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"Some Unheard of Thing": How Incest Became Convention in Southern Women's Drama

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Abstract

Incest breaks our most basic rule of human existence; it is a taboo within every culture and one that is reluctantly explored, if at all. Yet, can incest become an accepted norm for cultures with a legacy of sexual abuse, a fear of outsiders stemming from war defeat and inhumane slave holding, and a patriarchal lawlessness that rules at all costs? Several decades after traditional Southern honor codes have fallen by the wayside, the aftermath of this code of ethics has affected the work of its cultural offspring. Southern writers cannot write within a vacuum, nor can they ignore the historical significance of this tormented region if they wish to be grounded firmly within the Southern genre. But what makes something a Southern theme? Incest has become a common tenant of the genre. Whether stated explicitly or subtly, incest in various manifestations is inextricably bound with the work of Southern writers and in particular, it abounds in Southern dramas. Beginning with the legacy of such female playwrights from the South as Carson McCullers and continuing through the works of Southern contemporary female playwrights Naomi Wallace, Marsha Norman, and Rebecca Gilman, incest as a Southern theme has become a dramatic convention. Southern female dramatists examine the deep-rooted effects of a region dealing with the aftermath of sexual abuse by connecting the desolate condition of the working class, patriarchal anxiety

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about one's possession of land and capital, and familial fear of "foreign bodies"——especially those that are black or homosexual——with the often neglected discourse on incest in Southern culture.

This piece shows how the fear of "foreign bodies" made incest something of a coping mechanism to keep Southern families feeling safe in their rural family lives. Research illustrates how incest, in some ways, became a cultural practice in the Old South connecting this historical fact with the occurrence of incest as a common theme in the work of Southern female writers. Focus on the dramatic form argues that theater has a unique ability to create a public dialogue about a private, universally taboo act.

Keywords: incest, feminist theory, Southern Literature, Contemporary Drama, Modern Drama

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摘　　要

亂倫破壞我們人類最基本的生存規則；它是所有文化的禁忌而且也是最不情願地被探討的。一個有著性迫害傳統、有著來自戰敗與蓄奴而對外來者恐懼心理、與為維持權勢不顧一切之父權式的無法無天的統治之文化，會不會使亂倫成為一種的一種眾所接受的常規？在美國傳統南方榮譽規範被棄之後數十年，這一倫理規範已對其文化後代的成果有著影響。南方作者無法在真空中寫作，如果他們想要紮實立足於南方文類之中，他們也無法忽略此一飽經磨難的區域的歷史意涵。但到底是什麼構成一種南方主題？亂倫是此一文類的常客。不論以直接或暗示方式，不同形式的亂倫與南方作家之著作密不可分，它特別充斥於南方戲劇中。從 Carson McCullers 開始，到當代南方女性劇作家，Naomi Wallace、Marsha Norman 與 Rebecca Gilman，此股來自南方的女性劇作家的遺產，亂倫作為一種南方主題已成為一個戲劇傳統。南方女性劇作家探討面對性迫害之後遺症對於一個特定區域根深蒂固的影響，藉由將勞工階級的悲慘境況，對於自身土地與資財父權式的焦慮，以及眾所熟悉對於「異體」——尤其是對有色人種與同性戀——的恐懼，與南方文化中常被忽略的亂倫論述相互連結，以便加以探討。

此篇論文對於「異體」的恐懼使得亂倫成為類似於一種處理機制，以使南方家庭在其鄉間家庭生活中感覺安全。某方面來說，研究

顯示亂倫已成為在古老南方一種文化作為，這使此一歷史事實與南方女性作家常見亂倫主題現象相連結。本文以戲劇形式為焦點論證劇場具有獨特能力創造對於個人私密的，普遍之禁忌活動的一種公共對話。

關鍵詞：亂倫、女性主義理論、南方文學、當代戲劇、現代戲劇

Incest breaks our most basic rule of human existence; it is a taboo within every culture and one that is reluctantly explored, if at all. Yet, can incest become an accepted norm for cultures with a legacy of sexual abuse, a fear of outsiders stemming from war defeat and inhumane slave holding, and a patriarchal lawlessness that rules at all costs? In an environment where plantation owners would sleep with generations of their own offspring, where one in eight Southern couples were related,[1] and where only a little over half of Southern marriages had no relation at all,[2] there is no question why incest became a theme in literature of the American South. Bertram Wyatt-Brown's study of the Southern "code of honor" argues that dominate Old South ethics, which were based on a rigid adherence to family hierarchies, undying duty to that same unit, and an obsessive need to maintain tradition to the detriment of the South's own people, was more prevalent in Southern society than any other group of the time; yet this "honor" often backfired as it bred the very things it sought to eliminate: "unjustified violence, unpredictability, and anarchy."[3] Several decades later, the aftermath of this code of ethics has affected the work of its cultural offspring. Like a colonized country that has since had physical force removed from the land, the decolonization process leaves behind a cultural "colonization" that runs deep. It cannot be erased over time, so, too, do the Southern writers, even years after the abolition of slavery and the breaking down of formal honor codes, work under a heavily signified tradition. Southern writers cannot write within a vacuum, nor can they ignore the historical significance of this tormented region if they wish to be grounded firmly within the Southern genre. But what makes something a Southern theme? Incest has become a common tenant of the field. Whether

[1] Kathryn Lee Seidel, "Myths of Southern Womanhood in Contemporary Southern Literature," in *The History of Southern Women's Literature*, ed. Carolyn Perry and Mary Louise Weaks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 436.

[2] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 220.

