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Partaking of the Divine:
Images of Motherhood in Autobiography

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"What is loving, for a woman, the same thing as writing."

--Julia Kristeva
An intriguing set of poles is created by the maternal notion: the inhibiting part of being a mother, and also the inhabiting nature of motherhood. The maternal "instinct" as it has been dubbed brings with it both a sense of restraining the woman by means of added responsibility and a loss of speech, which I discuss later, and also a sense of occupying the woman, by giving her a life within her own, by creating her as the vessel for another’s personhood. A woman is irreversibly changed, or marked, after possessing within herself another identity and subject.

In the women’s autobiographies with which I work, meaning is created through motherhood as a system, and also through mothers themselves. In the discussions of motherhood that follow, a woman’s position in the world changes when related with the maternal aspect. To help me with this "positioning," I plan to look at the idea of the Blessed Virgin Mother, and her as she relates into the constructions of living mothers. The association of "mother" with the Virgin Mary causes a further split between the mother and the child because of the iconic distance inherent in the conception of the Virgin as a divine being.

All these autobiographies encompass women who write about their mothers in some fashion, and so the separation is revealed through the language and through the text of the autobiographer, and through the relation of the daughter/writer to the mother as Virgin Mary. With regards to language, discourse plays one of the most important roles in the separation between the mother and her child in that a mother, according to Julia Kristeva, a French theorist, experiences a re-creation of the semiotic, which is the state we are all in before the acquisition of language. Kristeva posits that the semiotic is a pre-
linguistic state that all infants experience. She suggests that mothers re-create the
semiotic as they go through the process of pregnancy and child-bearing. In a woman’s
re-invention of a semiotic mimicry, she feels a difference between her past and future
modes of being.

In my discussion of motherhood, I deal with women from a specific portion of the
western world, America and England. In my study, I examine such a small area, mostly
cut off from formal traditions of Catholic culture, in an attempt to explore the influence of
a piece of Catholicism, the Blessed Virgin Mary, on the understanding of motherhood in
a place which is much more liberal in its faith. Catholicism involves many rituals and
traditions that other Christians have repudiated, and altered into another form. The
relation of the Virgin Mary to motherhood is one of these traditions, and I use Christian
women from my part of the world to discover a deeper understanding of the frame of
motherhood within my own socio-cultural experience. And therefore none of the three
women I use as my literary examples are Catholic, nor have any of them been raised in a
Catholic culture. The relation of a Catholic understanding of motherhood as embodied in
the Virgin Mary still influences the ways in which these women of other Christian faith
ironically and thoughtfully portray their mothers. The Blessed Virgin Mary appears able
to transcend the Roman Catholic context.

And yet Kristeva’s theory is also limiting, and limited. Kristeva claims that her
theory, or the experience she evokes is universal within Christianity and clearly related,
but problems appear when I try to apply it to any text. In relation to the everytext, I have
to acknowledge the limitations and realize that her theory becomes controversial and narrow. One such limitation is the one I have already admitted: the application of a Roman Catholic model onto a Protestant culture. However, I believe there is a significant correlation.

Another recognizable limitation involves the question of how to discuss a theory which is inherently and necessarily difficult to express. In her discussion and her summoning of the semiotic, Kristeva breaks down half her page into columns composed of words and fragments that recall the semiotic, and yet the semiotic itself is before language; it cannot be expressed with symbolic language. And so how do I introduce and make use of a theory that the creator herself has difficulty in expressing? Her theory places limitations not only upon itself, but also upon my discussion of that theory’s relation to the three texts I use: Girl, Interrupted, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, and Oranges are not the Only Fruit.

Motherhood (in Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater”): inhibit/inhabit

Kristeva uses terms such as the “semiotic” and “speaking subject,” which both play extremely important roles in her discussion of motherhood and its effects upon society. The semiotic is a pre-linguistic level involving emotions and feelings, images and sensations that comes before a child enters into the symbolic order of language. Kristeva claims that mothers re-experience the semiotic, and recreate it, and yet the re-created semiotic is different since the woman has already become entrenched in the order of
language. Therefore mothers are vitally enmeshed in the issue of subjectivity since they are always recreating themselves as new subjects while also attempting to assimilate the prior subjectivity.

Kristeva’s writing in “Stabat Mater” discusses the construction of the mother in Christian society, and how femininity is associated with being a mother. In writing of the Virgin Mary, and her relation to her child, Kristeva sets up the mother as being the humanizing part of a child’s life: “[t]hus Christ, when all is said and done, is ‘human’ only through his mother” (235). The mother appears to assume a role that goes beyond the simple caregiver and lifebringer, one that extends her position into a blessed one. The mother of Christ partakes of the divine in her connection with the son of God, but “Stabat Mater” seems to make a connection between the mother of Christ and all mothers as being possessed of a special divinity in their maternal potentiality, for Kristeva claims that “the most intense revelation of God, which occurs in mysticism, is given only to a person who assumes himself as ‘maternal’” (235). Kristeva here discusses the male appropriation of the maternal aspect in order to have God revealed to them, but in their necessary adoption of that state of being, I see something pointing back to the mother as a role nearer divinity than any other. The maternal aspect is one of the most sacred parts of life; it brings life. Kristeva ties the mother’s role as a lifegiver, and therefore a being solidly attached to life, to the unspeakable parts of her role: the emotion and feelings and wordless parts of being a mother, the semiotics of motherhood. She reconfigures the

1 A mother experiences two versions of the semiotic: one she experiences through her own birth; the second through her child’s experience of birth and a lack of language.
“maternal” as “the ambivalent principle that is bound to the species, on the one hand, and on the other stems from an identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnamable that one imagines as femininity, nonlanguage, or body” (235). The semiotic is a limited, and limiting state of being. As Kristeva discusses, the semiotic is therefore inevitably linked with the feminine, and a mother, in Kristeva’s mind, is possessed of a power within her displacement and lack of assurance. She falls from language through the unspeakable language process involved with motherhood as Kristeva herself relates with her autobiographical murmurings when she writes, “[w]ords that are always too distant for this underground swarming of seconds, folding in unimaginable places” (Stabat 235), and here with the inexpressible is where her power lies.

While in the role of mother, a woman is placed within the semiotic, and yet still, as always, is both “semiotic and symbolic,” for no signifying system can be exclusively one or the other (Revolution 93). The mother is embroiled in an “identity catastrophe” since she on the one hand is named through her child, and yet isn’t she also a Name in her own right? The name of mother tends to overwhelm all that comes before, and bestows upon her a certain type of identity construction since the mother, by means of her journey through the birth process, loses her own speech, as Kristeva reveals when she re-creates her feelings of motherhood, demonstrating motherhood’s existence outside of language: “[f]lash on the unnamable, weavings of abstractions to be torn” (Stabat 235). A mother learns to live through the being she has produced. Her speech deteriorates because of the
severing of the bond between the mother and child after birth; in losing her subjectivity through the loss of part of herself, her patterns of discourse are altered.

The theory of Kristeva's speaking subject is necessarily one of a divided subject. Kristeva notes the pain of the division in her autobiographical margins in "Stabat Mater" when she says that "the pain, its pain--it comes from inside, never remains apart, other, it inflames me at once...[a]s if that was what I had given birth to" (241). The mother herself is divided between the subject she was, with a voice, immersed in symbolic discourse, and the reconstruction that she can create by means of the introduction of motherhood. The child of course emerges in a state of pre-language as well, and so for a while, both engage in their own versions of the semiotic, the child's real, the mother's created.

The mother's imitation of the semiotic arises out of the transformation into motherhood that necessarily divides the woman. The semiotic is the nonverbal portion of the systems of signification, and the use of the word implies a type of difference, a "distinctiveness," as Kristeva declares\(^2\) (Revolution 93). The semiotics of motherhood involve a break in the signifying process, establishing the identification of the subject, known as the thetic phase. The theory of motherhood requires the presence of this thetic phase, and in the identification the "subject must separate first and through [her] image, first and through [her] objects" (Revolution 98). What Kristeva sets up with her discussion of the thetic identification is that mothers are both divided beings themselves.

\(^2\) she discusses the significance of the semiotic, and the "distinctiveness" attached to it in detail in her essay Revolution in Poetic Language.
and divided from their children. They are separated from their children and from the
world by means of a lack of language, a semiotic condition which distances them and
therefore creates mothers as distant beings, whom the children are prepared to not
understand and to idolize. In the act of giving birth, a mother becomes an idol.

