the assistant” of fathers, sons, and husbands returning from the battlefield (Culpepper 226).

*A Speckled Bird* continues where *Macaria* ends, beginning with the childhood of Eglah Kent in the home of her grandmother, a Confederate widow, and under the care of the widow of a former plantation overseer. Mrs. Maurice is the widow of a Southern planter turned Confederate general who was killed during the Civil War; she keeps her granddaughter Eglah following her own daughter Marcia’s death. Mrs. Mitchell, the widow of a former overseer, lives with Mrs. Maurice and cares for Eglah as a foster mother after the death of her son in infancy. Mrs. Maurice feels little affection for the child, seeing more of her Northern son-in-law than the daughter she forbade him to marry, and instead jealously maintains artifacts of her former life: her daughter’s cradle, her husband’s slippers and Confederate uniform. She looks on these without tears, invoking “the legendary stoicism Confederate women were expected to demonstrate” that, although challenged by the trials of the Civil War, returned to being the status quo (Clinton 153). In this same fashion, Wilson writes that “to the truly typical Southern woman [...] ‘reconstruction,’ political and social, was no more possible than the physical resurrection and return of the slain thousands lying in Confederate graves all over the trampled and ruined South” (14). In drawing such a close parallel between political reconstruction and reconciliation and the revival of fallen Confederate—and only Confederate—soldiers, Wilson intentionally draws the reader’s attention and emotion to the loss these women experienced, one of whom is standing in for all the women left widowed across the South. Mrs. Maurice walks into this room with her husband’s favorite dog, a pointer described as being as “true as the heart of his widow,” as she sits among the remnants of a happier life (20). This dramatic moment exemplifies the stalwart dedication of Confederate widows, indeed, of all Southern women, who became “the

builders of a new southern consciousness,” required to reconcile the South’s collective opinion of itself as “divinely chosen” and the massive losses incurred in the Civil War. Wilson describes Mrs. Maurice’s death in similarly theatrical terms:

She sat in her husband’s easy chair, her head pillowed on his dressing gown, where a fresh Cape jasmine gleamed, and over her lap flowed the yellowed lace of Marcia’s christening robe, half hiding the baby shoes of white kid. She had laid one hand on the Confederate uniform folded on the couch beside her chair [...] and in the wide eyes fixed on her husband’s portrait was the rapt expression that comes only with the lifting of the veil as the soul drifts through its windows of flesh. (39)

Here, Wilson describes Mrs. Maurice as one would a figure in a painting, aiming to move the reader with this highly visual depiction of a Confederate widow choosing to pass away among the belongings of her dead husband and daughter. When an author uses them in this way, the dressing gown, baby shoes, and Confederate uniform function as symbols of the lost South which Mrs. Maurice clings to until her death.

After her grandmother’s death, Eglah lives with her father and Mrs. Mitchell, who continues to care for her, and grows up and goes to college in the North. Wilson pays particular attention to Eglah’s attendance at college, in part, perhaps, due to the increased attention given to the education of Southern girls following the Civil War. While mothers in particular thought of their daughters’ education as practical following the Civil War, and as something that could make unmarried girls attractive to men as well as capable of teaching or becoming governesses, the focus of many young women’s educations was less grounded in ideas of autonomy and more in the upper class maintaining their status despite the massive loss in wealth. Even with this loss, the upper classes wished to distinguish themselves from the lower classes, and one way of

indicating class superiority at the time was educating women. Thus, although the education of young Southern women received more attention than it had in the past and Southerners acknowledged the potential of an unmarried woman having to support herself, the jobs available to women delegated them to similar positions they inhabited before the war as wives and mothers. During the postwar period, women still had a passive role in a society that expected them to “be modest, gentle, kind, industrious, and naturally innocent and pious in thought” (Censer 11). Mrs. Mitchell’s role in Eglah’s upbringing matches these concerns, as she herself is another “reticent, demure widow,” who continues to wear mourning garments years after her husband’s death (79). Eliza, or “Ma-Liza,” as Eglah calls her, remains with her foster-daughter until her engagement to Noel and counsels Eglah throughout. Noel is a Northerner, and the relationship between him and Eglah fulfils the pattern of the “reconciliation marriage” between a Northerner and a Southerner present in many Reconstruction-era novels (Gardner 57). Eglah, Mrs. Maurice, and Mrs. Mitchell, then, all act as symbols for the war-ravaged South.

In selecting female characters to stand in for the South as a whole, Wilson reinforces Catherine Clinton’s statement in *Tara Revisited*, that in many of the novels coming out of the South during the Reconstruction era “Southern women are not simply pivotal to the plot, but come to symbolize the South itself” (193). Single mothers and widows such as Mrs. Mitchell act more as extensions of a political ideal than as accurate representations of women at the time who struggled to raise and support their children alone. While not all of the women in these novels are actually widowed in the course of the Civil War, their positions of dependence and their losses depict the confusion present in the South following the Civil War. Even when women in Wilson’s novels do not fit the typical pattern of marrying young and having children, they still exist within the parameters of acceptable female behavior. Wilson’s portrayals of Southern

womanhood in the years surrounding the Civil War act almost as instructional volumes detailing the paradox of womanhood in the South: women had to be able to endure poverty and despair while still appearing delicate (Weaks 128). If they appeared too strong or independent, they would compromise the patriarchal structure of Southern society. In *Tara Revisited*, Clinton claims that the pervasive images of the charming belle and the loyal mammy “will continue to shape our views of Southern women, exerting great influence whether we confront them or not” (213). While not about Confederate widows, Clinton’s statement bleeds into other models for womanhood in the South, including that of stalwart and pious widows who soldiered through Reconstruction while carrying an ideal of the South on their backs.

### **Single Mothers and Power**

Southern novels often concern themselves with community, with being a part of a larger body, not with the individual striking out on her own that is present in many other American novels. As Robert Brinkmeyer observes in *Remapping Southern Literature*, while fiction in what he terms “the classic American tradition, or at least what was once deemed classic” focuses on the hero freeing himself from the constraints of a society, Southern fiction does the opposite (4). In novels focusing on a single mother, she often becomes the figure breaking free from the community at large and its expectations for women, mainly when her children are threatened. These women are perhaps more likely to be portrayed in ways that contradict or lie outside the typical boundaries of what is considered feminine or motherly because they are viewed as “other” in America, a mother and children—only fragments of an incomplete family—rather than a cohesive unit in and of themselves.

Jesmyn Ward sets her novel *Salvage the Bones* in rural Mississippi in the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina and the hurricane's aftermath, focusing on the Batiste family, a poor African-American family, through the eyes of Esch, the only girl. Although Esch is not a mother during the events of the novel, she discovers early on that she is pregnant, and she knows that the father, Manny, will not help her. She also acts as a surrogate mother figure to her younger brother Junior after their mother dies giving birth to him. Throughout *Salvage the Bones*, Esch increasingly identifies with her brother's prize fighting dog, China, who bears a litter of puppies at the beginning of the novel, as Esch herself is pregnant. As the novel continues, a triad develops between Esch, China, and the mythological figure Medea, three fearsome women who are each willing to sacrifice anything for her own. Although not a single mother during the novel, Esch intends to keep her baby, and knows that Manny, the baby's father, will not aid her in raising their child. She sees herself in China's ferocity as she comes to terms with impending motherhood, having no other readily available example of a mother other than Medea's sacrificial love and rage in her summer reading, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. Ward's novel concerns itself less with matters of the single mother as an anomaly and more with the question of whether or not a woman can become a mother and maintain her former strength. Throughout, men either doubt the power of the female sex or fear it. In this novel motherhood is always a grim, bloody affair.