[3] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 61.

stated explicitly or subtly, incest in various manifestations is inextricably bound with the work of Southern writers and in particular, it abounds in contemporary Southern dramas.[4] Beginning with the legacy of such female playwrights from the South as Carson McCullers and continuing through the works of Southern contemporary female playwrights Naomi Wallace, Marsha Norman, and Rebecca Gilman, incest as a Southern theme has become a dramatic convention. Southern female dramatists examine the deep-rooted effects of a region dealing with the aftermath of sexual abuse by connecting the desolate condition of the working class, patriarchal anxiety about one's possession of land and capital, and familial fear of "foreign bodies"——especially those that are black or homosexual [5]——with the often neglected discourse, another direct link to the historical "silence" that occurred within proper Southern families, on incest in Southern culture. [6]

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[4] While Wallace, Norman, and Gilman use incest quite literally, McCullers examines it figuratively, which was more common the convention in Modern Southern texts versus the overt examination of the three Contemporary plays referenced here. Because William Faulkner's works——particularly *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom Absalom!*——deal with incest, and Faulkner is often considered the formative voice of the Southern Renaissance, this theme has pervaded as "convention" though female Southern writers have taken up its inclusion in their texts in a much more loosely signified fashion. Their treatment is varied and not nearly as valorized as in the works of male Southern writers.

[5] These African-American or homosexual "foreign bodies" are rejected and feared because they do not fit into the white, heteronormative master plan put into place by traditional Southern honor codes. The black body would not be able to own property and the gay body could not work to keep the patriarchal cycle of ownership transference functioning, as they do not fit into the institution of marriage.

[6] I am working with the classic Southern theme of fear of outsiders that appears in seminal Southern texts from William Faulkner's *Light in August* to Welty's *The Golden Apples*. In this piece, I show how this fear of "foreign bodies"——using homosexuality and anyone who is not white as a fixed reference to denote the outsider——in order to show how incest became something of a coping mechanism to keep Southern families feeling safe in their rural family lives and because of the pervading fear of African Americans that in many ways served to keep the slave system functioning for so long in the South. Citations from Bertram Wyatt-

From homosexual soldiers fighting both a war at home and abroad to young females who take an active role in their own sexual learning in a repressive Southern environment, Southern playwright Naomi Wallace is unapologetic when it comes to putting the grotesque on the stage. Rejecting genteel Southern conventions, her plays define a South that moves past the inclination to create Southern figures as stock mythic characters of the region while expressing what would be deemed unsavory by traditional Southern honor codes.[7] Regardless of their race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, Wallace strives to stage characters with real human emotions: multi-faceted beings who are not limited by their "grotesque" features. Still, even for Wallace's ability to dramatize what is often left unspoken in the South, the topic of incest is rarely breeched in conversation without some amount of discomfort.

Though Wallace does not always write Southern literature——often leaving behind traditional themes of religion, family, and the utilization of the Southern Gothic in favor for a more neutral backdrop for her work——she still claims Kentucky as fodder for her dramas: her plays exist on all continents and outside the boundaries of traditional Southern themes. In February of 2007, I corresponded with Wallace via email in regards to an impending interview. She remarked that I should read her first play *In the*

Brown's *Southern Honor* will further illustrate how incest did become somewhat of a cultural practice in the Old South. I wish to connect this historical fact with the occurrence of incest as a common theme in the work of Southern female writers. I choose to focus on this topic as it appears in dramatic form because of theater's unique ability to create a public dialogue about a very private, universally taboo act.

[7] This is alluded to in Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998). He discusses women in the South writing under an honor code that dictated their ability—or inability—to only discuss what would be considered proper topics by the day's standards. Discussion of any forms of sexuality, particularly homosexuality or miscegenation, would be unofficially prohibited or at least publicly decried under Southern honor codes, hence the fear of black or gay "foreign bodies."

Fields of Aceldama because it is very "Southern." Upon reading this work, I was struck by how carefully Wallace had cut any stereotypical Southern demarcations from the play, which is set in rural Kentucky. Her stage directions read, "*Any inclination to work from clichés such as 'backwoods America' etc. should be strictly avoided. The stage floor should not look 'farm-like' or 'real' in any sense*." [8] Though there was an overt attempt at neutralizing the regional culture of the play, something that I could not ignore was the unmistakable theme of incest that pervades the text. When I later asked Wallace to elaborate on her classification of this work as "Southern," she stared blankly and replied, "Did I say that?" [9] Considering her ability to break outside of traditional Southern themes——often creating her regional works to focus on issues of global concern——I was surprised for several reasons: Wallace's automatic connection with *In the Fields of Aceldama* as a Southern play; both her insistence and denial of the Southern stereotype──regional dress, accent, and incest; and her later disavowal of her earlier comment, choosing instead to overlook her own engrained Southern stereotypes.

This collective forgetting abounds in incest discourse. Why talk about it? Incest discussions are as awkward as parent-child sex education conversations: though we know it exists, no one wants to open the dialogue surrounding incest. [10] Later in the interview, Wallace strives to work out in her head why she told me to read this play as a Southern work. She remarks, "It was my first play and I allowed it to be more overtly Southern. There are

[8] Naomi Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama,* in *Best of the Fest: A Collection of New Plays Celebrating 10 Years of London New Play Festival*, ed. Phil Stren (London: Aurora Metro Press, 1999), 220.

[9] Naomi Wallace, interview with author, North Yorkshire, England, July 2007.

[10] Despite numerous references——overt and covert——to incest in Southern writing, it is only discussed peripherally, rarely listed in the index of seminal Southern scholarly texts, and the word "incest" is almost never placed on the exterior flap of the book; it is instead relegated to the private confines of the interior page.

certain games that they play and the singy-songyness …Of course there is that possibility of incest between the father and the daughter…"[11] Though she could not quite pinpoint her own classification of this play as Southern, she quickly interjected——before trailing off——that there is incest in the play. To call it a "possibility" of incest, however, is vulgarly understated. Why blame her for this elusiveness? Who would want to claim incest as a tenet of one's regional existence? As palpable the evidence, incest in Wallace's work is paradoxically erased from any connections to this play, even by her own admittance.