The foundation of Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater” is the Virgin Mary, and Kristeva
decides that much of the Blessed Mary’s importance lies with her virginity, which implies
an isolation from the patriarchal order, and a silence in her innocence and her “not
knowing man.” Mary as the continual Virgin, by virtue of attaching her state of purity to
her name, is embedded into our moral makeup. In her sanctification she stands as the
archetype of mother for Christian-influenced society everywhere. And so what does
Mary’s virginity mean for motherhood? She needs to be virginal and pure in order to
produce Christ, since sex tends to equal sin in religious thought, and sex cannot be
involved in the birth of our (Lord and) God. So long as she stands as a model for all
mothers, there is a tension and a silence to motherhood: a tension for the virginal aspect,
since all mothers cannot be free of sin, and a silence for the quiet submission (subjection)
with which Mary agreed to bear Christ.

Therefore the discourse involving motherhood revolves around impossibilities and
frustrations: “[a]ll those words, now, ever visible things to register the roar of a silence
that hurts all over” (242). In the subjection of her body before God, Mary’s voice
disappears, and her language arises as visceral and intuitive instead of symbolic to try to
express the effects of the silence and submission, the pain of the dichotomies of
motherhood. A mother’s language transforms into symbols and not fully formed words and thoughts. Mothers are in a state of re-creation using a contrived version of a semiotic pre-language that is an attempt to counter the silence, and the language they use is one of renewal and embodiment.

Kristeva uses her “Stabat Mater” as not only an introduction to her theory regarding the Virgin Mary and motherhood, but also as an opportunity to evoke her own mother status, as she composes in the left column an autobiography relating her personal experiences. In her estimation, motherhood equally entails an embodying. In the left column of “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva writes, “[t]here is him, however, his own flesh, which was mine yesterday” (243). The son is invested with a body, for which the mother provides herself as the vessel in which his body can become whole and complete. The son inhabits his mother’s body for a time so that he can live. The son may only live from the mother, and is finally “human,” and yet he also becomes separate from her; he travels beyond her body and influence, and becomes his own being: “any possible matrilinearism is to be repudiated and the symbolic link alone is to last” (237). The child goes beyond his mother, as shown by Christ, who assumes his role as the son of God, while the Virgin Mother becomes more of a symbolic figure who has meaning because of her role as the mother of Christ, and even more so once she is declared Aeiparthenos, ever-virgin, and is thereon proclaimed the “Mother of God.”

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3 see Kristeva’s discussion on p. 239 of “Stabat Mater” regarding the discussions over Mary’s virgin state, and the implications those discussions have.
The case for Mary’s idolization relies upon her virginity, and her having given birth to Christ. She is known for these reasons, and her name signifies much more than merely a name—it has become her identity, as she is properly referred to as the Blessed Virgin Mary. She has become a more distant mother because of the pedestal of purity to which she has been raised. Mary is The Virgin, and her status has progressed to her being an object of worship as well as a Blessed Mother. The humanizing role has circled, and it is now the child who humanizes the mother and who gives her significance.

But the mother also experiences a distance and a separation within her own body, for as Kristeva says in “Stabat Mater,” “[a] mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language—and it has always been so” (254). The separation of the mother is inherent in her biological state, since she, from the moment of conception, divides in two. She remains separated even after birth because she loses part of herself in the birth of the child. The division of the flesh between the mother and the child creates two languages, one of which the child might be said to tear from the mother—the language of the Law—for when s/he enters into the stage of language acquisition. Motherhood, as well as being a blessed state of being, also involves violence by Kristeva’s principles. There is a wrenching apart of the child from the mother, and at the time of birth, a division is made between the language of the symbolic order, and that of the mother who is to be confronted with the abyss between her and the child. The separation of the child from the mother symbolizes the separation of language, where the mother is struck silent by the loss of part of her body, part of her identity:

[w]hat connection is there between myself, or even more unassumingly between
my body and this internal graft and fold, which, once the umbilical cord has been severed, is an inaccessible other? My body and...him. No connection. Nothing to do with it. And this, as early as the first gestures, cries, steps, long before its personality has become my opponent (254-5).

The child becomes “inaccessible” to the mother after birth, and assumes its own identity and being. Kristeva notices right away the gulf between the two beings, even though the child still exists within the semiotic--the separation does not depend solely upon the child’s entrance into the symbolic. The child is embodied with a voice, and with a separate identity. In time, the child becomes an opponent to the mother in its otherness. The role of the mother is therefore one of borderlines and of yawning gulfs, just as the role of language.

After losing her child from her body, there is a distance between the two, which is what immediately affects the mother’s identity and subjectivity. As Kristeva says,

...I confront the abyss between what was mine and is henceforth but irreparably alien. Trying to think through that abyss: staggering vertigo. No identity holds up. A mother’s identity is maintained only through the well-known closure of consciousness within the indolence of habit, when a woman protects herself from the borderline that severs her body and expatriates it from her child (255).

Kristeva’s language makes it sound as if this borderline, once severed, banishes her child from her for all time. An immediate and irreversible process of separation begins. In banishing the child from the mother, the mother’s identity and subjectivity are banished as well.

The child here is said to enter into the patriarchal order, which, as Kristeva notes, begins much earlier than the actual time when the child can coherently form words and

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4 which she doesn’t name, but which sounds literally like the umbilical cord, figuratively the line divorcing (segregating) the mother from the symbolic order
sentences. In the separation from the mother through the severing of the umbilical cord--the only tangible tie between the two bodies--the child and mother experience a psychic distance as well as the physical: "[t]he child, whether he or she, is irremediably an other" (Stabat 255). The child, no matter the sex, exists without help from the mother, and she recognizes the division for what it is, a gulf between the two that marks a distance that can never be navigated. There is no solution to the dilemma of division between child and mother. And yet, although motherhood causes otherness and silence,\(^5\) motherhood, as a contradictory state by nature, is also a protector and a rejuvenator, a protector because of the nurturing involved and a rejuvenator because of the re-forming of the mother’s identity.

Understandably, because of the masses of contradictions and complications involved with motherhood, the role of the mother is a highly charged issue in many autobiographies, especially by women, and there seems to be a rivalry inherent among mother and daughter for a feminine life. As Kristeva notes, "[m]oreover, is there something in that Maternal notion that ignores what a woman might say or want--as a result, when women speak out today it is in matters of conception and motherhood that their annoyance is basically centered" (Stabat 236). Kristeva strongly asserts that women are annoyed with motherhood and all its related paraphernalia and concepts;\(^6\) however,

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\(^5\) I continue to refer to “silence” in relation to motherhood, when there are essentially two things occurring. There is the semiotic language of the mother, and the silence that I refer to, which relates to the mother in terms of her relation to the paternal order. She is muted by the symbolic by means of a discomfort in the reformation of her subjectivity, and in terms of the paternal.

\(^6\) Kristeva’s words here bring up questions of feminism and feminists. In her assertion, she does not clarify whether she differentiates between the two on this point, but rather avoids a discussion of feminists. She claims her point as related to all women, and introduces it as something to explore. I disagree with the strength of Kristeva’s assertion, and doubt that women as a whole hold that much against the role of
she posits that the annoyance draws from a sense that the “maternal” is a nonverbal position, or one which becomes muted by society’s attitudes and beliefs towards the mother. Women do sense this feeling of discomfort that comes with motherhood, and therefore concern themselves in their writing with the issues of childbirth and being a mother, or specifically with pre-verbal types of annoyances. With the following three women, the issue is less an aggravation than something that is noted and therefore brought to life in their writing.

**The Semiotic Embrace of Motherhood**

The unnamable in Kristeva could stand for femininity, body, or nonlanguage, and so the female is always bound to this idea of a loss of speech. When someone enters into the acquisition of language, at the same time that person enters into the world of the symbolic order, which is structured and clear and recognized by language and rules. A person within this order works within these boundaries, and is inhibited by those rules placed upon her. Some women never sense this prohibition and others very much notice and rail against it, such as Susana Kaysen in her work, *Girl, Interrupted.*

Kaysen does not necessarily directly connect to the idea of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is not a mother, nor is her own mother present, but the psychiatric hospital serves as a rejuvenating and inspiring source of renewal. The Virgin Mary may relate less

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motherhood. Much of the current drawing away from motherhood seems to be a result of the societal ideal and preconceptions regarding “women’s roles.” Earlier she notes that feminists tend to reject motherhood because of the traditional image and representation bound to it, and relates her own disagreement with a movement that ignores the “real experience” in favor of the fantasy.
to Kaysen's work than to the other writers' autobiographies, but the issues of the semiotic and the speaking subject are illustrated within the pages of her autobiography. The semiotic and Kaysen tie together in more of an allegorical way, in that the semiotic is realized through a discussion of her positioning within her environment. As Kaysen realizes her position within the hospital, her role as a child and her understanding of the mothering aspects of her surroundings, she begins to imitate the semiotic. The semiotic can only be imitated, and Kaysen creates her relation to it by means of echoes of connection.