Esch's second-oldest brother Skeetah and his friend Manny, the father of Esch's baby, end up discussing the phenomenon of female power when talking about China, how her status as mother may impact her fighting, moving to Esch: "You see how boss China is. You think the other girl on the Pit going to be weak?" Manny responds that it "take a lot out of an animal to nurse and nurture like that" and calls it the "price of being female." In his mind, a woman

loses strength during motherhood, allowing her children to drain her. To Manny, motherhood makes women weaker than men so that a female, the fighting dog China in particular, must choose between strength and motherhood. Skeetah disagrees, declaring that motherhood is the time when women ““come into they strength. They got something to protect. [...] That’s power”” (96). This exchange is significant to the novel, as Esch begins to align her view of motherhood with the ferocity of China and the mythological figure Medea, who kills her husband’s second wife, father, and their children in response to his slight: Ward shows Esch taking these models into her own view of herself as a future mother. Early in the novel Esch watches China with her puppies shortly after giving birth, and remarks, “she is a weary goddess. She is a mother so many times over” (40). With motherhood comes a kind of all-powerful status, as Ward shows when she draws a direct association between a “goddess” and a “mother.” Before giving birth, China was known only for being vicious, for beating the dogs she fought by clamping her jaws onto their throats and refusing to let go. Now, however, she is a “weary goddess,” possessing great power and feeling exhausted under the burden of the price of such power: motherhood.

Women are equally vicious during lovemaking, as Ward suggests describing China and Kilo mating: “she’d drawn blood: he hadn’t” (95). Even though the submissive party physically, China does not acquiesce to Kilo, or to male dominance, fully. Esch finally embodies the ferocious mother during her final interaction with Manny during the novel: “I am on him like China” (203). She physically attacks him after he talks to her brother Randall, tackling him as China attacked Kilo, the father of her puppies, without restraint—men are superfluous in this world of mothers.

When monitoring the progress of the hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico, Esch’s father remarks that “like the worst, she’s a woman. Katrina” (124). While not specifically a remark

about single mothers, or even any particular kind of woman, his comment reveals his general view of women as strong, but destructive, forces. Just after this remark, Esch's father loses a finger while preparing for the incoming hurricane and China takes one of her puppies into her mouth when it attempts to nurse and shakes it in her jaws: "China is bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea. If she could speak, this is what I would ask her: *Is this what motherhood is?*" (130). This question applies to what China just did as well as to the scene of chaos and violence surrounding the shed China and her puppies live in: Esch's father on the ground, three fingers missing; Skeetah punching any metal in his path; China with blood on her jaws. Without her own mother to look to for guidance, Esch turns to the next closest examples she can find. In these, she finds the mother not as a yielding, pliable force that gives underneath the strains of her office, but as a murderous, violent one.

Esch reminisces throughout the novel about her mother, and gradually these memories shape her responses, especially towards her brothers. When waiting for Katrina to make landfall, she and Junior sit on the front steps, and Junior leans on Esch: "I want to say, *It's too hot for you to be hanging on me*, but I look at his baseball knees, his head, which seems too big and heavy for his stringy neck, and instead I say, 'Do you want some noodles?'" (197). Rather than looking out for her own interests, she notices the fragility of her little brother, his "baseball knees" and the head that seems "too big and heavy" for his neck, and cares for him. She begins to take on the role of mother with Junior, recognizing that, underneath the violence in Medea, in China, is a sort of love for what they recognize as theirs, a love that can reveal itself in aggression or in tenderness. Another memory surfaces when Esch and Randall search for eggs: when teaching her children how to find them, their mother tells them that the hens will stay near their eggs, that "*the cock, he always running off being a bully [...] but the mama, the mama always here*" (199).

While the male aids in creating babies, Esch does not see them as essential to parenting, her own father a severe alcoholic following her mother's death. Ward, like the other authors whose works I am analyzing, places the woman, the mother, at the center of the home, the pinnacle, the centrifugal force that keeps the family unit from disintegrating.

In Dorothy Allison's first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the narrator and protagonist, Ruth Ann, often called "Bone," is the eldest, and illegitimate, daughter of a young woman from South Carolina. Her mother, Anney, marries and has another daughter Reese, but is left widowed when her husband dies. Throughout these hardships, Anney works as a waitress at a café, a low-paying job during which her daughters stay with their grandmother, an aunt, or in the backseat of Anney's car in the café parking lot, if no one can watch them. Later she marries Glen, whom Bone calls "Daddy Glen," the man who physically and sexually abuses Bone throughout the novel.

Anney accepts money from her brother while the family struggles financially, causing Glen to act "as if she had done it just to prove he couldn't support us" (68). Although the two are husband and wife, Anney provides consistent income and emotional support for her daughters, while Glen's inconsistency often leaves the family living from paycheck to paycheck. Glen goes from job to job at the same rate the family moves from house to house, always managing an excuse for why each situation does not work. At one point the family is so poor Anney feeds her daughters crackers spread with ketchup while Glen goes fishing with her brothers. When he returns, Anney is "just like a big angry mama hen, feathers up and eyes yellow," and reminds Bone of "a snake that's caught a rat" when Anney slaps Glen's hand away from her arm (73). Here, Anney reacts instinctively, rearing up when her ability to provide for her children is threatened. The comparisons drawn between Bone's mother and different animals, the mama hen

bristling and the snake shooting back with a rat in its jaws, create an image similarly threatening to male dominance as that of China and Esch drawing blood from their respective mates. Anney then dresses up, looking “like a different person, older and harder [...] coldly beautiful,” and leaves the house without telling anyone where she intends to go, returns late that night with plenty of food, and cooks for Bone and Reese (74). In both these scenes, Anney puts aside any notions of gender roles and provides for her children while Glen watches and wrings his hands, a gesture he repeats often in the novel in moments where he fails as a father figure and as head of a household. The typical active male role is usurped by a woman, who does it not out of spite or desire for equality, but out of concern for her daughters. Earlier in the novel, Earle Boatwright describes his and Anney’s mother as “a rattlesnake” (11), as though she is inherently dangerous. The family pattern here mimics that in Kingsolver’s novels, of a family of single mothers raising children with little to no help from the children’s fathers.

Throughout the novel, however, Anney begins to look after Glen as she would a child, and Bone often stays with relatives to stay out of the house. Eventually she works with her aunt Raylene, who has no children or spouse, during her free time. As Glen continues to lose each job he gets, he becomes increasingly irritable and criticizes Bone and Anney’s parenting. When Bone begins spending time at a café to escape Glen and to listen to the jukebox, Glen tries to make Anney force Bone to stay home, to which Anney soothes Glen and replies, “I wouldn’t let nothing happen to my little girl” (142). Notably, Anney refers to Bone as “my” girl, not “our” girl, as Glen refers to both Bone and her sister Reese earlier in the novel. While Anney actively takes agency for Bone and Glen’s care, always sure to soothe him in the face of his self-created adversity, he complains about Bone at times as if he and she answer to the same authority. In his case this figure is the wife-turned-mother, more devoted to his care as he gulps her attention.

While Bone is staying at her Aunt Alma's and helping look after her and the home, Glen comes to talk to Bone, to convince her to tell Anney to go back to Glen. When Bone refuses to follow his orders to talk to him and make him a sandwich, and thereby refuses to recognize him as her father, Glen rapes Bone. His attempt at dominance backfires when Anney witnesses his actions and attacks him. When Anney first reached Bone, she "cooed" as though Bone were a baby, and then pulled Bone's shirt shreds and pants to cover her body, while walking her out of the house. On the way, Anney and Bone are accosted by Glen, who "sobbed like a child," and "whined like a little boy" (288). When Bone is safely in the car, Anney begins a second physical assault on Glen, who lets out "mewling grunts" and wails, which further infantilize him (290). In this moment Anney hangs between her duty as Bone's mother and the unconditional, and therefore mother-like, love she feels for Glen. Anney must choose between her love for her daughter and her husband, and in choosing Glen she relinquishes the power of motherhood to Raylene. When Bone is in the hospital, her mother disappears; no one knows where she is, and when the Sheriff, who interviews her, goes to the waiting room in search of her mother, the "angry struggling figure" at the door is not Bone's mother, but her Aunt Raylene, to whom Bone "opened my mouth, cried out, and reached up to her with my good arm" and then "lay against her breasts" (297). In comparing Bone's gesture to that of a baby bird, and noting that Bone, tired and injured, leans against Raylene's breasts, Allison shows that Raylene becomes Bone's mother in this moment, taking her niece with her while using a voice that, to Bone, sounds "awesome, biblical" (298). She takes on the absolute power of motherhood when she takes Bone out of the hospital although reporters, doctors, and the sheriff all want Bone to name her rapist. Bone's physical response reflects this exchange, as she responds to Raylene's presence by laying her head on her aunt's chest as a child would. Here, Anney cedes power and Raylene takes it up,

and, in that exchange, takes on the role of mother to Bone although the medical and law enforcement officials search for her biological mother.