In the Fields of Aceldama is the story of a couple, Mattie and Henry, who are dealing with the death of their teenage daughter, Annie, while working to survive in an economic system that nearly destroys them. Like Wallace, the description on the back cover of the anthology from London's New Play Festival does not mention or even allude to incest in the play. In scenes that include Annie appearing as a ghost or a memory of the past, we learn of the type of relationship that existed between the trio. Henry's first line in the play says, "I never touched the child. But a person has a right you know."[12] This initial speech introduces the concept of possession that went along with patriarchal Southern society. Patricia Yaeger notes that possession is something highly advocated in the contemporary Western world, but possession in the South was something that could only be claimed by the white male ruling party. She goes on to connect historical property ownership—plantations and the slaves that worked them—to the aftermath of this belief system in the contemporary South where this "residual effect [is] contaminating perceptions about who is and who gets to possess property." [13] Minrose Gwin reiterates the Southern father's inclination to commit acts of

[11] Naomi Wallace, interview with author, North Yorkshire, England, July 2007.

[12] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama,* 223.

[13] Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 210-2.

incest on female family members because of the cultural expectations of land and property ownership that existed within Southern society.[14] This means that Annie, though she is white, is a poor girl who would not have the ability to lay claim to any property, and by proxy, even her own body becomes possessed by her father who has the power ownership. Henry is not economically empowered, nor does he have a reputation of respect in his community as a middle-aged, balding farmer—his baldhead being reiterated throughout the play as one of his mocked sexual powers. Yet, he does have the right to claim ownership due to his status as a white male. His interaction with Annie is suspect because of his insistence from the very beginning that he did nothing wrong. When Mattie leaves the house, Henry gives Annie a dancing lesson:

> Henry: Where's your mother?
> Annie: At the store.
> Henry: Ok then, but don't tell her I taught you…(*he takes Annie in his arms…they turn slowly awkwardly…*)
> Annie: It's too tight…Too tight. Let go…It hurts my ribs.
> Henry: See my leg? (*grabs it*) It's mine. My arm? (*grabs arm*) The same. Your ribs are mine. Your leg is mine.[15]

Henry's status as lower class leaves him wanting to possess something, and Annie is the weakest and most accessible to him. His declaration of ownership over her body further illustrates the Southern tradition of patriarchal custody. At one point, Henry even suggests that Annie, a sixteen-year-old at the time, should marry a forty-year-old man so that Henry might be

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[14] Minrose Gwin, "Nonfelicitous Space and Survivor Discourse: Reading the Incest Story in Southern Women's Fiction," in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, ed. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 417.

[15] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 237-8.

able to purchase his land. [16] Henry intends to proffer Annie as a human-dowry for her own marriage. She will simply be traded to another "father" who will continue the cycle of abuse. This trade agreement would not only secure his rights to negotiate Annie, but it could potentially better his socio-economic status, making Annie a valuable commodity. He says, "If I had that piece of land I could make something of this farm. I could be a respectable citizen." [17] The only thing he "owns" as it is now is his daughter. He reminds her that her body is his, and only he has the right to do what he wants with it; whether it is molestation or bartering, Annie is assumed his property.

In a dramatic double-entendre, Henry speaks of the dangers all around them from the enemies with which they are at war. Wallace notes, "*The 'Enemy' referred to in the play is whatever people or nation in the world happens to be at odds with United States foreign policy*,"[18] leaving the war somewhat ambiguous and dependent upon the time in which it is produced. Wallace has stated her belief that what happens in one country——war, economic discord, and violations of human rights——can affect what happens in small-town Kentucky. The two are not separate. [19] Henry's speech is also delivered as a warning for Annie to not do too much touching at her upcoming school dance. Henry says, "If we don't watch out for each other, foreign things are going to take over. Foreign bodies." This speech leads to a game of horse-y where Henry says, "Sit on my knee. Come on. (*Annie does so, reluctant but also relieved*) Now, who was your first and favourite horse?" Annie cheers, "Daddy!" Wallace writes, "*Henry begins to buck his legs about. Annie balances*." [20] Annie is about to go out of the home and into the world where she will be surrounded by threats to her father's power: other males who may want to possess her, seduce her, or touch her. His fear of "foreign

[16] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 242.

[17] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 242.

[18] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 220.

[19] Wallace, interview with author, North Yorkshire, England, July 2007.

[20] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 238.

bodies" not only stems from this anxiety about his position as the keeper of Annie's body, but also from his own limited propriety in life. Wallace suggests that incest connects to our own socio-political existence as figures that have been cultivated to believe that the enemy can invade and usurp power at any given moment. One's best protection lies within those that spring from one's own blood, hence the pervading anxiety in the Old South to keep one's family safe and away from the outside world, which could be anyone not white or anyone not Southern. In answer to the inordinate amount of incestuous pairings in the Old South, Wyatt-Brown quotes a poor white Kentuckian as saying, "I just felt practically every body *not* related to us, all those that wasn't relate to us and mixed up with us, was *against* us." [21] It is no wonder, however, that Henry's abuse of Annie, though she is both hypnotized and repulsed by his behavior, leads inadvertently to her death. If Annie's father was her first and favorite horse, it is her next favorite horse, literally, that kills her when she is thrown from it and kicked while riding. In essence, her father's fear of a "foreign body" taking dominion over Annie has come to fruition. Quite possibly this is at the heart of Wallace's unconscious belief that this play is overtly "Southern." Kreyling points to the fact that Southern literature has traditionally been concerned with an overwhelming anxiety about outsiders invading Southern spaces. [22]

Annie's mother, Mattie, also appears to have grown up in an abusive home. The first indication is Mattie's account of her sister, Tara, who would systematically seduce her as a child, overtly sexual behavior that is not uncommon for children of abuse. Mattie says:

> She used to take her clothes off in front of me…Just like my Father, my sister would make me watch her…She'd put a tune on the radio and then she'd start brushing her hair…Then she'd undress and brush her hair some more…She'd start going over her body with the brush,

[21] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 222.

[22] Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature*, 171.