In her life as a patient at a psychiatric hospital, Kaysen works within the limits of the boundaries provided, while also sliding out of those restrictions into a state of being outside typical societal borders. In her escapades, she confronts the abyss of language and comes close to a semiotic imitation; as Kristeva said earlier, "no identity holds up," and Kaysen's "rest" signifies her willingness to temporarily let go of the symbolic order so that she can return with a new understanding of her subjectivity. She relates that "I had an inspiration once. I woke up one morning and I knew that today I had to swallow fifty aspirin. It was my task: my job for the day. . . .And I could have done what I did do, which was go onto the street and faint" (17). Kaysen doesn't want to die; she desires a new identity. She nears the threshold of release, but at this point she is not prepared to enter into a new mode of language, one that Kristeva offers. As she later relates, the aspirin served a particular purpose: "[t]hey were metaphorical. I wanted to get rid of a certain aspect of my character. I was performing a kind of self-abortion with those
aspirin” (39). Kaysen tries to expel herself from her own body so that she can arise again to go through a process of re-birth and re-discovery in her recovery. If she can oust certain parts of her identity from her, then she may be able to reconstruct, and re-create herself anew.

Part of Kaysen’s disturbance with her former identity lies with her parents. Kaysen’s relationship with her real parents seems much less important than the relationship she maintains with the hospital because the hospital assumes the role that her parents normally would, as a pair of safe arms to go to, a home in which she can find security and safety. So Kaysen understandably seldom mentions her actual parents, and when she does, it is only in passing, such as when she tries to rationalize who a visitor may be: “[i]t wasn’t my father; he was busy” (25). Her father serves as the contact on all her forms, and must pay the bills, and yet the only real indicator of her feelings towards either of her parents is in a case study when the case worker notes: “[s]he is most extremely upset about her parents and their lack of understanding and she relates this to other people, and that they can’t understand or can’t be trusted” (105). However, obviously the loss of the bond between her and her parents has caused a trauma in her sense of what is right. The hospital then becomes a virgin replacement for Kaysen’s mother. She constructs the hospital as her idealized mother, her version of the Virgin Mary. She finds her “family” in the hospital, and the hospital itself acts as her lifebringer.

When Kaysen enters the hospital, she gives up her position in the world. She leaves the ordered and structured existence that she found in the outside world to be so
inhibiting. Kaysen describes a maze of tunnels under the hospital as an illusion of freedom, as somewhere to go and travel anywhere within their boundaries. And yet despite the boundaries, the tunnels seem endless, “like the essence of the hospital,” the essence of the being (121). Kaysen describes them as being “like the plan of something rather than the thing itself,” and the idea of something being planned but not finished appeals to her as a patient, for she is in the same situation linguistically.

The semiotic is not a site of ultimate freedom. It is simply a state like the plan of the tunnels, unfinished, and so it can allow for a different experience, although not necessarily one that is any more “free” than the patriarchal Law. The semiotic recognizes its limitations, whereas language frequently claims to have no limits. Kaysen places herself within the symbolic order with her linguistic representation of the semiotic, and yet not in such a defined way as “normal” people are. If the tunnels under the hospital are like a plan, they merely form a guideline and basis for exploring that freedom of possibility, whereas the body of the hospital is where the person actually grows and develops into a full human being, as she would in a womb. The tunnels may seem endless but she knows they are not. It is the illusion she craves.

The womb that Kaysen inhabits differs from what we consider it to be, as “warm and cozy and quiet” (121). Kaysen characterizes the womb, as embodied in the hospital, as a cramped, almost inhibiting place: “[y]ou can’t go anywhere, and it’s noisy, and you’re stuck. . .The tunnels are like the hospital without the bother” (122). If the tunnels are not the womb, then while in them a patient never needs to consider her development,
whereas in the hospital, she rarely thinks of anything else. While in the tunnels, Kaysen can lose herself; in the body of the hospital, she needs to reflect on her growth.

The womb is a comforting place, and yet there is always some anxiety attached to it because no one can stay in the womb forever. Moving back into the real world is just like a birth for these patients. Each time a person enters the world, it is done naked, as a full human being, and yet as a being not far enough developed to function without aid of some kind. There are other people in the hospital who have problems with reality, and Kaysen can sink into the comfort of the hospital environment, lie back in the knowledge that she is protected by the “womb”; she can be possessed of traces of a semiotic and become one who observes while surrounded by a shielding influence, as she realizes when she recalls that “[f]or many of us, the hospital was as much a refuge as it was a prison. Though we were cut off from the world and all the trouble we enjoyed stirring up out there, we were also cut off from the demands and expectations that had driven us crazy” (94). The patients all inhabit the mother in the form of the hospital, and find safety and comfort within her walls. Kaysen can lie back and float through the days because “[t]he hospital shielded us from all sorts of things” (94), just as good parents do when their children are unprotected.

As she notes, the patients are on their own, vulnerable. They need help from the staff: “[n]aked, we needed protection, and the hospital protected us. Of course, the hospital had stripped us naked in the first place--but that just underscored its obligation to shelter us” (94). Kaysen complicates the role of the hospital in that it is not simply a
benevolent set of parents ready to care for its children’s needs; the hospital is also the
creator of its “children,” and the patients themselves are in turn responsible for giving
birth to new and healthy people. And so the patients revert to infancy and the semiotic,
helpless and needing protection in the hospital’s presence.

Kaysen’s relation to the semiotic is one of traces and echoes. She helps us to
understand the semiotic, and yet cannot fully return to it; she recreates her language in
terms of her relation to the world of the symbolic. However, the split between language
and a loss thereof may be realized through Kaysen’s words. The semiotic cannot be a
“freed” condition; it is always experienced through the voice of the Law. Kaysen
experiences the Law and through it reflects a re-creation and imitation of the experience
of a child being born into the symbolic.

Kaysen introduces the semiotic as found in traces and eruptions. . . . when she
"began scratching at the back of my hand. My plan was to get hold of a flap of skin and
peel it away, just to have a look. . . . I put my hand in my mouth and chomped” (102).
Kaysen wants to express her feelings and concerns, but she, while in the hospital, is
unable to do it with words. She instead becomes self-destructive, and acts out in order to
get her point across. She, like all the other patients, needs the womb-like protection of
the hospital. She finds it hard to use language to tell her story, and so she appropriates
others’ words in order to fulfill her needs.

Kaysen’s inclusion of her case notes within her autobiography implies a
recognition that within the hospital, she has become someone “spoken about.” Since the
case notes also provide other voices and points-of-view, early on she uses them to tell her story, as seen with her own complete lack of commentary on the pieces. She includes the doctor’s evaluation of her on the morning of her admittance: “Susana Kaysen was seen by me on April 27, 1967; following my evaluation which extended over three hours, I referred her to McLean Hospital for admission” (13). She gives up power and control into the hands of others so that she can revert to her infantile state. In order to attempt to experience the semiotic and recreate her language and sanity, she needs to assume one of the roles involved with motherhood. She obviously is unlikely to become a mother, and so she alters her language and being by reverting to infancy and helplessness.

She later attempts to regain some of those moments of power, and therefore some more of her sanity, by disputing facts within the notes, such as with the doctor who diagnosed and sent her to stay in the hospital. She rationalizes within the language of the Law, using his phraseology, that he could not possibly be correct in his time computations, and it becomes very important that “[n]ow you believe me” (72), the “you” being her readers. She is creating her own version of what is real, regaining her voice and her position as one who has the ability to speak, to rationalize, and to be listened to by “normal people,” such as her readers.

However, in her return to the world, Kaysen must understand the coterminous relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic, and the necessary play between the two. She reminisces with an old painting she formerly identified with, and in the process
reveals a great deal of information regarding how she viewed herself, and how different she has become:

[s]he had changed a lot in sixteen years. She was no longer urgent. In fact, she was sad. She was young and distracted, and her teacher was bearing down on her, trying to get her to pay attention. But she was looking out, looking for someone who would see her. This time I read the title of the painting: *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*. Interrupted at her music: as my life had been, interrupted in the music of being seventeen, as her life had been, snatched and fixed on canvas... (167).