Allison's second novel *Cavedweller* chronicles the lives of Delia Byrd and her daughters Amanda, Dede, and Cissy, in Cayro, Georgia. When finally in a house of their own, Cissy and Delia retreat into their respective worlds: Cissy into books and Delia into her pain in what Cissy calls "crying season." Just before crying season ends, however, Delia dreams of her two eldest daughters and the men she loved, "her babies and her rage" (73). Her position as a mother and her simmering anger at the continued separation from Dede and Amanda appear to save Delia, waking her from the stupor that prevented her from being a mother to Cissy. Shortly after crying season ends, Delia agrees to care for Clint until he dies in exchange for Dede and Amanda coming to live with them. Though she cares for her three daughters, the town still treats her as a pariah in the wake of her inactive state: "Cayro still believed Delia a sinner, and crying season was a penance they understood" (70). Now, however, she is not the meek penitent willing to be punished, but a storm whipping through their sheltered town. When working to get Dede and Amanda back from Clint's mother, who cared for them after she left, Delia gathers "infinite patience and ruthlessness [...] to outlast one stubborn old woman" (117).

While patience is a part of Delia's method, it appears threatening when coupled with ruthlessness, unlike the patience the South expects its women to exhibit. Delia appears more like a force of nature than a wholesome family woman. She is not the gentle mother here, but the hard-bitten sister of mothers in other novels, including *Salvage the Bones* and *Pigs in Heaven*. Clint gets their daughters back for Delia, but in Delia's main plan he "did not matter at all," because the root of the struggle over the girls lay between Clint's mother and Delia: "This was a war of women" (118). Allison's description of the power struggle between these two women

forms a contrasting image to that of Clint, a violent man who takes after his equally abusive father; these men's physical violence has no authority in the realm of motherhood where these two formidable women grapple for the care of Dede and Amanda. Significantly, both women raise the girls on their own, as Clint's father died years before. Grandmother Windsor and Delia both exhibit a rampant, stubborn conviction that they know how to raise these girls and that the other's ideas of mothering and motherhood cannot benefit Amanda and Dede.

In *Cavedweller*, Allison also provides a glimpse of the opposite to Delia. Amanda marries soon after completing high school and has two sons early on, all of which contribute to a sudden change in persona: rather than angry righteousness, she appears tired, haggard, and less responsive than ever. Cissy, while lying in her caves, remembers Amanda with "energy in her that had to be profane," who "[stormed] about like one of those nasty Old Testament prophets" (275). After her marriage, the frightening vehemence she directed at her—to her thinking—heathen family evaporates under the cares of children and husband. The depiction of married life, then, is not a terribly happy one. Dede, unlike Amanda, is not eager to marry but the opposite. She and Nolan begin a relationship that drives her to a breaking point, at which she shoots, but does not kill, him. While on the surface an act of jealous rage—Dede sees Nolan kissing a girl who forced herself on him—her motivation stems more from her own experiences: "Delia Byrd's daughter had done the one thing she had sworn never to do. Dede had put her life in the power of a man, and it did not matter that Nolan loved her" (382). After being abandoned by her mother due to her father's abuse, and watching Delia handle life and her children without the aid of a man, Dede is skeptical to the point of fearing love itself. In loving Nolan, in wanting to make him happy and to be happy with him, she feels she has ceded her power, that to be a woman unattached and autonomous means holding more power and, by extension, being safer.

Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Bean Trees* follows Taylor Greer as she struggles with her identity as a mother, having had no preparation or desire for the role and initially lacking the parenting instincts of the single mothers in the novels I have addressed above. Returning from a picnic, Taylor and Lou Ann sit still in their stopped car, watching a mother quail try to direct her babies out of the road to safety: "I suppose we could have honked and waved and it wouldn't have raised any more pandemonium than this poor mother already had to deal with, but instead we help perfectly still" (100). In describing this bird as "poor mother," Taylor identifies with it, understanding the panic of looking after children, and so begins to take on the identity of mother through this moment of observing mothers in nature. Likewise, when Taylor takes Turtle to the doctor's to monitor her development, she looks out the window and sees a mother bird flying to her nest among a cactus's spines, flying in and out "among the horrible, spiny branches, never once hesitating" (130). The mother bird knows exactly where her nest is among the spines and knows exactly how to get there. In comparison, Taylor feels gawky, unable at this point to access the mother instincts that tell this bird just what to do and where to go.

A different kind of instinctive response appears at the beginning of Kingsolver's novel *Pigs in Heaven* when Taylor's legal claim as Turtle's mother is threatened by Annawake Fourkiller, a Cherokee lawyer who suspects that the adoption an Oklahoma lawyer conducted at the end of *The Bean Trees* may be illegal and believes, consequently, that Turtle's place is with her tribe and not with a woman from outside this group. In response, Taylor packs her and Turtle's things and leaves Tucson and Jax behind. When Annawake returns to see Taylor and finds only Jax instead, he tells her that Taylor "would jump off Hoover Dam herself for that kid, head first," continuing to say "me [...] she *enjoys*, but Turtle she *loves*" (86). The distinction between mother-love and romantic attachment is clear: while Taylor can give up the man she

lives with, she cannot and does not remain and risk having her daughter taken away from her. Maternal love is not optional, but automatic. Taylor does not stop to think, does not hesitate when Annawake leaves, but packs whatever she can of hers and Turtle's and leaves Jax behind. Although Annawake claims to be neutral, simply looking at the case from a legal standpoint and not as a girl whose twin brother was taken off the reservation and raised by white people, Jax points out that she "might think [she's] just out picking blueberries, but that's highly irrelevant to Mama Bear" (84). Jax discusses Taylor's sudden flight with his landlord later, referring to her actions as "jumping bail," prompting the landlord to ask, "Why did she go?" Jax calls it an "unanswerable question," that it is the same reason "mothers throw themselves in front of traffic or gunfire to save their offspring" (155). Taylor herself restates this instinctive reaction when talking to her mother, telling her that she "jumped into the car with Turtle because I was scared to death and it seemed like the safest way to go" (169). Motherhood is not logic, then; it is instinct, a woman's animal need to see her child or children safe, and to be with them. His comments adhere to the idea of ferocious mothers, those like China, like Delia, like Esch seems set on becoming, who care for their children above anything else and who refuse to let any man, law, or stigma come between themselves and their children.

The physical presence is enormously important to these women, as Taylor demonstrates, as do Delia and Granny Logan. They feel the best interests of the children in question lay with them, with being physically and emotionally connected to them and having complete control over ensuring their children's safety. As a mother, Taylor's love for Turtle, born April, drives her to flee from the possibility that her child may be taken from her and to consider the importance of Turtle's status as a Cherokee Native American to Turtle's sense of identity as well.

Taylor settles into motherhood more fully in *Pigs in Heaven*, when she is also in a committed relationship with a musician, Jax. Taylor meets up with her mother Alice in Las Vegas on her and Turtle's aimless escape, during which Alice notices that Taylor is wearing a pink shirt, although she used to hate pink, causing Alice to realize that Taylor is "genuinely a mother," and that her daughter "has changed the way motherhood changes you, so that you forget you ever had time for small things like despising the color pink" (138). Shortly after making this observation, Alice also notices the two have picked up habits and behaviors from each other and has to remind herself that Turtle and Taylor's similar habits are learned and not a genetic similarity between the two. Taylor used to make a point of disliking pink and wearing bright, unusual colors, often in eye-wrenching combinations, but now her identity does not hinge upon standing out and being distinct from all the people around her, but upon caring for Turtle. Rather than being ferocious or frantic, as before when Taylor all but ran out of Arizona, Taylor appears tender, picking out whatever clothes she can afford and unconsciously synching her behaviors with those of her adopted daughter, another example of the instinctive bond that develops gradually between Taylor and Turtle.