> brushing it up and down her skin. It made me sick to watch her moaning and groaning and brushing and brushing. And then she'd marry the brush…And when Tara was finished she'd call me a dirty little girl for spying on her. [23]

While this recollection is taking place, Annie begins to "*touch herself, as a child might, who is exploring her body for the first time*." [24] Annie takes part in her mother's memory of the incestuous voyeurism, repeating only what seems natural to her. Mattie also briefly recalls an incident with her father: "But I'd say to my father: I won't watch you, but he'd make me watch…And then I got my period." [25] Her abuse is typified by a non-physical exploitation that repeated within her own sibling relationship and with Annie. Mattie suggests that her coming of age occurred concurrent with the voyeurism forced by her older sister and her father. Even Henry, like her father, becomes her abuser when he says, "I can make you a little girl again. Smooth as a baby, smooth as our own little girl." [26] After losing Annie, Henry's only ownership is now transferred to Mattie. He wants her to assume the role of the "little girl" so as to make her more vulnerable and more susceptible to possession. Mattie, whose tormented relationship with her own father transferred into her marriage, inevitably acts as Henry's child after Annie's death because she cannot separate her sexual feelings between the two ruling males in her life. Wyatt-Brown comments on this unique familial task whereas a Southern bride must find a way to move physically and mentally from her father's house to her husband's house, though the relationship dynamics rarely changed very much between the two homes. [27] This passage illustrates Mattie struggle to make this transition while attempting to "pass the torch" of sorts to her own

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[23] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 233-4.

[24] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 233.

[25] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 253.

[26] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 254.

[27] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 272.

daughter who will have to eventually move through this same cycle of "ownership" transfer.

Mattie's interaction with Annie goes inappropriately beyond the bond of mother and child when she attempts to make Annie into an interim lover to combat her own failed marriage. Mattie and Annie play a game where they scratch each other's arms "*violently yet sensuously*." [28] This game occurs at points in the text where they stand facing one another and deliberately carry out these acts until the sensation comes to a head. Mattie's own mother, Lulu, taught this game to her. Mattie also teaches Annie that masturbation is the only way for a woman to please herself, [29] and she tells her about she and Henry's wedding night together, [30] conversations about sexuality that are unabashedly spoken as if they were occurring between intimate partners. Mattie, however, exhibits the same fear of "foreign bodies" as Henry. She notices a pool of urine on the stage that belongs to Annie. Wallace writes, "[she] *bends to touch it, then licks her finger, as though testing the urine for something*." [31] She is like an animal reassuring that it is her daughter and not an imposter. If Henry is disenfranchised, then Mattie is even more so; as a poor woman in a loveless marriage, her only power exists when she can exert it over Annie by taking up a "male" role. Her daughter is under her spell. In classic Southern anxiety, Henry and Mattie believe that they have nothing to trust in the outside world. All it brings is war, destruction, and socio-economic struggle.

Shannon Baley writes about Wallace's inevitable connections in her play between the erotic and the socio-political. She states, "Each of these plays gestures to apocalypse…these apocalypses exist on the edge of utopia, a

[28] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 244.

[29] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 245.

[30] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 252.

[31] Wallace, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, 234.

place where death and desire coexist…" [32] Though the interaction between Mattie and Henry with their daughter Annie is not only incestuous and abusive, it is presented in a fashion that is ambiguously erotic as if we are meant to determine the reasoning behind such a *functioning* dysfunctional family structure. It only seems natural to Mattie and Henry to place their interests within the confines of their home and to expend energy on a product that they know they can trust: Annie, their offspring. Everything else could potentially kill them. In the end, however, it is Annie who dies when she ventures away from the house to go riding alone. Somehow, despite their greatest efforts, the outside world comes to them.

This same irrational anxiety about outsiders abounds in *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers (1917-1967). In this story, twelve-year-old Frankie becomes enamored with her brother Jarvis, and his fiancé, Janice, when they announce their plans to marry. She fantasizes that they will take her with them and become a happy family. The opening scene shows Frankie gazing in adoration at the couple. She says to Janice, "It was such a surprise when Jarvis wrote home you are going to be married." Janice responds, "I hope it wasn't a bad surprise." Frankie says, "Oh, Heavens no! (*with great feeling*) As a matter of fact…(*She strokes Janice's shoes tenderly and Jarvis' army boot.*) If only you knew how I feel." [33] She knows that something inside of her feels different when she sees the two of them together, but her innocence does not allow her to pinpoint her feelings. She says, "Oh I can't understand it! The way it all just suddenly happened…I have never been so puzzled…They are so beautiful." [34] She wishes to change her name to Jasmine so as to be in lilting consonantal harmony with their names. [35] She eventually declares, "I know that the bride and my brother are the 'we' of me. So I'm

[32] Shannon Baley, "Death and Desire, Apocalypse and Utopia: Feminist Gestus and the Utopian Performative in the Plays of Naomi Wallace," *Modern Drama* 47, no. 2 (2004): 238-9.

[33] Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding* (New York: New Directions, 1951), 3-4.

[34] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 12.

[35] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 26.

going with them, and joining with the wedding…I love the two of them so much and we belong to be together." [36] Frankie does not realize at this point the unlikelihood of her own fantasy, nor does she understand how this improbable relationship will eventually relate to the unjust love laws that constrict everyone around her.

Berenice, Frankie's black maid and mother figure, attempts to teach Frankie about the taboo nature of her obsession with Jarvis and Janice. Berenice says, "If you start out falling in love with some unheard-of thing like that, what is going to happen to you? …So what will become of you?" [37] She understands the implications of Frankie's actions. Gary Richards remarks on the double nature of Frankie's fantasy. Not only is the incest perceived as taboo, Frankie's by-proxy relationship with Janice would also be forbidden as an act of homosexuality, and this threesome would counteract the expected monogamy that accompanies traditional marriage laws. [38] Frankie's obsession further escalates until the reality of the situation is driven home at the same moment that everything else in the play begins to fall apart.