Kaysen is a much different person than she was before she "self-aborted," and she can see the painting not for how it is a reflection of herself, but for how it reflects who she was. Kaysen now emerges from the paralysis of her mental illness, of the painting, and gives up her semiotic language in order to give birth to her subjecthood and start anew.

**Iconic Mothers and Cycles of Motherhood**

The separation and distance inherent in motherhood most comes to view with the advent of the Virgin Mary, and in the ways in which mothers are associated with the Virgin. Kristeva’s Virgin Mary, while a humanizing presence, signifies a separation in the mother/daughter relationship because of the distance inherent in the conception of the Blessed Mother as an icon. As Kristeva says, “[i]f, however, one looks at it more closely, this motherhood is the fantasy that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory; what is more, it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the relationship that binds us to her...” (Stabat 234). Kristeva considers it natural to idealize the mother, especially because of the connection of mother with the Virgin Mary.
The separation of the mother/daughter relationship, or a similar one, plays itself out in several constructions of mother as Virgin in various women’s autobiographies, including Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. When Angelou clothes her mother in the garments of the Blessed Virgin Mother, she refigures her simultaneous presence and absence. As the Virgin Mary is incorporated into the text of motherhood, the distance the semiotic creates, and the difficulties in assimilating mother as love can be seen in the construction of individual mothers as the Blessed Mother.

Maya Angelou deals with motherhood in several different ways in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She features in her autobiography the influence of religion in her life, and introduces the Virgin Mary’s influence in Angelou’s understanding of motherhood. She also discusses an inherent lack in motherhood with the absence/presence of her mother, recreating her mother as a Virgin Mary; the intervention of a mother substitute in her grandmother, whom she calls “Momma”; and finally touches upon her own role as a mother. In bringing all these different angles of motherhood together, Angelou creates motherhood as a cycle. She must possess within herself another being in order to become complete, and to understand her own mother. The issue of discourse is also an important one for Angelou since she spends nearly a year of her childhood in utter silence, thus imbuing a special significance to the association she forms with language and with the semiotic when she becomes pregnant.

Angelou’s relationship with her mother took me aback when I first read *Caged Bird*. She spends much of her life separated from a faraway mother who lives in another
state, one untouchable and unreachable, her mother an alluring mystery, more resembling an icon than any typical mother. And Angelou throughout continues to form her mother as a being at a distance; Angelou holds her mother away from herself instead of trying to relate how she could be seen as a mother to her children. At the age of three, when their father shipped young Marguerite and her brother off to their grandmother’s home in Arkansas, Angelou recalls being known as the “poor little motherless darlings” (4), saddening the children, but also allowing them rich gifts of food from fellow traveling blacks. Being motherless in the South seems both a heartache and a blessing. They on the one hand receive gifts from strangers, but on the other, perceive themselves as rejected by their real nurturers.

Later, when Bailey and Marguerite receive Christmas gifts from their parents, the meaning of being “motherless” is further complicated: “[u]ntil that Christmas when we received the gifts I had been confident that they were both dead. I could cry anytime I wanted by picturing my mother (I didn’t quite know what she looked like) lying in her coffin” (42-3). Angelou had pictured her mother dead all that time, creating her mother as an icon in her mind, someone to picture from a distance, a mother to worship and revere like the Blessed Virgin Mary. In essence, though, the children are still motherless at the time of Christmas because the mother is still an enigma. She has no face, and though she can send presents, she is imbued with no real sense of body. The children form her body in their minds though, and institute the idea of her into their reverence. She rejects her children’s presence; however, as yet, she remains “our mother... who
lived separately in a heaven called California” (42). Angelou’s mother is still dead, though also not dead. She lives through her gifts and through the devotion of the children to the idea of their mother. The fact of her living raises all sorts of questions in Angelou’s young mind of motherhood, and what it truly is: “[t]he gifts opened the door to questions that neither of us wanted to ask” (43). Although her mother sends gifts, she is still absent, and perhaps is made even more distant by the fact of her being alive and well.

In setting up her mother as a distant ideal, and by maintaining that distance throughout most of her relationship with her, Angelou allows herself to reconcile her mother’s early rejection of her children. The rejection creates a silence between the two women, and a space across which they are unable to communicate for many years. Angelou relates her first reaction to seeing her mother years later as she says, “[t]o describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow... My mother’s beauty literally assailed me” (49). She is unequipped to deal with such a different kind of mother than Momma, and is unable to put her mother’s beauty and grace into words. Angelou’s worship here is reminiscent of a semiotic reaction since she is incapable of using her language to react. She therefore compares her mother to natural occurrences which involve power and an inspiration of awe that is equally difficult to express. Momma, who has acted as her mother for all of her young life, is nearly opposite to Angelou’s mother, and so Angelou, because of the separation, feels more safety in having her real mother be an icon.
The first things Angelou notices about her mother involve her beauty and her difference from young Marguerite herself: “I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children. I had never seen a woman as pretty as she who was called ‘Mother’” (50). Her mother is still a mystery to young Angelou, who only sees a separation between them, and who cannot understand their relationship, or the wonder in her mother’s beauty and grace. Her dazzlement turns her mother into a being much like a saint in her apparent perfection because “[s]he was so pretty and so quick that even when she had just awakened, her eyes full of sleep and hair tousled, I thought she looked just like the Virgin Mary” (57). Angelou immediately sets up her mother as an idol, a vision of the perfect mother.

Her mother’s blessed nature seems so certain to Angelou, and yet even in constructing her mother as the Blessed Virgin, she pushes her mother apart from her by exclaiming upon the distance between them: “[b]ut what mother and daughter understand each other, or even have the sympathy for each other’s lack of understanding?” (57). There is an immediate and obvious separation in that Angelou obviously reveres her mother, who seems like such a paragon of virtue and someone to worship, and yet her observation of perfection is marred by a negative remark involving the question of whether these two particular people can ever understand each other that creates more distance.

It is apparent that Angelou and her mother are at this point on very separate paths, and Marguerite, as much as she idolizes her mother, still only sees her as a superficial
being. The pain of being sent off is still with her, and she always retains in her mind the “threat, which was never spoken, of a return to Momma” (57). Her mother’s actual role as mother is in question or even wholly non-existent, although, and likely because she is an idol, or rather because she refuses to be one. She remains unavailable to even be worshipped. And yet the interesting subject involved here is the way in which Angelou prefers her own distant mother to her grandmother, who acts far more like a parent in Angelou’s life. Vivian is a distant mother, one whom Marguerite can worship, but cannot reach. As the Virgin Mary, she is necessarily so. Her mother as Virgin Mary shows the distance between the two women, and the absence which her mother has yet to fill. She remains an icon so long as Angelou constructs her as such, and in being an iconic mother, she fulfills a prophecy of emptiness.

Yet even though her mother is this “distant” idol rather than someone whom Marguerite can hug and love, she prefers the Blessed Mother to her own mother substitute: Momma. Even though her mother is far away, Angelou is created through her mother, a fact which binds the two closer together. The possibility of being returned to Momma is a “threat,” which Marguerite counters by finding another image of her mother once she is returned to Stamps, Arkansas. Her mother remains for much of her life an idol rather than a flesh-and-blood reality within Marguerite’s mind, and the “mother” whom she and Bailey find reflects that truth most vividly. They find their “mother” in the movies. Not only is the woman they find to replace Vivian Baxter on the silver screen, but she is also a white woman: “it was funny to think of the whitefolks’ not knowing that
the woman they were adoring could be my mother’s twin, except that she was white and my mother was prettier” (99). Not only do the children get to pretend that they are watching their mother on the screen, but they get to “one up” the white folks who watch the woman in wonder. In Marguerite’s mind, they also worship her mother, but without knowledge of her blackness, and this fact of their ignorance of the resemblance puts the children in a spot where they are superior to the whites, another step in the humanizing process, leaving Angelou closer to discovering her own subjectivity.