Taylor's tenderness, in contrast to her reaction to any threat to Turtle, appears when she and Turtle are alone together, when she doesn't have to work to keep the world at bay from the little girl she took as her own. After Barbie, a woman they met in Las Vegas and live with in Washington, leaves and steals Taylor's money, Turtle worries that she made Barbie mad. Turtle recedes within herself when she thinks people are angry with her, a reaction she developed while being abused, and Taylor, seeing Turtle recede and knowing what that means, turning Turtle's head to her and tells her "don't go away" and rocks her until Turtle, known for her vice-like grip, relaxes her hold on Taylor's arms (212).

During the hearing, Annawake mentions that separating Turtle and Taylor by placing Turtle with her grandfather Cash Stillwater, incidentally the man Alice is dating, would be devastating for Turtle, as Taylor took her in and cared for her after she was physically and sexually abused. In the end, the Cherokee nation decides that although Turtle will stay with Taylor most of the year, Cash is Turtle's legal guardian and Taylor will have joint custody. Supposedly a victory for both sides, the plan allows Turtle to stay with Taylor, the woman she considers her mother now, while still being in contact with her Cherokee heritage. Taylor, however, after learning the verdict, "takes her first breath of the too-thin air of the rest of her life—a life of sharing Turtle with strangers" (339). Here, the way in which Kingsolver chooses to describe Taylor's understanding of her role as mother suggests that motherhood, in particular single motherhood, is primarily a physical state rather than a legal or psychological state.

The most revealing passage about Taylor's view of motherhood comes shortly after Taylor meets with the Cherokee nation's representatives, when the entire congregation of the hearing—an extensive jumble of extended family members of Cash's, Alice's cousin, and the Greers—drives to Cash's house, Taylor and Turtle bringing up the rear:

Taylor can still remember the day when she first understood she'd received the absolute power of motherhood—that force that makes everyone else step back and agree that she knows what's best for Turtle. It scared her to death. But giving it up now makes her feel infinitely small and alone. (341)

Without this "absolute power," Taylor can offer suggestions for and have input in Turtle's upbringing, but no longer can she make decisions on her own. Her autonomy has been stripped from her. Notably, at the end of *Pigs in Heaven* Cash and Alice are contemplating marriage, and Taylor decides she wants to be in a serious relationship with Jax and have him become Turtle's

father, as the two are already very attached. As Alice notes in the closing paragraph, “the family of women is about to open its doors to men” (343). When Alice and Taylor become a part of this community by way of Turtle, they take men into their lives as permanent fixtures rather than as “a remedy for minor plumbing irritations” (40), an ongoing joke between the two women, who formerly remained staunchly unattached to any man. At the same time, Taylor’s acceptance of a male counterpart in Jax coincides with her loss of legal guardianship over Turtle. While she had considered Jax’s role in their family previously, Kingsolver leaves the decision until the end of the novel, when losing Turtle, or losing some part of her mother role, seemed imminent. When losing sole custody and care of Turtle, Taylor finds herself able to commit to a serious romantic relationship where formerly she had avoided anything of the sort.

In Alice Walker’s short story “How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It was Easy” the narrator’s opening lines are, “My mother and father were not married. I never knew him” (21). The entire story functions as an answer to the question posed in the title, to how the narrator, who we learn is a young black woman, gets away with killing an extremely powerful white lawyer in the South. That she chooses to begin her story with these details indicates that her lack of a father and being raised by a single mother are facts essential to answering the question in her title, or at least providing context to the events that follow. After her mother finds out about the relationship, the narrator, with the aid of her lover Bubba, commits her mother into an insane asylum for trying to end the relationship between her daughter and Bubba. Her mother eventually does go insane in the asylum and looks “vacant, as empty as an eye socket” (25) with her role as mother stripped from her. Without the duty of motherhood, the narrator’s mother is “empty,” as if her position as mother was an internalized state that her time at the asylum and her daughter’s actions removed from her. Seeing her mother

in this state, the narrator realizes she wants to get her mother out of the asylum and herself out of the paid relationship with Bubba. When Bubba refuses to help her, she shoots him and takes the money he said he would use to send her to college. The narrator's act is partly revenge for herself and partly for her mother, the unrecognizable woman in the asylum.

In these instances, the author almost always compares the mother to some notoriously protective mother animal, or at least as responding instinctively to some perceived threat to her children. Without the assurance of some male figure to protect their children, these single mothers take on the masculine qualities of parenting as well as the typically feminine. In usurping the male position, these women resemble their animal counterparts, who often raise offspring on their own in nature. Esch, Anney, Delia, and Taylor reflect Bennett's assertion that the female protagonists in contemporary Southern novels "are virtually always strong in nature and independent in spirit, resisting all that is attached to bellehood" (442). In rejecting bellehood, these women reject the former ideals of womanhood perpetuated in the South, and these authors alter the image of Southern women.

### **Single Mothers and Guilt**

Guilt is doubtless a mainstay of any endeavor, particularly one as massive and important as parenting. However, single parents have no counterpart to share the triumphs and tribulations of parenting with as closely as traditional two-parent families do, and so must take on the guilt of any shortcomings in parenting on themselves, particularly as society sees single mothers in particular as "inadequate," while their families are "seen as deficient" (Nelson 23).

While these single mothers rise to take up absolute power over their children's lives, a mother's vigilance cannot protect themselves or their children completely. When this total power

fails to protect their children or when the world wrenches its way between mother and child, guilt consumes these women. The general thought process is as follows: if she, the only thing standing between her children and the world, cannot keep her own safe from harm and stay with her children, does she deserve to be a mother? Or should she entrust her children to the care of another?

*Cavedweller* begins with the death of Randall, Delia's ex-husband and the father of her youngest daughter, Cissy. While Randall flies over the handlebars of his motorcycle, Delia is humming snatches of songs to resist the temptation to take up drinking again. Her identity as a recovering alcoholic is central to her identity throughout the novel: two pages in, she is humming to distract herself from the urge "to sip whiskey until the world turned golden and quiet and safe, until Dede and Amanda Louise, the daughters she had left behind, ceased whispering and whimpering behind her left ear" (2). Her alcoholism caused her to leave Randall, although she continued to drink, and it remains a source of guilt in her relationship with Cissy, whom she took with her when she left Randall.

Allison depicts Delia's guilt more vividly when Delia is singing or dreaming and lets her subconscious take control; while when she is in a more sentient state, she is able to repress it. One example of this is a dream during which "her girls became one creature, one keening source of anguish, one child monster damning her name" (4). Her wronged daughters become a thing of myth, a hydra with many hungry heads rearing when she is least able to defend herself. Likewise, "the song inside herself was meaner than anything anyone ever heard onstage. It was almost meaner than she could stand" (4). The thread of Delia's internal dialogue continues here, her song feeding off of and reminding her of her toxic regret. Likewise, Delia's response to Randall's death is "road dreams, Dede and Amanda Louise dreams, Mama dreams, guilt and

hope dreams” (17). In the wake of his death, she returns to her state just after leaving Cayro to escape her abusive husband Clint. Delia feels that “if she [does] not get on the road, the beast [will] reclaim her and she [will] go down to the beach with a bottle” (10). Again, her subconscious assaults her with the guilt she attempts to repress, only rather than a horrifying vision of her children the monster is her alcoholism. Her reaction is to take off for Cayro to avoid the alcoholism that has colored Cissy’s life and to remedy the abandonment of Dede and Amanda. Allison shows that when all else is gone Delia’s identity as a mother remains.

These “Mama dreams” prompt her to drive across the country and to make her home in a place and with daughters she abandoned, to regain her children as a different woman, as “Mama” without being “wife.” The “do-not-deserve-to-live refrain” echoing in Delia’s mind when she first arrives in Cayro (42) presents a glimpse of her self-loathing, a stand-in for the self-loathing many of these women feel—they cannot do it all, but they have to. The same voice that whispers that perhaps Dede and Amanda miss Delia as much as she misses them is the same that excuses Delia’s drinking and tells her that “one drink would not kill her, and another was all right too,” and when left with her two addictions—alcohol and her mama dreams—she reasons that “her girls were not liquor” and decides to try and earn their forgiveness (18). By intertwining Delia’s alcoholism with her guilt at abandoning her two eldest daughters, Allison directly links the two, and thereby delineates the lengths to which a mother forced to shoulder the full brunt of parenting will go to escape the constant reminder of the ways in which she failed her children.