As Frankie's fantasy slowly dissipates in the wake of reality, McCullers's depicts how Frankie's incestuous feelings are the *least* unnatural things about her situation. Though her longing to be a part of the couple, to attend their honeymoon and live with them, breaks social rules, it cannot compare to the inhumane actions of Frankie's surrounding environment in the 1940s American South. Race, homophobia, and class are all issues that Frankie strives to ignore until the reality of her brother and sister-in-law's departure after the wedding becomes wholly apparent.

Frankie herself breaks gender norms through her appearance and her actions. She is a lanky girl with a close-buzzed haircut. Even her name is

[36] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 52.

[37] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 80.

[38] Gary Richards, *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 188.

gender-neutral. Like McCullers herself, Frankie is somewhat androgynous and she enjoys writing plays about crooks and cowboys. Janice asks, "Do you ever have romances?" Frankie responds, "…I had crook shows for the most part. You see I never believed in love until now. [*Her look lingers on Janice and Jarvis*…]." [39] When her best female friend moves away from town, Frankie is dejected. Her brother's engagement to Janice allows her to dream about happiness again in a safe environment with someone who comes from within her social structure and is therefore, not threatening.

Even Frankie's friend John Henry does not adhere to heteronormative male behavior. When Frankie gives John Henry a doll that she received from Jarvis instead of a prize from Alaska, John Henry says, "You serious when you give me this? [*He pulls up the doll's dress and pats her*.] I will name her Belle". [40] He plays "mommy" to the doll and "*holds out an imaginary skirt and begins to skip around the room with one finger resting on the top of his head*." [41] Both of the children do not recognize their own social "flaws," but they slowly become aware of the rules that dictate their ability to touch and be touched by certain others.

Berenice tells the children about all of the other "unnatural" pairings she has known: men who loved ugly women, women who loved evil men, and men who loved other men. She tells the story of Lily Mae Jenkins, a transvestite who fell in love with a man and turned into a girl. [42] Frankie is incredulous. She cannot believe that there ever was such a person. John Henry innocently asks, "How did that boy change into a girl? Did he kiss his elbow? [*He tries to kiss his elbow*]." [43] McKinnie and Dews describe Berenice's reasoning behind relaying this tale: "Berenice seems to associate

[39] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 8-9.

[40] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 27.

[41] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 28-9.

[42] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 56-7.

[43] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 58.

what Frankie wants to do with what Lily Mae has done because both are considered unacceptable behavior by society." [44] Frankie later tells Berenice about an incident that happened while she was in town. She says:

> I was walking along and I passed two stores with a alley in between. The sun was frying hot. And just as I passed this alley, I caught a *glimpse* of something in the corner of my left eye. A dark double shape. And this glimpse brought to my mind——so sudden and clear——my brother and the bride that I just stood there and couldn't hardly bear to look and see what it was…Then I turn slowly and look. And you know what was there? …It was just two colored boys. That was all. But it gave me such a queer feeling. [45]

This account, though Frankie does not understand it, is something that Berenice immediately comprehends. Frankie has connected all of the past weeks' events in her mind. She knows that her love for Jarvis is forbidden because it is an act of incest, as is her love for Janice because it would be akin to Lily Mae Jenkins becoming a girl——an act of homosexuality. It is no small leap to compare Jarvis and Janice to two black boys because the pairings are equally prescribed love laws to which Frankie must conform. She could not, at least in her culture, love any of these people for fear of social repercussions.

As if Frankie intuits the danger of entering the socio-political sphere, it is only natural that she finds comfort in her love for her brother. Jarvis is from the same space as Frankie: the same home and the same womb. Keeping safe within the confines of her home, and working from a home-life where the

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[44] Betty E. McKinnie and Carlos L. Dews, "The Delayed Entrance of Lily Mae Jenkins: Queer Identity, Gender Ambiguity, and Southern Ambivalence in Carson McCuller's *The Member of the Wedding*," in *Southern Women Playwrights: New Essays in Literary History and Criticism*, ed. Robert L. McDonald and Linda Rohrer Paige (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 65.

[45] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 72.

father is nearly always absent or at least insufficient as a parent, and the mother died giving birth to her daughter, Frankie finds in Jarvis and Janice a love that will also mimic that of parental figures. Wyatt-Brown examines brother-sister relationships that flourished under a complicated system of familial ethics. He states, "The system of honor or, to use the more familiar terms, patriarchy and womanly subordination, engendered these emotions as a way to cope with the process of maturing. Wherever fathers exercised their right to rule——and to be free——children were likely to see in each other idealizations that were a comfort to them both." [46] Unfortunately, as Wyatt-Brown comments, girls grew into women who found that their husbands were much more like the overbearing fathers from their childhood than the sibling with which she was so affectionate. [47]

Frankie's situation is unique, if not more problematic, because of the early death of her mother and her rarely present father. Frankie says, "Jarvis remembers mother…and I don't remember her at all." [48] Her father works incessantly and has little interaction with Frankie. She thinks aloud, "Sometimes I wonder if papa loves me or not?" [49] When the temporary security of this parental bond is removed——security brought on by Jarvis and Janice's presence due to the impending wedding——Frankie's environment collapses. Seidel's work corroborates this problematic father-daughter bond where the intimacy between the two can become heightened in a house where the mother has died in childhood or from some disease. [50] The only difference in this play is that Jarvis has become the stand-in parent for the father.

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[46] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 253.

[47] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 253.

[48] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 36.

[49] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 54.

[50] Kathryn Lee Seidel, "Myths," 430.