Their mother is again an idol, and they find her in a place where she cannot reject them as her own, once again the Virgin being admired by her children. And yet the Virgin Mother is a mother of love and acceptance, whereas their own true mother is one of absence. But here, the children are able to “possess” their mother, since they “watch her” without her knowledge and refuse to “share” her. Neither child tells the family, and Marguerite’s response to this secrecy is that it is natural: “[s]he was our mother and belonged to us. She was never mentioned to anyone because we simply didn’t have enough of her to share” (99). They can only have their mother in small quantities because she is again absent in her “presence.” They can make-believe that she is really on the screen, there close to them, but they know that it is only a falsehood to believe it fully. Also, the children are once again able to worship their mother themselves, and see her frequently, without fear of rejection, as we can see with Marguerite’s response to the films, when she says that “[t]he movie star made me happy. It was extraordinary good fortune to be able to save up one’s money and go see one’s mother whenever one wanted
to” (100). Their mother is once again within and without of their reach, paralyzed in the dichotomy of motherhood.

When Momma makes the decision to move the children out to California for good, Marguerite “didn’t actually think about facing Mother until the last day of our journey. I was ‘going to California.’ To oranges and sunshine and movie stars and earthquakes and (finally I realized) to Mother” (170). Part of her reluctance to think about seeing her mother is based on the guilt she feels for upsetting her mother’s life the last time she was with her, but most of it centers on the creation of her mother as an infallible idol instead of seeing her as a real human being. She sees her mother as graceful and sinless like the Virgin, whereas Marguerite has blamed all her problems on herself, as the sinner. Therefore she sadly makes sense when she says, “I was as unprepared to meet my mother as a sinner is reluctant to meet His maker” (170). Her mother is her creator, once again, and first Angelou sees her mother as the Virgin, ever-innocent and ever-pure, and next as a beautiful white goddess on the screen. The Virgin is pure and clean, and so Angelou’s feelings of sin and blame are easy to trace because she feels responsible for all the awful things that occur around her, such as her rapist’s (Vivian’s man-friend’s) death.

Within Marguerite’s guilt for the man’s death lies her silence. She begins to believe that people die when they talk to her because of her sin, and so her conclusion is that “I had to stop talking” (73). Once Marguerite makes this decision, she separates herself even more from everyone around her, especially from her mother. She becomes
silent in a search for silence, in a hope that “after I had heard all the sounds, really heard them and packed them down, deep in my ears, the world would be quiet around me” (73). Angelou pays much attention to the way in which she assimilates her silence. For nearly a year she listens, sucking up all the sound wherever she stands, and this attenuation to language, and her assumption of the role of quiet bystander results in an immediate isolation, and a permanent focus on words.

Living with her mother gives Angelou a sense of her mother’s humanity that comes from Vivian’s nervousness with her children and in her imperfections. Both children still regard their mother with a sense of awe and rapture, but they begin to see her materiality as well. For Angelou the time when this relationship blossoms the most is when she tries to get a job where no other black works, as a conductorette on a cable car: “[d]uring this period of strain Mother and I began our first steps on the long path toward mutual adult admiration” (228). An understanding relationship results between the two women as Angelou matures also, and as both regard the other as a real human being. For Angelou and her mother, a developed relationship involves the acknowledgment of their distance and difference, and an attempt to have a relation despite such a gulf.

The distance between Angelou and her real mother is clear in the fact that Vivian provides a “replacement” for herself. Marguerite idolizes her grandmother as well, but it is in a much different way than that in which she worships her mother. Momma is reachable. Momma is a pious and righteous example for Angelou to see, and attempt to mimic, and so Angelou’s “mother” for much of her early life is her grandmother, who is
Angelou’s religious guide. She teaches her young charge how to handle herself gracefully in a graceless world, and Angelou models her as Jesus. Momma also serves as Angelou’s mentor and example of a black woman in the world. Momma becomes, and perhaps later loses her role as Marguerite’s savior, just as Jesus seemed to among many disbelievers in his time with his crucifixion. Marguerite watches and learns from Momma’s strength and fortitude in dealing with different kinds of people, like the “powhitetrash” who frighten the young Angelou.

In watching some “powhitetrash” attempt to insult Momma with their vulgarity, Angelou learns that strength comes in many forms: “[s]he was beautiful. Something had happened out there, which I couldn’t completely understand, but I could see that she was happy. Then she bent down and touched me as mothers of the church ‘lay hands on the sick and afflicted,’ and I quieted” (26). Momma becomes a healer given Marguerite’s faith in her grandmother’s abilities as a savior. Angelou’s reaction to the scene was that “[w]hatever contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won” (27). Without fully understanding what kind of experience they had just survived, or why her grandmother had acted with the patience and grace she had, Angelou learns about faith and respect.

Momma’s “world was bordered on all sides with work, duty, religion, and ‘her place.’ I don’t think she ever knew that a deep-brooding love hung over everything she touched” (47). In contrast to Vivian, Momma at least gives Bailey and Marguerite an idea of where they can look to find love, even though she neglects to show that love extends beyond God into the individual. She provides a security for the children, one
which they understand is based in love, though they don’t see it. She never directly expresses love to Marguerite and Bailey, and for this they both fear and revere her. They see her strength, and know that Momma believes God is everything, and because of her devoutness, “through Momma, Marguerite absorbs values and concepts that make it possible to maintain and replenish a sense of self-worth. Through Momma, Marguerite learns to pray” (Braxton 190). Momma teaches the children to pray, and to believe, and is very serious and dedicated to her church. Since religion is what gives Momma her strength, she makes it a large part of theirs as well.

Religion and Momma are so intertwined for the Johnson children that they speak of her rules in terms of “commandments”: “‘Thou shall not be dirty’ and ‘Thou shall not be impudent’ were the two commandments of Grandmother Henderson upon which hung our total salvation” (21). She believes that “cleanliness is next to Godliness” and would have her “children” believing it too. Momma’s influence is a strict one, with no leeway in her rules and regulations. “Marguerite needs the values and beliefs these ‘lessons’ contain in order to anchor her identity. The knowledge and wisdom passed down through generations supplement what she reads in books. She needs the strength that this knowledge imparts, and from this knowledge she gains power” (Braxton 196). Because of Vivian’s absence, Marguerite would have virtually no way to form her identity were it not for Momma’s presence as a missionary providing rigid spiritual influence and guidance. Marguerite survives the problems of having an iconic mother because she does have a replacement. Kristeva would include a discussion of the symbolic link between
mother and child, and how this symbolic link creates a distance for an iconic mother 
because she will never be near. Vivian’s link to being a mother, despite the physical role 
as such that she ignores, is one which she may alter or remove as necessary because it 
seems less real; her motherhood is symbolic and only to be accessed when she desires it.

Momma receives respect from everyone and is the only black woman in Stamps to 
be called “Mrs.” As Angelou says late in the book, “[k]nowing Momma, I knew that I 
would never know Momma” (164). She imagines her grandmother to be a perfect 
example of righteousness, and God’s justice. It is all the worse, therefore, when she 
overhears her Momma’s method of “obliterating” the actions of a dentist who refused to 
repay a favor by use of “retributive sin” (164). Angelou has her fantasies regarding her 
grandmother’s actions as well as her mother’s, and this eavesdropping contradicts an 
earlier judgment Marguerite makes, when she says that she “crawled under Momma, who 
I knew for the first time was so good and righteous she could command the fretful spirits, 
as Jesus had commanded the sea. ‘Peace, be still’” (142). Here Momma is as blameless 
and as able to create miracles as Jesus was. And so Marguerite is provided early on with 
a “perfect” model after which to mold herself. Her view of Momma is altered by the 
experience with the dentist, and so her grandmother’s position as a savior is clouded by 
issues of reality. Marguerite can imagine and fantasize about the event happening in 
another way, but her proximity to both Momma and the truth prevent her from making 
Momma into a straight icon as she does with the other women. She may still idolize her
grandmother, but it is with an idea of her as grounded rather than raised up high.

Momma is idealized but not exalted, as is Vivian.

Much of the way that Marguerite views both her grandmother and her mother as religious idols lies in the way a child, especially one brought up under the word of the Lord, views a parent, or a parental figure; however, given the relationship within the roles applied to each woman, Angelou tightens her construction of her childhood. Her mother she creates as the Virgin Mary, while she compares her grandmother to Jesus. In constructing Momma as Jesus, a present figure whom Marguerite may worship but also be close to, and her own mother as the absent Virgin Mary, Angelou creates all the older women around her as iconic figures. She worships each for a personal trait that deals with her role as mother. And yet again Vivian is placed as the distant mother, the icon who must be worshipped from afar, while Momma assumes a much closer loving relationship with her devoted follower; Momma is near enough to lay her hands on her devotees, and is a being who can actually be reached.