Her alcoholism becomes a source of guilt in her relationship with Cissy, who lived with her during that time and resents her mother for most of the novel as a result of Delia’s addiction, which had prevented her from being a mother to Cissy. In part, Delia’s mental and emotional absence while drunk indicates to Cissy that her mother loves her first family more than she loves

Cissy, although Delia feels more pointed guilt in abandoning her first two daughters, not more love for them than for Cissy.

Cissy, when recalling some of Clint's favorite sayings, latches on to several in particular: "Real Men. Good Women. God and Righteousness. Wages of Sin. What a woman really wants" (247). These dichotomies and in particular their application to women reflect Kathryn Lee Seidel's observation that "women who embody the myth of southern womanhood increasingly represent the South's definition of itself" (431). Delia's actions, in the eyes of her community, merited the treatment she garnered. While she ran away from her abusive husband, and consequently her daughters, Clint's mother stayed with her abusive husband until his death, never admitting any difficulties in the marriage. Women, to the minds of Cayro's people, are not meant to assert themselves, but to remain with their husbands and fulfill their duties to family, no matter what the cost. Delia's own guilt and Cayro's depiction of her guilt stem from radically different sources: Cayro blames Delia for being strong enough to break from the traditional roles set out for women, while Delia blames herself for not being strong enough to save her daughters when she ran to save herself.

The transition from being a single mother to teenagers to parenting young adults proves difficult for Delia, for whom "the desire to drink [...] had come back with a vengeance after Amanda married and moved out" (329). This woman dedicated herself so completely to her children and to being a mother after returning to Cayro that the space left behind by their growing independence allows her struggle with alcoholism to resurface. To combat her urge to drink, Delia takes up running. While Amanda dislikes her mother running around town in cutoff shorts, Dede "watched Delia go out with a face full of awe and longing" (331). For Dede, her mother becomes more fascinating when she engages in activities outside of raising her daughters

and trying to make up for all the lost years with Amanda and Dede. With Cissy, however, Delia is still trying to recover the bond between them, one that arrived in Cayro damaged. Delia realizes, when playing with her grandsons while Cissy babysits them, that “being predictable was the best gift she could give to Cissy” (342). Early on in the novel, Cissy’s world is often tumultuous: her father dies; her mother drives with her across the country to be met with contempt from most of the town they move to; her mother becomes almost catatonic, leaving her daughter to read as an escape; and getting her daughters, Cissy’s half-sisters, back, burying Clint, trying to make amends with the girls Delia left as babies.

While many authors portray single women as ferocious mothers and focus on depicting the strength of these women who are willing to sacrifice anything for their children, Delia realizes that, for Cissy, the mundane offers solace: her mother crooning to the little boys and singing them nonsense songs. This moment prompts Delia to consider her life as a whole, her three girls as babies and as women, knowing that “there was a cost, a cost to everything. Delia had paid all her life. When she looked at her girls, all she wanted was to have them not to pay as much” (344), as though her status as a single mother, though perhaps more significantly as a mother who abandoned her children, is another part of her discretion against the moral code of Cayro, Georgia.

When Rosemary, Delia’s friend from California, visits, she appears mystified by Delia, telling Cissy that “you with your hard little pinball eyes, that man in there eating her up every minute, Amanda with her pinched mouth and nasty looks, Dede like a big old sucker snake swallowing the air wherever she goes—all this, and still Delia is happy. [...] Happiest I’ve ever seen her” (169). Here, Allison pairs each of Delia’s daughters with an unappealing trait, one that takes pieces of Delia slowly and diffuses them with a simple statement of Delia’s happiness.

When Delia's opportunity to remedy her shortcomings as a mother, or to at least atone for them through her dedication as a mother, she remains positive despite the aspects of motherhood that, to an outsider, look unappealing. Allison uses Delia's optimism in the face of her struggles to reconcile with her daughters and to come to terms with her guilt as a more subtle portrayal of the strength that reaches mythic proportions in *Salvage the Bones*. Delia's concern throughout *Cavedweller* is to remedy her failures as a mother—from abandoning her first two daughters to her alcoholism's negative impact on Cissy—and in this moment, although exhausted and alone, Delia is happy. Surrounded by her daughters, Delia becomes a new woman even to Rosemary, who was her closest friend in California.

During *The Bean Trees* an unknown man attempts to assault, and presumably kidnap, Turtle while she is visiting a park with Edna Poppy, Taylor and Lou Ann's blind elderly neighbor. After Taylor is informed of the attempted assault, Taylor helps Virgie Mae, the woman Edna lives with, get a sparrow out of the house while Turtle clings to Edna even though Lou Ann tells Taylor later that "the poor kid was looking around the whole time, trying to see where you'd gone," to which Taylor answers with the question, "what makes anybody think I can do anything for her?" (177). In the days following the incident, Edna, Virgie, and Lou Ann rally around Turtle, and Taylor begins spending more and more time at work, convinced that because the attack happened while Turtle, not physically with her, is under her care that she is incapable of being an adequate mother. The state learns, upon Edna reporting the incident to the police, that Taylor has no legal claim to Turtle, leaving Taylor to grapple with the decision to let Turtle go into Child Welfare Services or to fight to keep her.

When discussing the issue with Mattie, Taylor tells her that when she first moved out to Arizona, "I realized I had no business just assuming I could take the responsibility for a child's

life,” and reflects on a woman in Pittman who worked reading fortunes, thinking that “almost anything is better than having only yourself to blame when you screw up” (186). Taylor tends towards the opposite extreme, blaming only herself for this attempted assault, believing that because she cannot completely protect Turtle from everything in the world, because the absolute power of motherhood failed, she is unfit to be a mother.

In *Pigs in Heaven*, the threat to Taylor’s custody of Turtle leads her to pack their things and leave, telling no one where they are going and working minimum-wage jobs to support herself and Turtle in one of the public housing projects of Seattle. After months of living in poverty in Washington, Taylor and Turtle return to Oklahoma because Taylor cannot afford to care for Turtle well, and feels that if she would be better cared for elsewhere she would give Turtle up for her own good. While sitting in the Child Welfare worker’s office, Taylor envisions living without Turtle as “loveless, hopeless, blind” and feels that “she will forget all the colors” (320). Without Turtle and without being her mother, Taylor’s world will be colorless, devoid of the colors she used to wear that became less important when she had Turtle to care for. Despite her love for Turtle, Taylor knows she cannot continue to support her daughter as she has since leaving Tucson: scraping by, unable to buy Turtle new clothes or to feed her beyond some fruit and a multitude of peanut butter sandwiches. Taylor’s guilt and love lead her to Oklahoma, to Annawake, and to the possibility that she may lose Turtle completely. In the wake of the Cherokee Nation’s decision to grant Cash guardianship of Turtle and to give Taylor joint custody, Taylor accepts her loss of absolute power through the knowledge that this way Turtle will be provided for by an entire community, that Taylor has ensured her daughter’s wellbeing, even at the cost of her own desire to care for Turtle herself.