After the wedding, Frankie makes preparations to leave, giving away her costumes to John Henry and bidding adieu to various spaces in the house. As the bride and her brother move to leave, Frankie shouts, "*We*! When you say *we*, you only mean you and Jarvis. And I am not included." [51] She is determined to go away, and her next plan is to dress like a boy and join the Merchant Marines, [52] another nod to her male-gendered proclivities. A storm escalates, and Frankie leaves with her father's pistol and a suitcase. When she returns, John Henry has taken ill and dies unexpectedly. Berenice's friend, Honey, a black male, has drawn a razor on a white man, and eventually ends up hanging himself in prison. John Henry was too *abnormal* to exist in the normal world, and this leads to his death. Honey commits an act that is considered against all that has been ordained: he steps out of his socially dictated space. Yaeger comments, "The South itself is in crisis, anxious about the end of the war and the advent of racial catastrophe, and its children are caught within a racial, homosocial ideology that demands terrible conformity to its norms." [53]

All of these outside influences only enter the house when Frankie comes to terms with the limitations of her love. She cannot be with her brother, with other women, or with men of another color. McCullers's inclusion of incest makes this taboo seem less so in a world where everything else is so broken. Why would Frankie's obsession with Jarvis be harmful if people can die simply for their skin color or their sexual preference? Incest here, as in Wallace's play, is juxtaposed against a socially and politically unjust system that harms from the outside. Loving her brother only seems right to Frankie. Why look further when things beyond the home can only destroy? More than love of a black boy or for someone of the same sex,

[51] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 100.

[52] McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*, 103.

[53] Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire*, 181.

Frankie's adoration of her brother would be the most accepted love in her Southern world.

Marsha Norman's work explores incest in much the same ways as Wallace and McCullers. Set in Kentucky, Norman's *Getting Out* is the story of Arlene who has just been released from a women's security facility where she has been incarcerated for the last several years of her life. Her former self, Arlie, who is shown in parallel scenes beside Arlene, haunts her throughout the play. When Arlene's mother appears in the play, we learn why Arlie was such a violent girl. Enduring years of molestation from her father, Arlene's mother refuses to validate the abuse that was committed against her daughter. Sally Burke writes in her in-depth study of Norman's play that this double consciousness is a way to effectively depict on the stage the identity anxiety that is experienced by a child of incest. [54] In many ways, Norman's play works to combat this split-self that Arlene suffers by allowing her to relive all of the ghosts of her past through Arlie's omnipresence until the final scene where the women merge and speak in unison: "Arlie, what you doin' in there?" [55] In the end, incest on the stage is still something only hinted at as the dialogue between Arlene and her mother will only move so far. As Burke notes, accepting Arlene would only mean that her mother would have to accept the reality of what happened to her daughter. [56]

While Arlene who is literally in her mother's presence will not discuss the incest, Arlie speaks openly like a little girl from outside the scene to her mother. Arlie exclaims, "Nobody done this to me, Mama…Was…(*Quickly*) my bike. My Bike hurt me. The seat bumped me." At this point, Mother

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[54] Sally Burke, "Precursor and Protégé: Lillian Hellman and Marsha Norman," in *Southern Women Playwrights: New Essays in Literary History and Criticism*, ed. Robert L. McDonald and Linda Rohrer Paige (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 111.

[55] Marsha Norman, *Getting Out*, in *Marsha Norman: Collected Works, Volume 1* (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1998), 58.

[56] Sally Burke, "Precursor and Protégé," 109.

looks into Arlene's closet, seemingly unaware of Arlie's comments, and says, "Filthy dirty." [57] While the child Arlie is frustrated over her own attempts to cover the abuse, Mother can only respond with something that she says to change the conversation. Yet, somehow her words effectively convey her true feelings. The fact of her husband's incestuous acts against her daughter is filthy and dirty, but she certainly could not say this aloud. Gwin writes that it is precisely the task of women writers to discuss incest so that there will be a space where it is safe to talk about the things we do not often wish to speak, [58] something Arlene and her Mother are incapable of doing even years after the fact. Seidel notes that contemporary Southern writers have the tendency to focus on "the mother who is still caught in the myth of southern womanhood and its pejorative effects on her daughter in leaving her vulnerable to the sexual desires of the father." [59] Arlene's mother has bought into the Southern honor code by allowing her husband to stake claim over her daughter's body. She either chooses not to intervene or recognizes her own powerlessness as a lower-class woman.

This refusal to speak and therefore name the crime against her daughter is Mother's way of dealing *without* dealing with the issue. Mother feels guilt; this is certain for the conversation escalates to the point of her leaving in anger, but she cannot allow herself to admit that she might in some way have played a role in her daughter's abuse. Arlie continues with her childlike disavowal of the act stating, "Daddy didn't do nuthin' to me…" Mother continues to speak to Arlene: "Your daddy ain't doin' too good right now. Man's been dyin' for ten years, to hear him tell it…" [60] Even as Arlie's outburts become more insistent, Mother and Arlene's discussion surrounds Arlene's hopes to regain custody of her son, Joey:

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[57] Norman, *Getting Out*, 14.

[58] Minrose Gwin, "Nonfelicitous Space," 422.

[59] Kathryn Lee Seidel, *The Southern Belle in the American Novel* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1985), 436-7.

[60] Norman, *Getting Out*, 15.

> Mother: See, now you don't have to be worryin' about him. No kids, no worryin.'
> Arlene: He just had his birthday, you know.
> Arlie: "Don't let Daddy come in here, Mama. Just you and me. Mama?"
> Arlene: "When I git working,' I'll git a nice rug for this place. He could come live here with me.
> Mother: Fat chance. [61]

Patricia Schroeder's work on feminist strategies in theater describes Norman's technique as a way to show the parallel confines of class and gender that confine both Arlie and Arlene.[62] Though Arlene is now technically free, her "freedom" is limited by her desolate prospects for a respectable existence. Her former work as a prostitute will give her more money, but her chance at gaining custody of her child is unlikely. Because her mother could not protect her from her father, she is quick to tell Arlene that children can only bring trouble. She does not believe that Arlene will be able to do the thing that she could not do: keep the child safe. Arlie speaks to an unhearing Arlene: "Wanna know what I know about your mama? She's dyin'. Somethin's eatin' up her insides piece by piece, only she don't want you to know it." [63] This "somethin'" that is killing Mother is her guilt, but before this can be revealed to Arlene, Mother pushes her daughter away, and refuses to invite her home for dinner. She leaves with the final line, "Don't you touch me," [64] as if the reality of Arlene's touch would reveal the evidence of her abuse. Linda Rohrer Paige comments on the relationships of mothers and daughters in Norman's plays. She writes that mothers who have an unsatisfactory marriage because of father/daughter incest become "tangled in strained and tortuous

[61] Norman, *Getting Out*, 16.