Angelou creates Vivian as the mother of Momma. This inverse of the relationship places Angelou herself in a strange place; without a real location within the relationship, she is distanced, once more the outsider, related to the situation, but having no real place within it. She appears to be making a point for the distance of mothers, justifying their separation and split so long as there is another being present such as Jesus, who is able to be near enough to lay on hands. In such a convoluted construction, with

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7 I use this theory of reversal even though Vivian’s husband is Momma’s real child, not Vivian herself.
women in reversed roles, Angelou reveals the displacement she herself feels within the network of motherhood and creates a bridge to her own pregnancy, setting up the moment in which closeness with her child is forced upon her.

Angelou happens upon her own motherhood by mistake, and through the hiding of her pregnancy, she places herself in a false role, as the “guileless schoolgirl” (243). She keeps her future motherhood a secret from everyone but her brother Bailey, and makes her pregnancy into a secret ownership. The first three months of her pregnancy “were a hazy period in which days seemed to lie just below the water level, never emerging fully” (242). Angelou brings in semiotic elements here since she is unable to use language to describe what she feels. She doesn’t make the connection between pregnancy and having a baby until about the ninth month, but she feels the inexpressible parts of pregnancy, semiotic traces and echoes swirling through her. Instead of being able to describe her feelings and semiotic undertones, Angelou mainly mires herself in language, describing the nausea, the effects her pregnancy has on her life outside of her body: “[s]chool recovered its lost magic” (243). The semiotic is apparent in how little she is actually able to relate about her pregnancy. There are words for so little of the changes that she must anchor them in very real, outside occurrences and involvements. Soon, “possession became mixed up with motherhood. I had a baby. He was beautiful and mine. Totally mine... I had had help in the child’s conception, but no one could deny that I had had an immaculate pregnancy” (245). Just as her mother had been her possession, her child assumes that space, in not too differently a way. She shares her child with no one,
although she also ironically fears being close to her baby, resembling the way in which she secreted her mother’s screen “presence” away, and in how she kept her distance from her mother. Angelou is a mother unlike either of the two models she has known, in her attitude of being the sole “owner” of her son, and she takes pride in the idea of immaculate pregnancy. While playing on the idea of immaculate conception, with her insistence of secrecy during the pregnancy, Angelou creates a space for herself between the Virgin Mary and Jesus relationship. She sets up an additional place that involves a separate kind of motherhood than the two she experienced.

However, Angelou also has a fear of her child’s fragility: “[t]otally my possession, and I was afraid to touch him” (245). Her child is the first real thing that has belonged to Angelou alone. And so in her excitement in her possessing something, there is also a large element of fear. Her feelings of awkwardness and clumsiness return to her as she considers having to actually touch her child. Finally, her mother intervenes, bringing the baby to Marguerite’s bed one night, explaining “that he was going to sleep with me. [Begging no,] I lay on the edge of the bed, stiff with fear, and vowed not to sleep all night long” (245). However, sleep soon set in, and her mother returns to show Marguerite that she and the baby had curled together in their sleep. Angelou finally accepts her responsibility as a mother, relinquishes her fears, and with her mother’s remark, finds assurance: “‘See, you don’t have to think about doing the right thing. If you’re for the right thing, then you do it without thinking’” (246). Angelou circles back into being the child, and being taught by her mother before she finally moves into her own position as
mother, possessing her child and understanding the cycle of motherhood. Joanne Braxton reviews the relationship well when she relates that “from her mother, Marguerite learns increased self-reliance; she grows out of the passive stage and begins to think for herself, asserting herself through action, and forging an identity and testing the perimeters of her cage through brief encounters with exploratory flight” (198). Her mother is finally a presence, and Angelou proves to be not simply a possessor, but a presence as a mother as well.

Angelou’s motherhood involves a closer love than the one she experiences with her distant iconic mother. At first, Angelou also experiences motherhood as distance; she refuses to hold her child near. However, she soon holds her child near, both physically and emotionally, as something she owns, a being whom she both possesses and is possessed by. She will not remove herself enough to become a Virgin Mary figure in her child’s construction of her. Angelou relinquishes the desire for distance once she experiences her child’s life, and it is released not only in her idea of motherhood in her own relation with her child, but also in her relation with her mother. Angelou out of fear nearly enters into a similar type of distant motherhood that her own mother accepted, but once her mother forces her to sleep with her new baby at her side, Angelou wakes up, and as she “patted my son’s body lightly and went back to sleep” (246), she enters into a motherhood of closeness. And yet it is a far different kind of love also than the type she feels with Momma. Momma and Angelou’s relationship is one of child and icon, and despite the nearness of Momma and her healing and strengthening powers, she is still an
icon. She assumes the role of Jesus in Angelou’s mind and therefore there is always a modicum of distance, even while near. Angelou removes the iconic position of mother once it is she who assumes the role. She experiences a completeness with her child’s presence, and ends her first volume of her autobiography with the wholeness of her love with her child.

Parables of Difference Involving an Ironic Virgin Mary

In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette Winterson creates an ironic parallel between her mother and the Virgin. She makes it clear through the use of parables and through actual memories that her mother and the Virgin Mary are not identical beings, but rather that her mother sees herself as Blessed though the reality of her mothering is less than ideal. In setting up the relationship in this way, Winterson sets out a definite guideline and role for her mother and herself. Just as Kristeva discusses the humanization of the Virgin through Jesus’ presence, in her autobiography Winterson allows for her mother to be tempered in the end by Winterson’s own presence. Through the course of her writing of her mother and their relationship, and as Winterson matures through her autobiography, her view of her mother shifts into one where they each feel the difference, even if no explicit realization is made.

The religious aspect of Jeanette’s upbringing is obvious from the start, and its control over the dynamic between her and her mother is strong. From the very beginning, the relationship is unique because Jeanette is a foundling whom her mother adopted into
the family. As Winterson says, “[s]he had a mysterious attitude towards the begetting of children; it wasn’t that she couldn’t do it, more that she didn’t want to do it. She was very bitter about the Virgin Mary getting there first. So she did the next best thing and arranged for a foundling” (3). Her mother’s disavowal of sex is one that sticks with Winterson. Her mother, in her religiosity, wants purity and no mortal feelings. Therefore, she would adore having the role of the Virgin Mother, except that nature (and Bible history) makes that position impossible. And therefore, her mother begets a child in as pure a manner as she can.

In telling the story of her arrival, Winterson alludes to the story of Jesus’ birth: “[a]nd so it was that on a particular day, some time later, she followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage, and in that place was a crib, and in that crib, a child. A child with too much hair” (10). Winterson’s mother is not exactly the Virgin Mary, but she resembles the Blessed Mother in the story of Jeanette’s “birth” into her family. In telling the story, Jeanette creates her mother as a sort of ironic paragon; her mother is not to be unquestionably revered. She allows us to see the imperfections and flaws in her mother’s character, and yet there is still a part that holds the role of the Virgin: “[s]he said, ‘This child is mine from the Lord’” (10). The way in which Jeanette’s arrival from the Lord occurs does not involve conception, but rather an immaculate adoption.

The nickname her mother picks up creates her “Virgin Mary” status, as the “immaculate” mother of her child. Her nickname creates meaning and purpose because of its relation to her desire to be revered and respected. She picked it up when she sang
and played piano in the first year of the opening of the local gospel hall: “the Jesus Belle” (36). Winterson clarifies for her readers that her mother works to achieve a position like the Virgin’s and yet will always fail because of her attempts to force the role mainly by her attitudes, such as her disgust of anything sexual and the idea that Jeanette must become as Jesus was: a missionary to spread the faith. Her mother desires perfection and yet will never have it.

In the beginning, Winterson is molded by her mother because her mother considered Jeanette a gift. The purpose involved is to combat the rest of the world. This particular mother’s agenda and attitude towards people is like a corruption of the Virgin’s. Whereas the Virgin Mary recalls love, Winterson’s mother calls to mind vengeance and fervor. Jeanette’s role is not to spread the word of love and peace like Jesus did, but rather to “join her in a tag match against the Rest of the World” (3). Jeanette is created by her mother as a partner against sin and people uninitiated into their belief system, a “vision” of another missionary who would change the world. And in this vein, Jeanette’s education begins: learning to read from Deuteronomy and other parts of the Bible, being told “all about the lives of the saints, how they were really wicked, and given to nameless desires. Not fit for worship; this was another heresy of the Catholic Church...” (15). Her life is filled with fire and brimstone, hell, evil, and most of all, sin.