Perhaps the most poignant instance of guilt among these novels is that of Anney, Bone's mother in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, whose guilt leads her to leave Bone in the care of her sister Raylene at the end of the novel. The first time Glen beats Bone with his belt, Anney waits outside the door until he unlocks it, slaps Glen and washes Bone's tearstained face and the welts on the backs of her legs. Later, however, she stifles her guilt by making love to Glen, who lies about the reason for Bone's beating (108). Later, as Glen degrades the Boatwright family and continues to abuse Bone, Anney "just got quiet, more and more quiet all the time" (110). The shame Glen associates with the Boatwright family escalates as he moves the family often, each time to a house farther from Anney's family, isolating her and providing an alternate narrative to the one that the Boatwright women create themselves. Anney's guilt at allowing her daughter to become the victim of Glen's abuse is an ironic result of her marriage to a man in an attempt to provide a male head of household, and it is Anney's attempts to keep her family together and make them one cohesive unit that Natalie Carter claims "destroys the very family she is trying to protect" (8). Anney's silence, then, acts as both a literal and a symbolic testament to the reign of the patriarchy in the South, which ostracizes the single mother for her failure to submit to male authority. That Anney's attempt to make hers a legitimate family causes its disintegration, which challenges the assumption at large that a male figurehead is needed to complete a proper family. Bone's shame is at times more potent than her mother's guilt, as it prevents Anney from discovering the entire truth about Glen's treatment of her daughter, although it is unlikely she is completely unaware the entire time Glen abuses Bone. In the end, Anney feels compelled to care for her daughters as well as her husband but, unable to fulfill the roles of mother and of wife simultaneously, she chooses to leave Bone in the care of her Aunt Raylene and to leave the state with Glen. At the end of the novel, Anney visits Bone at Raylene's and leaves her with a copy of

her birth certificate without the stamp that marks her as illegitimate, a bastard. Following her brief visit Anney leaves, presumably for good, and Bone finally lets Raylene touch her shoulder after avoiding physical contact following her hospital discharge. As the pair look out to where Anney drove off, Bone solidifies the mother-daughter bond between her and Raylene when she “[wraps] my fingers in Raylene’s and [watches] the night close in around us” (309). Anney’s guilt causes her to feel as though she cannot adequately care for Bone, which leads to this last moment of Bone taking her aunt’s hand as a child takes its mother’s hand.

*Salvage the Bones* lacks instances of a mother’s guilt because Esch is not yet a mother. However, she contemplates her future position as mother and exhibits anxiety over her qualification to be a mother. One instance of Esch’s anxiety occurs towards the end of the novel as Hurricane Katrina makes landfall in Mississippi and the Batiste family fortifies the home and convenes in the living room. Esch remembers her mother calming herself and Skeetah in a hurricane while they were children, and wonders “Will I keep it safe? If I could speak to this storm, spell it harmless like Medea, would this baby, the size of my fingernail, my pinkie fingernail, maybe, hear?” (219). In comparing her mother’s actions in a hurricane to her own, Esch is attempting to gauge her aptitude for motherhood, wondering if she will have the power, as her mother did, to soothe her child in the face of a hurricane. Her anxiety stems from the same place as the guilt of the mothers in these other novels does. She fears that even though she will receive the absolute power of motherhood Taylor Greer describes, she will not be capable of protecting her child from the raw forces of nature in the same way her mother calmed her during a hurricane when she was a young girl.

These authors evoke guilt often as a catalyst to change or as a driving force behind their decisions: Anney’s guilt drives her to leave Bone with Raylene; Taylor’s: to take on the

difficulty of motherhood in *The Bean Trees* and to give up that authority in *Pigs in Heaven*; and Delia's prompts her to return to the life she ran from. Although Esch has no guilt to feel as of yet, anxiety over potential failures appears especially after Katrina blasts through her small community and does massive damage. These authors, by depicting women who must be strong in order to care for their children and their struggles to provide for their families emotionally and financially, clarify the reality of the single mother's position in society. Consequences of their state, including difficulty finding or keeping jobs with flexible hours, the inability to make ends meet, and total exhaustion plague these women. By bringing feelings of guilt into these novels, the authors create realistic portraits of the difficulties single mothers face today.

### **Single Mothers and Community**

When attempting to take on all the duties involved in parenting, single parents of either gender often must enlist the aid of friends and family members, who in turn become a part of the community helping to raise the child or children. Ruth Sidel writes that of the single mothers she interviewed, "almost all credit their families with enormous ongoing help [...] with simply being there for them" (131). This sentiment echoes in these novels, as women seek out support from a network of people surrounding them and their children. Notably, many of the novels I am focusing on feature communities made up of a blend of family members and close friends, although some, *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Salvage the Bones* in particular, feature communities made largely or completely of family members.

*Cavedweller* begins with the death of Randall Pritchard and the subsequent move east of his widow Delia and daughter Cissy. Delia's old friend M.T. takes her and Cissy in when they first arrive in Cayro, Georgia, shortly after leaving her husband. That both Lou Ann and M.T.

reach out to fellow single mothers after splitting up with their husbands shows a need for community, as well as an understanding of the struggles uprooted mothers face when trying to make a new life for themselves and their children. When Delia first returns to Cayro and faces the resentment of the townspeople for leaving her two daughters behind, Cissy, her youngest daughter, terms it “crying season,” due to Delia’s almost comatose state and depression (66). Delia’s state appears unusual to Cissy, which is one of the first indications in the novel of how media often portrays single mothers: not as the weak, helpless women of the Old South, but strong, often stubborn women looking out for their own at any cost. Arriving in Georgia, Delia “had lost the part of her that could fight back, take care of business, and do what she had to do. The Delia who fell into M.T.’s arms was childlike and broken” (54). That Delia “falls” into M.T.’s arms tells the reader what is going to happen before it does: she falls apart, unable to care for herself or for Cissy. Cissy notes, observing the ways in which Delia’s trespasses are remedied in the community, that “in the way of things, women screwed up just as much as men did, but women’s sins were paid for by children and women friends” (70). Women are a community, then, in part as they take on shares of another’s guilt whether willing or not. M.T. divorced shortly before the novel began, and without asking Delia what kept her away so long, she “used her hard-won capital for Delia” (69). Sacrifice is a core aspect of these female communities, as one woman sacrifices her own resources or time to take on the burdens of another.

When Bone sits among the aunts in *Bastard Out of Carolina* and listens to them make jokes at the expense of the men in their lives, she does not always understand the full import of what they say, but enjoys “feeling a part of something nasty and strong and separate from by big rough boy-cousins and the whole world of spitting, growling, overbearing males” (91). Bone feels compelled to create a space separate from that of men for herself and sees an incarnation of

the space women create for and among themselves in the discussions amongst her aunts, where they care for each other's children, clean the house, and keep track of all the members of the Boatwright family. Indeed, the Boatwright women "seemed old, worn-down, and slow, born to mother, nurse, and clean up after the men" (23). These women learn their duty from one another and look after one another's children, and in this way they solidify themselves as a community beyond their familial ties. Peggy Dunn Bailey notes that the significance of these ties among the Boatwright women is not lost upon Glen who, in moving the family further and further away from the rest of the Boatwright women, "strives to insert distance between Bone and her maternal aunts and grandmother" (276). In separating her from the other Boatwright women, Glen attempts to separate Bone from the source of her power—the tales her aunts and grandmother tell, ones that Glen has convinced her mother are shameful proof of the Boatwrights' white trash status.

After Bone's collarbone fuses wrong after Glen breaks it, the doctor's x-rays reveal breaks and fractures all over her body, causing the doctor to demand Bone tell him who caused her injuries. While his intentions are helpful, Bone realizes that "he didn't know us, didn't know my mama or me," noting that he asks her who beat her "in his stranger's voice" (114). The doctor's "stranger's voice" comes from outside the community Bone hails from and is, as such, untrustworthy, while she trusts her mother to take her to the car, where they leave Glen behind only to return to him two weeks later. When the situation between Bone and Glen becomes obviously irreversible, namely after the first beating Bone receives after returning, Anney sends Bone off to stay with her aunt Ruth, who is ill. Likewise, she later sends Bone to her aunt Raylene during afternoons and evenings at another point, and to her aunt Alma's as well. In this instance, the only support that the community surrounding them can only act as a buffer between

Glen and Bone as an attempt to try to keep her away from him and in that way keep her safe. The community in this novel provides Bone with her identity as a part of the Boatwright family and also protects her from the failings of her own mother when Raylene takes her in after Anney runs away with Glen at the end of the novel. In both novels, but in *Bastard* in particular, women understand how their relationships with other women give them strength, but they don't find it, as Allison herself says, "nearly as important as what a man and a woman [make] together" (9). That Anney does not recognize her sisters and mother as where she gets her power from forces her to relinquish her daughter at the end of the novel, while Raylene, who exists within the support system of the Boatwright women, takes up caring for Bone.

In Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, community plays a large part as Taylor takes on becoming a mother and moving to an entirely new city and state. In her attempt to escape from the small Kentucky town where she grew up and where girls married young and where some had babies even younger, she travels into motherhood, taking the baby given to her on an Indian reservation in Oklahoma. Taylor's own mother raised her alone after her husband left, telling Taylor that "trading Foster for [her] was the best deal this side of the Jackson Purchase" (5). Not only does Taylor not want to get married, but she does not want to become a mother either, and feels some trepidation for the potential for a relationship, stating that although not completely unexperienced, "none of these sights had so far inspired me to get hogtied to a future as a tobacco farmer's wife" (3). Rather than get "hogtied" by unplanned pregnancy and marriage, Taylor, formerly Missy, decides to drive west. In her rural Kentucky hometown, Missy had not been a part of any community; she lived with her mother, worked, and planned her departure from Kentucky.

The first person Taylor meets in Arizona is Mattie, the owner of a tire store called Jesus Is Lord Used Tires that she ran with her husband until his death, and which she now maintains alone. Mattie's knowledge of the store and the cars she works on impresses Taylor, who knows that in her own hometown of Pittman, "if a woman had tried to have her own tire store she would have been run out of business" (45). Before seeing Mattie handle the tire, she had seemed comfortable dealing with children as evidenced by her treatment of Turtle. Taylor does not remark on Mattie's ability to care for children at all because it fits completely within the images of womanhood she carried with her from Kentucky. Shortly after Taylor and Turtle arrive in Tucson, Taylor searches for a place to live and answers an ad looking for a roommate and meets Lou Ann Ruiz, a new mother whose husband recently left her. Within minutes, the two women "had already established that our hometowns in Kentucky were separated by only two counties, and that we had both been to the exact same Bob Seger concert at the Kentucky State Fair my senior year" (75). The two women connect shortly after becoming mothers and bond over their status as single mothers as well as their common roots in rural Kentucky.

Taylor's initial response to motherhood is understandably unlike that of the mothers in the other novels I am analyzing—she actively avoids becoming a mother, and becomes one only when an unknown woman leaves a child in her car. In contrast to Taylor's mothering style, which is geared towards Turtle's interests, Lou Ann, recently separated from her husband and a new mother at once, takes a radically different approach to parenting. As Taylor observes, "for Lou Ann, life itself was a life-threatening enterprise" (87). Lou Ann, though, also goes through a transformation in the course of the novel. When Dwane Ray, her son, grows older, she gets a job and throws much of her energy behind her anxiety and terror into her work.

As Lou Ann and Taylor settle into a routine, Taylor finds herself bothered by the way in which she works all day and comes home to Lou Ann and the children, as if they were “some family on a TV commercial,” causing Taylor to explain her position to Lou Ann: “It’s not like we’re a *family*, for Christ’s sake. You’ve got your own life to live, and I’ve got mine” (88). Even when Lou Ann’s help makes Taylor’s life easier, allowing Taylor to work full-time while Turtle stays with Lou Ann during the day, she dislikes how much their arrangement resembles the typical family structure she had left Pittman to avoid. The two reach an agreement where they split household chores and cooking, ridding the household of one distinct domestic caretaker and therefore a single, typically feminine role and another typically masculine role.

After the two settle into a routine, Turtle utters her first sound, a squeak-laugh as she catapults forward at the car’s sudden stop on the way back from a picnic, much to Taylor’s relief:

Knowing that Turtle’s first uttered sound was a laugh brought me no end of relief. If I had dragged her halfway across the nation only to neglect and entirely botch her upbringing, would she have laughed? I thought surely not. Surely she would have bided her time while she saved up whole words, even sentences. Things like ‘What do you think you’re doing?’” (101)

Taylor truly becomes a mother in this moment, fretting over whether or not she is a good mother to Turtle and celebrating her child’s milestones as though Turtle was her biological child, something she realizes makes her act more like Lou Ann. Taylor, Lou Ann, and Mattie, Taylor’s employer, celebrate again shortly after Turtle’s first laugh, when Turtle says her first word. As Taylor becomes more comfortable with her position as a mother, she also settles more comfortably into the community built around her and Turtle. Taylor begins to further identify with Lou Ann after noting that “I had noticed that Lou Ann measured many things in life,

besides her figure, in terms of Before and After Dwayne Ray” (105). Taylor begins to do the same as the novel progresses.

Also prominent in Taylor and Turtle’s lives are two refugees staying with Mattie, Estevan and Esperanza, a couple from Guatemala, whose daughter was taken from them before they escaped their home country. Esperanza in particular appears mostly vacant, as if without her child she has little else to live for, causing her to attempt suicide. When talking to Estevan shortly after Esperanza’s suicide attempt, Taylor tells him that she “spent the first half of my life avoiding motherhood and ties, and now I’m counting them as blessings?” (144). Taylor associates one with the other, as if when taking on motherhood fully she took on a community that gathers around her and Turtle as both settle in to their relationship. Significantly, Taylor feels no lasting connection to Pittman besides the fact that her mother lives there, but in leaving to avoid the “trouble” many girls she grew up with got into—pregnancy and marriage—she has a child given to her and has to form a community in part to learn what it is to be a mother.

Taylor drives Estevan and Esperanza to their next safe-house in Oklahoma, partly in the hopes of finding the woman who gave her Turtle in order to secure legal guardianship of her. Her search is futile, but Estevan and Esperanza pose as Turtle’s biological parents and give up Turtle to Taylor’s care (225). In part, giving Turtle to Taylor is a moment of catharsis for the couple whose only daughter was taken from them in Guatemala but also a confirmation for Taylor as her status as a mother, something she questions after Turtle’s assault, as I mentioned above. After dropping Estevan and Esperanza off at the safe-house, Taylor and Turtle go to the public library in Oklahoma City while waiting for the adoption to be processed. While the two look through the *Horticultural Encyclopedia*, a fitting book for Turtle’s fixation with plants, they turn to an entry on wisteria, or what Turtle calls “bean trees.” The entry describes the rhizobia that

live on the roots of wisteria and provide nitrogen, which allows the plant to survive in poor soil, a phenomenon Taylor compares to the pair's support system: "The wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by [...] but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles" (241). Without the community she built in Tucson, Taylor would not have been able to become a mother to Turtle. In drawing a direct link between Taylor and Turtle as a wisteria vine and their community as the rhizobia that provide the wisteria with nourishment, Kingsolver underlines the necessity of a support system.

*Pigs in Heaven* addresses racial and cultural communities in contrast to the more personal ties Kingsolver depicts in *The Bean Trees*. The central conflict of the novel is between Taylor's instinct to keep her daughter with her within the community Kingsolver establishes in *The Bean Trees*, and Turtle's Cherokee heritage and the community that comes with it, which is one she does not encounter while living with Taylor. After leaving Tucson, Taylor and Turtle reach Las Vegas, a decision made spontaneously, and meet Alice there. While in Las Vegas, Alice tells Taylor that she "didn't bring you up with men as a consideration," going on to say that "I think single runs in our family" (133). This tendency towards single women within the family appears in both of Kingsolver's novels following Taylor and Turtle, emphasizing a tendency towards a female-formed community, which we also see in *Cavedweller* and to a lesser extent in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. The Cherokee matrilineal conception of family underlies this, and Kingsolver emphasizes it later in the novel while Alice is staying with her cousin Sugar on the Cherokee reservation in the hopes of finding some way for Taylor to indisputably keep Turtle. Attending a stomp dance, Sugar tells Alice to sit with her in the benches designated for the Bird Clan. When Alice questions the validity of her sitting there, Sugar tells her that she belongs to the clan through their mutual grandmother, a full-blooded Cherokee, because "you get your clan

from your mother's line" (267). This statement hearkens back to the opening line of the novel, where Alice, unable to sleep, realizes that "women on their own run in [her] family" (3). Rather than ceding to a patriarchal familial and societal structure, women in this family, a tribe of its own, create family units in which men are irrelevant. Taylor was raised by a single mother and, almost as if to emphasize the point, is handed a child by a woman in a bar parking lot and becomes a mother without the direct involvement of a man, as no man impregnates Taylor or hands her Turtle.