[62] Patricia R. Schroeder, "Locked Behind the Proscenium: Feminist Strategies in *Getting Out* and *My Sister in This House*," *Modern Drama* 32, no. 1 (1989): 107.

[63] Norman, *Getting Out*, 20.

[64] Norman, *Getting Out*, 25.

encounters with others." [65] In essence, Arlene's mother cannot help but blame her own misery on her daughter for the interaction with the husband/father that she was denied. Wyatt-Brown remarks on the dissatisfaction of Southern mothers——regardless of class—who had no way of seeing past their place as obedient daughter and then obedient wife; they knew nothing else, so they had no reason to want more. [66] There is indication that this is precisely Mother's problem. Living a life without agency or ownership——being owned from the day of her birth—why should she expect anything more for her daughter who is already "spoiled" by her abuse.

Norman's tale of incest goes beyond the idyllic longing of Frankie for her brother, and even the grotesque sensuality of Wallace's family, but she is still working within a juxtaposition between the external effects of the socio-political and the internal arena of domestic life. Mother arrives wearing her cab driver's uniform and she is described as "*strong but badly worn.*" [67] Her class——like the poor family in Wallace's *In the Fields of Aceldama*——has not afforded her respect or power. Gretchen Cline writes, in reference to Arlene's dismal situation, that the "social order of *Getting Out* operates on the basis of male domination." [68] This is also true, however, for Arlene's mother who is also subjugated by a patriarchal system. The place where she might hold some dominion, within the sphere of her domestic realm, has been removed by her failure as a mother and protector. Their father has abused both Arlene and her sister, but she still has two children at home about which

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[65] Linda Rohrer Paige, "'Off the Porch and Into the Scene': Southern Women Playwrights Beth Henley, Marsha Norman, Rebecca Gilman, and Jane Martin," in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, ed. David Krasner and Molly Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 399.

[66] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 126.

[67] Norman, *Getting Out*, 14.

[68] Gretchen Cline, "The Impossibility of Getting Out: The Psychopolitics of the Family in Marsha Norman's *Getting Out*," in *Marsha Norman: A Casebook*, ed. Linda Ginter Brown (New York: Garland, 1996), 13.

to think. She states, "Don't want no bad example." [69] To her, Arlene's status as a victim of incest marks her as tainted goods, and this is an influence that she worries will spoil her other children. Yet, she does not consider that they might already be caught in the same cycle of abuse.

Possibly this theme of failed protection is the counterpoint to father-daughter incest on the stage as appears in Rebecca Gilman's play *The Glory of Living*——set in several states throughout the Deep South. Lisa is the teenage daughter of Jeanette——a prostitute who solicits customers via CB radio to her Tennessee trailer. Though Lisa's father died when she was a child, and there is no clear indication of literal incestuous abuse, Lisa's mother creates a figurative incest through her sexual exploits from which Lisa can never quite escape. Like Arlene's mother, Lisa's mother does not question that there is any other way for a poor, Southern woman to survive other than to use her body like a commodity.

Jeanette, like Arlene's mother, has no stake in her daughter's virginity. Unlike the victims of male incest, it is as if the mothers have forfeited their rights to the daughter's bodies in an effort to pre-empt any post-trauma anxiety. Jeanette simply does not want the responsibility of being Lisa's protector. While Lisa engages in casual conversation with Clint, a man in his early thirties who has come to the trailer with his friend, Jim, Jeanette has sexual intercourse with Jim in the same room separated only by a thin sheet. Before Jeanette leaves Lisa with Clint, she says, "You can talk to my girl while you're here but you don't go tryin' to mess with her…I ain't sayin' that 'cause of some notion I got about protectin' her or nothing.' I'm sayin' it on account of how she went and hit a boy last month tried something with her." [70]

Clint——who will later become Lisa's surrogate incestuous father——recognizes that the situation in Lisa's home is unfavorable. She is

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[69] Norman, *Getting Out*, 21.

[70] Rebecca Gilman, *The Glory of Living* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1998), 8.

privy to all of her mother's sexual pursuits. Playing the gentle and sympathetic parental figure, Clint asks Lisa about her mother's questionable sexual practices:

> Clint: Your Mama always do that sorta stuff with you right in the room?
> Lisa: It ain't the same room…She does it but I don't care.
> Jim: (*off*) Oh that's nice…That is, that's nice. Come on an' take your panties off too honey.
> Lisa: I really don't mind on account of it happens all the time…So I guess I'm kinda used to it. [71]

Even when Jim speaks from off behind the sheet, it is as if he is right in the middle of the room with them. Lisa can only sit and stare at the television, acting as if nothing is happening to her. Intermittent between awkward silence and idle conversation between Clint and Lisa, Jeanette's screams break the consistency of the scene. Gilman writes, "*Jeanette shrieks*." Clint says, "She okay?" and Lisa responds, "She's all right. She's a screamer." [72] Later, when Jeanette and Jim's screams reach a peak, Lisa tells Clint, "She fakes it…She tole [sic] me." [73]

If Arlie was tormented by the literal abuse of her father, Lisa lives through a daily abuse by her unwilling participation in her mother's sex. She so clearly *feels* what is happening that she can decode her mother's coital exclamations. Stein references different definitions of incest that include not only physical sexual contact between members of the same family, but she extends this to include mere seduction of a child by a parent or parental-figure or any sexual act that must be "kept secret." [74] When Clint, opportunistically,

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[71] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 11.

[72] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 13.

[73] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 14.

[74] Claudia Herbers Stein, "Violation and Voice: The Incestuous Father-Daughter Relationship in Southern Literature" (PhD diss., University of South Florida, 1993), 41.

brings up Lisa's father, who died when she was ten, and asks her to come along with him, Lisa goes readily.