Sin becomes a large part of Jeanette’s learning, as her mother tries both to inform her of its presence, and also to prevent her from ever experiencing it. Jeanette’s purpose becomes to prevent and avert evil from reaching its destinations in people’s minds and
actions. Winterson makes her role as another Jesus, one who stops sin and shows people the Word, obvious from the first: “[w]e stood on the hill and my mother said, ‘This world is full of sin.’ We stood on the hill and my mother said, ‘You can change the world’” (10). Her mother’s idea of “sin” encompasses most of the lives of non-churchgoing people. Therefore, Jeanette is to become a missionary and spread the Word of the Lord, to be as Jesus was, and to try to show people the right path. And yet, according to her mother’s beliefs, and the Church’s, Jeanette is full of sin, and therefore full of demons. She has unhealthy and sinful desires in her lesbian tendencies with another young woman of the Church, and the Church’s response is to “cure” her of her infliction: “[t]hey started arguing between themselves about whether I was an unfortunate victim or a wicked person. I listened for a while; neither of them were very convincing...” (131). Jeanette is not interested in what the pastor and her mother see as the fate of her soul. She cannot see the fault in her actions because she says that love is pure. And according to her beliefs, “[t]o the pure all things are pure...” (123). She says that something becomes impure when it is corrupted into being so, but her stand on purity causes her to lose her role in the Church, and consequently in the society she knows.

Jeanette doesn’t much mind her social status as a pariah because as she says, “[i]f it had not been for the conviction that I was right, I might have been very sad” (43). Jeanette is not only an outcast among her fellow Church members, but also among her schoolmates. However, she rests still in the knowledge that she is in the right and that all others are going to hell because they and their parents won’t even allow the children to
take the time to learn about hell. Jeanette soon begins to develop her own sense of right and wrong outside the world of the Church and her mother, both of which follow someone else’s idea of morality. In her creation of her own ideas, Jeanette experiences her first real break from the Church, and from her mother: “[t]he sermon was on perfection, and it was at this moment that I began to develop my first theological disagreement. Perfection, the man said, was a thing to aspire to. . . ‘Perfection,’ he announced, ‘is flawlessness’” (60). In debating the validity of the preacher’s claims, Jeanette debates her mother’s profoundly narrow life philosophy, and lays at risk all the comfort she has known within the Church.

Winterson, as an author, however, develops a parable within her narrative to express the flaws in the argument of perfection that Jeanette can see. Winterson uses her writing abilities to try to express her feelings and ideas in a way that won’t conflict directly with her upbringing. She cannot express her beliefs in a straightforward way because it would conflict with her childhood, and so she chooses to mimic the semiotic with a look at the Church using indirect language, words not aimed straight at the hallowed institution, but rather at fictional characters and establishments. The semiotic appears in Winterson’s avoidance of a directed discussion. There is an obvious eruption of impressions and emotions, but she has trouble explicitly writing them on the page. Instead, she chooses to focus on the feelings that she contains and attempts to suppress, which question the morality of the Church’s order and its conduct towards its parishioners, through “fictional” parables.
The Church and her mother require perfection for the devotees and refuse to acknowledge anything less. However, as Winterson sadly and scathingly points out in her fable, the hunt for a perfect and flawless person results only in heartache: “[t]he woman was indeed perfect, there was no doubt about that, but she wasn’t flawless. He, the prince, had been wrong” (64). The prince’s advisors end up killing the flawed princess, and then die themselves by drowning in a river of her blood. As a parable, the story of the princess shows the faults in the Church’s belief system. However, through her first theological dispute with the primary influence of her childhood, Jeanette realizes that the gap between she and her mother is a fundamental one.

Because of her mother’s rigidity, Jeanette must spend much of her time being humanized outside the confines of the Church. The Church and the outside world, which Jeanette knows are different, although she thinks there still might be some human bond tying the two together, finally become two entirely different realms. She comes to see the complete polarity between her and her mother: “I used to imagine we saw things just the same, but all the time we were on different planets” (114). Unfortunately, the difference in opinion that Jeanette never paid much attention to begins to split the relationship between her and her mother much like a fissure in the land--for the first time Jeanette sees the extent of the distance. Winterson’s separation from her mother frees her while also being painful because Jeanette no longer feels inhibited by her mother’s core beliefs. She can see them for what they are, narrow and unyielding, and manage to understand them rather than believe that the fault lies within herself, as she reveals with the mature
remark that, "[m]y mother has always given me problems because she is enlightened and reactionary at the same time" (128). Jeanette sees the problems inherent in her love of her mother’s evangelical God and her love of the Church while she is not, nor will ever be flawless. However, given the parable she creates, she knows that being flawed is not a bad thing so long as she avoids the fervent advisors who are willing and ready to chop off her head.

Jeanette’s separation from any kind of life outside the Church begins early as her mother had cut off all her own previous ties, and Jeanette had none because she was adopted. Her mother finds what she needs by means of connections in her religion, and tries to make that everything for Jeanette as well: "'[t]he church is my family,’ she always said whenever I asked about the people in the photograph album. And the church was my family too” (37). The idea of the Church being all of her mother’s family reminds us of her mother’s identification with the Virgin. As John Ettinger writes in a Catholic Internet site when he interprets a scriptural passage, 8 “Jesus gave His Mother to the whole Church. . .Because the Church makes up the body of Christ, the Church shares the same Mother as Christ.” The Virgin is the mother for all of the Church’s members, and Jeanette’s mother assumes a similar position within her own Church in all the responsibilities she accepts. And so even though, in some way, her mother was holding onto her past and her memories with the photograph album, she also let go of them so that she could move on without inhibition and intervention from relations.

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8 John 19:26-27. “When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’”
Consequently, the church becomes the only relatives Jeanette has ever known, which is why her pain is so real when her birth mother comes to her home. Jeanette knows she is adopted because she found a stack of papers one day, and her mother’s response was to pass it off as unimportant: “‘formalities,’ my mother had said, waving me away. ‘You were always mine, I had you from the Lord’” (100). Until her birth mother shows up at the door, Jeanette never questions the Virgin Mary connection between her and her mother. Though she never physically inhabits her mother’s body, the relationship is present. However, when her “real mother” appears, the factor of inhabiting suddenly takes on more significance, although Jeanette and her mother disagree on that regard: “‘I’m your mother,’ she said very quietly. ‘She was a carrying case’” (101). Jeanette’s mother refuses to listen to any rebellion from Jeanette regarding their relationship. Jeanette’s mother makes a distinction between “real” motherhood, as involved with the raising and molding of the child, versus no motherhood at all, as she views the mere coincidence of carrying the child in the womb for nine months. The belief and acceptance of her position is what determines the relationship for her.

Jeanette’s relation with her mother is fraught with tension because of Jeanette’s aberrations in regards to the beliefs of the Church. Jeanette acts in ways incompatible with the demands for perfection and flawlessness from the Church, and therefore her mother betrays her not just once, but twice. In the midst of a Sunday sermon, the preacher demands, on account of her mother’s word, that Jeanette and her friend Melanie
give up their “Unnatural Passions,”\(^9\) and rid themselves of the devil. Her mother’s betrayal here is mild compared to the later emotional treachery, and this first merely results in the elders of the Church praying over Jeanette until she repents. Later, when Jeanette gets ill however, is when a major fissure happens.

As glandular fever strikes Jeanette, “there is no doubt that I would be welcomed back into the fold as soon as I recovered,” but her mother could not forgive, and

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\text{[w]hile I lay shivering in the parlour, she...found all the letters, all the cards, all the jottings of my own, and burnt them one night in the backyard. There are different sorts of treachery, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it. She burnt a lot more than letters that night in the backyard. I don’t think she knew. In her head she was still queen, but not my queen any more, not the White Queen any more (112).}
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In burning everything that has meaning for Jeanette, her mother crosses the line of interference, moving into the territory of deceit and betrayal. She creates the foundation for Jeanette to have reasons to leave and once again treats Jeanette as though she were a part of her—the inhabiting feeling of motherhood—creating the distance between them as more than one that results from Jeanette’s outside birth and existence. She loses her place as an idol for Jeanette; she is no longer the Blessed Mother who humanizes her child, but rather a mother without the ability to humanize, only to control.