Taylor finally decides to take Turtle to Cherokee Nation when the doctor Taylor takes Turtle to tells her that Turtle's digestive upsets are caused by the milk Taylor makes her drink, and remembers Annawake telling her in Tucson, "I bet she hates milk" (296). At this point, Taylor recognizes what Turtle's tribal identity and the community that comes with it can provide for Turtle that Taylor herself cannot offer, no matter how intensely she loves her daughter. When Taylor has returned to Oklahoma with Turtle and is waiting for the decision about custody of Turtle, Taylor talks with her mother about the whole situation, trying to make sense of what has been happening to her world, particularly after Turtle, when asked about her family, said she did not have one. Taylor, however, views the community they built in Tucson as family, saying that family is not necessarily a set of people genetically related to one another, but "the people you won't let go of for anything" (328). Taylor is definitively identifying herself as Turtle's family, as she endured poverty, exhaustion, and unimaginable strain to keep Turtle with her and to continue providing for her. The lack of a support system Taylor experienced in Seattle reveals to her how essential the Taylor and Turtle's surrogate family in Tucson was.

Following at the end of the line of cars to Cash's house after the custody hearing, Taylor realizes that she and Turtle could simply drive off and leave the line, but then "if she gets

separated from the others now, she'll never know how her life is going to come out" (342). Both Taylor and Turtle cannot survive without these connections, as does Taylor's mother Alice, who realizes that "the family of women is about to open its doors to men" (343). When Taylor finally opens the family to men, she also widens the community aiding in Turtle's upbringing, knowing now that she cannot manage without her friends and family to contribute.

In Alice Walker's short story "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It was Easy," the narrator begins by describing her home situation as the only child of a single mother who worked cleaning houses. While her mother works, a neighbor looks after her, and she notes that "by the time she died she was more like a mother to me than Mama was" (22). It is important to note that none of the characters in Walker's story have names, as if this situation and ones similar to it are so widespread the characters are not singular, unique figures but stand-ins for situations in numerous households. The only character Walker names is the narrator's pseudo-father figure/lover/rapist, whom she calls Bubba.

*Salvage the Bones* is an anomaly in that the community surrounding Esch is comprised of males, from her three brothers, her father, and her brother's friends, Big Henry in particular. Esch does not have any close female friends, and her only female relatives—her mother and grandmother—are dead. Consequently, she has no choice but to craft her conception of motherhood from the memories of her own mother and the points of reference she can find in her surroundings. When Randall discovers that Manny is the father of Esch's baby after the hurricane, Manny looks for some recognition of his and Randall's friendship. Instead, Esch puts her hand into the crook of Randall's arm and walks away, positioning herself so that "Randall was my shield, my warm cover, my brother" (244). Randall provides her with emotional support

when he must make a choice between Manny and his sister and takes on brotherhood as a physical act of support for his sister.

While staying with Big Henry and his mother, he drives Esch and her brothers out to see the wreckage in the surrounding area. While looking through rubble, Esch tells Big Henry her baby does not have a father, to which he responds “this baby got a daddy [...] this baby got plenty daddies” (255). Similar to Taylor’s support system in *The Bean Trees* and to the descriptions of the Cherokee sense of community Annawake dictates in *Pigs in Heaven*, Esch’s community is comprised of a web of people related and not. In the same way this community supports its members in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, they will also come together around Esch and her baby.

Notably, the only community of women Esch belongs to is the girls from school, whom she thinks of after first learning of her pregnancy:

The girls say that if you’re pregnant and you take a month’s worth of birth control pills, it will make your period come on. Say if you drink bleach, you get sick, and it will make what will become the baby come out. Say if you hit yourself really hard in the stomach, throw yourself on the metal edge of a car and it hits you low enough to call bruises, it could bring a miscarriage. Say this is what you do when you can’t afford an abortion, when you can’t have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you. (102)

Unplanned pregnancy, especially among girls of lower socioeconomic status, often prompts them to adhere to the “proper” path, to kill the babies inside them at great risk to their own health and safety. They would rather risk killing themselves than become single mothers. In deciding to remain pregnant and have her baby, Esch takes on agency. While other girls attempt to cause miscarriage because “nobody wants what is inside [them],” Esch decides to want it herself, and

to thereby create a space in which she and her baby can exist outside of the typical nuclear family structure.

Community, while a large part of any single mother's life by way of necessity, is also a major concern within Southern literature. These authors depict the importance of single mothers creating their own communities within the general community-at-large, by describing how heavily each mother depends on the people with whom she surrounds herself in the midst of a culture that acts as though they do not exist or do not merit the same treatment as families that adhere to the traditional nuclear family structure. A support system for the mother, these people also provide the children of single mothers with care while their mothers are working as well as a caring environment of people who look out for their best interests.

### **Conclusion**

In comparing the treatment of specific portions of the population in literature from periods as different as the Reconstruction-era and the contemporary South, it is important to be mindful of the potential lack of one-to-one comparisons. Between Reconstruction and the present, the Civil Rights movement, the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s, and other movements have changed the South into a radically different place. Despite the progress the South has made, Barbara Bennett notes in "Southern Women Writers and the Women's Movement," the representations of the belle and other figures "have been particularly resistant to change" and still dictate appropriate behavior which none of the mothers in these contemporary novels live up to (Bennett 440). Single mothers, although more common today than thirty or forty years ago, still experience stigma and are considered largely as irresponsible women who bring their deplorable situation upon themselves. In the South, a single mother heading the house

means there is no male figure to control her and that she fails to adhere to the enduring expectations literature associates with Southern womanhood.

Notably, although African-American women make up a large portion of single mothers, the novels and stories detailing them make up a significantly smaller portion of Southern women's literature than one may expect. Similarly, narratives coming from other minorities in the South are still grossly underrepresented. The reason for this large gap in Southern literature is unclear, and makes it difficult to read for any differences in the representations written by and about white women and those written by African-American women.

However, these texts do reflect the reality of class and single mothers, depicting the day-to-day struggles of raising children on limited resources and coping with the stigma associated with single motherhood and the lower class, and is due to the fall of the Agrarian influence that had formerly reduced "lower-class southerners to a supporting role" (Guinn 4). Here, women refocus on these lower classes that formerly existed on the periphery of depictions of the South, which gives these women the complexity and intelligence deserving of their positions as lower-class mothers supporting families alone. Southern women writers like Dorothy Allison and Jesmyn Ward return to their blue-collar roots and portray women as they knew them—poor and desperate, but powerful. Allison's intent appears in both *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Cavedweller*, where she depicts poor families as resilient units trying to contend with their situations rather than as shiftless, lazy, and deserving of their status.

The works of Augusta Evans Wilson and many of her contemporaries in the South focused on the political concerns of the South following its defeat in the Civil War and the reintegration of the South into the United States. While they watched their entire culture and way of life crumble, the heroines in Wilson's novels, and in the works of other Reconstruction-era

authors, embody the values of this dead world. More contemporary writers take a socially conscious approach, looking at single mothers where they appear most often: among the lower and working classes, often living paycheck to paycheck. This transition from concentrating on these women as symbol and these women as people reflects Matthew Guinn's point that "the Agrarian ideal today is being assailed by the sons and daughters of southern culture orphaned by its elitist character" (5). Reconstruction-era novels use members of this upper-class as their protagonists; indeed, very rarely does a lower-class character appear in any meaningful role at all.

Contemporary authors, in contrast, focus on issues of class and other social issues impacting single mothers rather than on political concerns. As a result, the women protagonists in their works are thoroughly individuals rather than stand-ins for an entire class or race of women, each facing her own struggles as a mother and as a head of household. In characterizing single mothers as powerful, dedicated, and fallible figures, contemporary Southern women novelists combat the idealized visions of Southern women propagated in the past, offering instead realistic glimpses of single mothers and their struggle to exist in a society that does not make room for them.

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