Like Arlene's mother, Arlie herself, and Lisa's mother, Lisa's childhood abuse renders her incapable of protecting her own children. Clint immediately becomes Lisa's "father" as he calls her "my little girl." [75] Though he is twice her age, the play skips to a few years later after they have married and had twins, of which they no longer have custody. She says, "Clint, I wanna see the twins…They're at my mama's." Clint says, "Girl, your mama's a whore. We did not leave them with your mama." [76] Lisa is confused as to the whereabouts of her children, and she soon forgets the conversation at hand. We learn that she "one time gave one of the babies a drink. Made it sleep for hours." [77] Because she is technically still a girl, and she has never had a model for mothering, Lisa is incapable of acting as the guardian of her children. The twins will likely become another generation in the abusive cycle.

Though Lisa comes from an unstable background in a home with a mother who would not act as her protector, she does not recognize her own indictment in the victimization of other girls like herself. She and Clint are living out of motel rooms and making their way through various states in the South picking up young teen girls who are runaways or who are mentally debilitated in some way. One young girl, who Gilman only refers to as 'Girl,' tells her story of abuse. Lisa asks her why she was in the home for girls, and she responds, "They put me in there for protection…It was this man my mama lived with. He useta come in the living room and make me lie on the couch and he'd put his fingers in me." [78] This "incest" from a parental figure haunts both of the girls who cannot escape this cycle of violence. Lisa repeats it and

[75] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 17.

[76] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 18.

[77] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 20.

[78] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 27.

the girl will be abused over and over again. In the end, Lisa is responsible for the girl's demise as she participates in the rape of the young woman; eventually killing her and leaving her in the wilderness, she does leave an "anonymous tip" about the body that leads to her arrest.

Clint and Lisa's next victim is Carol, a nineteen-year-old woman who is mentally challenged. She seems oblivious to what is happening, and says, "I done it lots with other guys. That's how I get rides home." [79] Carol indicates that she regularly trades sexual favors to gain access to basic needs. Though she has a boyfriend, he has been shot and left for dead by Lisa. When he later gives his statement to the police, it becomes apparent that he, too, like Clint, has been using Carol for sex. Carol does not seem to be aware of her compromised position, and she takes off her clothes without question. She asks Clint, "She your daughter?" and Clint responds, "Honey. That gal is my wife, thank you." [80] The age difference between Lisa and Clint is apparent enough for Carol to assume they are daughter and father, but in the context of the situation—Lisa witnesses their sex acts—does not strike Carol as being unusual. Clint says to her, "You know how to do it with your mouth?" Carol says, "I know that… Will ya'll give me a ride back home?" [81] Like a child, Carol innocently performs the duty that she is used to doing. She does not realize that Clint is taking advantage of her. It is no coincidence that all of Clint's exploits——Lisa, Girl, and Carol——are either underage or mentally childlike. He wants to be with little girls, and having Lisa at his disposal, a child of incest and abuse, is the ideal match for him.

Clint fears that Lisa will leave him—not realizing that as a young school dropout with two children and no resources, Lisa is already incapable of escaping her situation. Lisa is both Clint's child and his lover. Like a controlling father, he coerces her into trapping the young girls that she brings

[79] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 31.

[80] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 32.

[81] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 33.

home for him to rape. He says to her, "You're a goddamn baby. My goddamn baby girl." [82] Clint talks Lisa into the killings as a bargaining agent: her crimes will further serve to bind Lisa to him. In these acts, she murders women who are not unlike herself: battered, abused, molested, and socially disenfranchised. She kills them to the point of no longer *feeling* anything for them or for her actions.

When Lisa is finally caught, her lifetime of abuse——incest by-proxy from her mother's sexual pursuits and from Clint, her father figure——has turned her into a cold, unflinching, and socially stunted girl. The final scene has her playing a toy piano that she received from her father. Ironically, Lisa has inherited her father's possession, and though it is just a child's piano, it is the only thing that Lisa truly owns. Still like a child, her compassionate male lawyer, the one person who has not tried to abuse her, teaches Lisa to play "Mary Had a Little Lamb" as she sits waiting for her execution on death row. It took Lisa until the end of her life to find one person who did not want to take advantage of her, and to gain, in some small sense, ownership of a thing—the piano. Still, like the other poor females in contemporary Southern drama—Wallace's Annie and Norman's Arlie—Lisa's relegation to the "white trash" class makes her body even more rape-able. She repeats this cycle by surrendering herself—something that her prostitute mother did long before her—because she knows that a poor, Southern girl has no rights to possession, especially to one's own sex. Lisa's lack of agency leads to her inevitable demise.

Incest in Southern women's drama examines love laws——who can be loved or touched and by whom——while dealing with the tormented history of incest that is engrained in the Southern psyche and the cycle of abuse that still haunts the region today. Their work ranges from an incest that is somehow transformative in a system of violent oppression and incest that damages and repeats, creating victims that reenact the crime in their daily

[82] Gilman, *The Glory of Living*, 35.

existences. Naming these atrocities and putting them on the stage is a move that writer Andrea Nouryeh attributes to the Women's Rights Movement's fight against incest and the attention in contemporary media to such issues. [83] While many texts still only allude to incest, Southern female playwrights are bringing it out of the wings and onto the stage where it will be uncovered and explored. They are decriminalizing the victims of incest who have been forced to endure a double-defilement: sexual abuse and a silent aftermath. Their work serves to make this universal taboo a topic of debate within the political sphere of the theater. Whether positive or negative, underlying themes of ownership and agency that connect modern and contemporary writings about the Southern female body and fear of the outside world invading in on a "safe," Southern home have inadvertently made incest a Southern theme.

[83] Andrea J. Nouryeh, "Flashing Back: Dramatizing the Trauma of Incest and Child Sexual Abuse," *Theatre Symposium: A Journal of the Southeastern Theatre Conference* (1999): 49.

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