Her desire to control and inhibit Jeanette becomes clear when she announces her belief that women should no longer be able to preach, and therefore removes some power from women because of Jeanette’s love of another woman, and Winterson’s response is one of disbelief and anger: “[i]f there’s such a thing as spiritual adultery, my mother was a whore” (134). Her mother has totally lost Jeanette’s respect by this point, in her

\(^9\) i.e. their lesbian relationship
sacrifice of women and lack of any support whatsoever for her daughter. The relationship between the two deteriorates further and quicker as they move in different directions, following different paths to the truth and creating greater distance than ever, finally culminating in an angry cry from her mother saying, “[s]he’s no daughter of mine” (157). Her mother’s denunciation only finalizes what has been happening all along, and serves as a grim and extreme example of the chasm between a mother and child.

Near the end of her autobiography, Winterson begins using more parables to express her feelings and understandings. She cannot do so directly, using the first-person as she does normally, and so she creates an imitation of the semiotic in the vein of Kristevan autobiographical understanding: “[l]et a body venture at last out of its shelter, take a chance with meaning under a veil of words” (Stabat 235). Winterson attempts to express feelings which are difficult to acknowledge for they tend to either repudiate all she has known, or reveal a deep love for her mother that she is unused to verbalizing. Necessarily an imitation of the semiotic since she can never fully recover it, Winterson begins to evoke creative imagery and tell stories that remove the reality a little distance from her.

When her mother asks her to leave, Jeanette knows that the situation, although difficult and sad, will not necessarily ruin her life because there’s always the possibility for change. She doesn’t know whether she can return or not, but she must move on anyway; she’s been given no choice. She relates her feelings to us in another parable within her narrative when she says, “[s]o at dusk you say goodbye to the place you love,
not knowing if you can ever return, knowing you can never return by the same way as this. It may be, some other day, that you will open a gate by chance, and find yourself again on the other side of the wall” (123). Jeanette must leave her home, the place she loves, the people she loves, without knowing if she will ever be able to return. And yet she cannot say straightforwardly that she is leaving home. Her creative powers must assume the dominant position in order for her to tell the truth involved in a painful subject. She uses her creation of the semiotic to deflect some of the reality of her situation from her.

Strangely, although Jeanette has related earlier that her mother was no longer her queen, she introduces her leaving with a line that easily ties in with her mother: “‘[n]ow I give you fair warning’ shouted the Queen, stamping on the ground as she spoke; ‘Either you or your head must be off’” (127). If Jeanette no longer sees her mother as her queen, her White Queen, then why bother refer to her as such at all? Winterson here brings in the bonds of motherhood, and the inhabiting nature of it. She reminds her readers that she and her mother, the Queen in her creative language, are bound together, and yet Jeanette herself is not mature enough in her understanding of her mother to relate such truth to us so suddenly. Although there is a great distance between the mother and daughter, still something ties them together that remains unbreakable.

Winterson introduces another parable within the body of her autobiography that involves a fissure between parent and “child,” and which culminates in the parent telling the child to leave. As Winnet, the girl in the fable, sacrifices herself for the one she cares
for, the wizard, her father, declares, "'Daughter, you have disgraced me. . . and I have no more use for you. You must leave'" (147). Winterson creates her mother as a man in her simulation of a semiotic rendition of her own life-struggle. In the body of the story, the girl entertains the idea of staying, and is told by a raven that her heart will turn to stone with sorrow if she stays. And so she leaves, but as she does so, "[t]he raven, struck dumb, could not warn her that her father had crept in, in the shape of a mouse, and was tying an invisible thread around one of her buttons" (148). Winterson relates her ties to home and family in a way that still leaves her somewhat distanced (although in a false way) from the reality of her circumstances. The semiotic surfaces to tell her ideas in the only way she still can, by using her creativity and indirectness to try to express the actualities of what is happening. Just as the girl, Winnet, decides to leave, Winterson makes her decision to do the same, and yet she too is tied to her home and her mother. She too leaves under the auspices of saving herself, and yet will return as she does in the end.

When Jeanette returns, she is able to understand her mother's ties to her religion and church. She makes the connection between families and furniture, both sturdy and both in sets, saying, "[f]amilies, real ones, are chairs and tables and the right number of cups, but I had no means of joining one, and no means of dismissing my own; she had tied a thread around my button, to tug when she pleased" (176). The relationship between Jeanette and her mother has run the gamut of emotions and drives. In the end, both realize the necessity of family, and Jeanette sees the undeniable bond that ties her to
her mother, and to home. She loosens the false distance she creates with her counterfeit of the semiotic, and acknowledges the ties of her home. Kristeva’s umbilical cord returns in a new way, as a string tied to a button which cannot be removed.

And so women write today, taking note of the notion of the maternal as separation. As Kristeva addresses, both women’s frustrations in the ephemerality of language as associated with motherhood, and women’s consequent silence and distance from the mother enter in as major focuses in discussions of the maternal. Kristeva’s Virgin Mary reflects and reveals the tension since she stands as the prototype of the mother we should all worship and revere. And yet she is a distant mother, one encased in impossibilities and dichotomies.

Traces and imitations of the semiotic appear in all three texts but the different authors change the way in which these echoes call out to us. Each woman assumes her simulation of the semiotic under different circumstances, and imbues it with different meaning. Kaysen imitates the semiotic in an attempt to reform, and re-create her subjectivity, doing so by means of allegorical connections with her location, such as when she discusses the network of tunnels beneath the hospital, and the freedom they provide. Tunnels are innately subterranean, beneath the surface of the land, such as the semiotic is submerged beneath the symbolic. However, too much cannot be made of such a relation because of the semiotic’s also simultaneous existence with the symbolic.
Angelou involves the semiotic while lost in her mother’s beauty, and also while pregnant with her own child. While she is pregnant, Angelou discusses the way in which days never seemed to fully emerge. Nothing seemed real; all was hazy, and she lives in a state of fluidity, experiencing all, separating little to none. The semiotic mimicry lies in her locating and naming other things around her rather than her happiness at her future as a mother as the source of her joy. She buries the truth, and cannot directly discuss her pleasure.

Winterson also experiences a difficulty in explicit discussion of a subject that affects her greatly. Winterson’s semiotic relation occurs within her use of parables to mirror her responses to what happens around her. She brings in her impersonation of the semiotic as she cannot directly discuss her emotions. To do so would be to fight against everything she has known and learned. It would mean that she is denying a part of herself, albeit a deeply snarled part.

The mother’s distance from her child seems to lessen at the conclusion of each of Angelou’s and Winterson’s works. Angelou better relates to her mother after giving birth to her own child, Winterson after leaving home and moving away. Both of them renew their relations with their mothers in some fashion. And so what does this mean for the Kristevan notion of an inherent separation between mother and child that remains ever-present? Kristeva’s theory would appear to be flawed, and yet perhaps the distance that is present is necessary for a time. For some people and some mother/child relationships, the time may be forever, but there might be something in the relation itself, in the fact of
having been tied to one another by means of the umbilical cord, that pulls a daughter back to her mother. It certainly occurs with Angelou and Winterson, and even though both of them know there is a change, the bond returns. For Angelou the distance between her and her mother lessens after she gives birth to her own child. My question with Winterson, because she is not a mother, and as she says, has no means of becoming one, is whether her lesbian feelings create a feminine stirring similar to the shift created by pregnancy, and if that stirring is what causes the separation between her and her mother to diminish.

In the end, I have come to the conclusion that the Kristevan abyss separating mother and child is not a non-negotiable one, but rather one in which the boundaries shimmer and shift. Certain types of feminine involvement and construction appear to allow for a refiguring of the immense distance between the mother and her child, such as occurs with Angelou and Winterson. If I studied further, perhaps I might discover a correlation between the ways in which the semiotic arises in women before and after the distance is lessened, but until then, I must simply suppose that such is the case.

As I rewrite and rethink my essay, I also come to another conclusion: mothers are not the focus at all. The important relationship is between a mother and a daughter; however, what I seem to discuss are the ways in which the daughter feels, thinks, writes. I use writings that invoke a mother’s presence, but they are written exclusively by daughters (Angelou brings in her own motherhood only at the conclusion). The

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10 I recall the earlier quotation I cite on page 45: “[f]amilies, real ones, are chairs and tables and the right number of cups, but I had no means of joining one, and no means of dismissing my own.”
relationship between mothers and daughters is one that is hard to separate into halves, but I discuss in my essay the attitude of the daughter to the mother, and the ways in which that attitude both creates the connection between them, and alters the relationship that the mother introduces. Motherhood therefore seems to be about passing the baton to the younger woman, about moving through a cycle.
Works Cited


