

Mères Fatales: Maternal Guilt in the Noir Crime Novel

I crawled under and hid and finally started exploring her legs and she snatched her dress from over me and said angrily: Your grandfather shall punish you for this;...he will do to you what he did to the ram;...and when she shouted at me that I would be fixed good, I picked up a big rock and hit her...

- Horace McCoy, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, 1948 (336-37)

It may be fanciful of me but I expect she thought she had paid. She had rendered up a heavy price: her husband, her freedom, a financially comfortable future, whatever of Francis she might have salvaged, Eden's devotion. She had given this enormous ransom to the Furies and I expect she hoped that they would keep away.

- Barbara Vine, *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, 1986 (194)

Both Horace McCoy and Barbara Vine are describing surrogate mothers who inflict damage on a child and who in turn meet with retribution. *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, however, centres on masculine identity, introducing the mother figure only to account for the psychic instability of the narrator, whereas *A Dark-Adapted Eye* is preoccupied with the breakdown of the mother figure's own identity. We will argue in this article that the coupling of "noir" conventions with an interest in maternal subjectivity has characterised the work of a number of female crime writers. Recent theories of maternal subjectivities (developed, for example, in the work of Jessica Benjamin, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Marianne Hirsch, Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy) have departed from the mother-blaming psychoanalytic emphasis of many earlier feminist critics, arguing instead the importance of recuperating the mother's

perspective and voice, of disrupting "narratives that silence mothers" (Daly and Reddy 5) and allowing the maternal figure to be humanised.¹ Our aim here is to compare male and female representations of "the guilt of the mother" in a range of crime fiction published from the 1940s to the present, and to analyse some of the ways in which an increasing interest in reclaiming the subjectivity of the mother has been reflected in noir crime novels written by women.

At the climax of *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, the narrator relives, with hallucinatory vividness, the primal scene that acts as an explanation of his psychopathic personality. The grandmother whom he has thought of as a mother had seemed to him a protective figure, shielding him under her "great capacious black dress"; as he begins "exploring her legs," however, thus approaching both the perception of sexual difference and her "true nature," she is transformed into a terrifying, castrating figure of fate. His consequent matricide is punished by two other women who also appear to him as avenging Furies: "Alecto", who symbolically emasculates him by throwing his gun away, and "Tisiphone", who shoots him, thus allowing him to return to the secure blackness "of the womb from which I had never emerged" (344-46). McCoy's novel, with its insistent and phallogocentric psychoanalytic Freudianism, is a particularly explicit example of the traditional noir thriller's representation of the dangerous power of female sexuality, a power which, in *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, is passed on from the "bad", phallic mother figure to the *femme fatale*. The narrator's discovery of his grandmother's destructive potential is all the more disturbing because of her duality - her apparent conformity to the opposing archetype of the "good" (loving, nurturing) mother. As in many other noir thrillers, glimpses of the good mother are fleeting and deceptive: the world depicted is one of exile from all such providers of comfort and nourishment; where maternity is figured, the mothers generally turn out to be sexually desired but forbidden, possessive and obsessed, or masculine and punishing. The guilty mothers of male noir - for example, Ma Jarrett in Raoul Walsh's 1949 film *White Heat*, Norma Bates in Robert

Bloch's and Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1959/60), Lilly Dillon in Jim Thompson's *The Grifters* (1963) - are by no means wholly unsympathetic characters, any more than is the *femme fatale*², but their function is above all as objects in the subject-formation of their children, characters in the background whose "sins" constitute an explanation of their psychologically damaged offspring.

Vine's *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, like McCoy's novel, exhibits many of the characteristics of what one might call "a-heroic noir", in which the protagonists do not act to "reconstitute order" (Klein 123) but are themselves victims or perpetrators: in both Vine and McCoy, murderer and murderess alike are victims, and (as often in male noir) the protagonist is in fact the perpetrator; the normal world is shown to be vulnerable and easily disrupted; there are no clear distinctions between guilt and innocence; love ends in crime and death; the resolution is ambiguous and irony is pervasive; there is no heroic detective figure in the ascendancy; instead, obsessed, alienated, schizoid characters struggle to make sense of chaotic reality, haunted by dark secrets, their lives possessed by the past, their identities destabilised.³ In Vine's novel, however, since the focus is on female rather than male identity, it is the central mother figure, Vera, who is pursued by the Eumenides; it is the collapse of her socially-defined self that is at the centre of a narrative in which the urge to mother is itself responsible for breaking apart the normal world - for "sensational acts that seem unreal in the context of a humdrum life" (277). Vera not only inflicts psychological damage on but ultimately murders the much younger sister to whom she has "been a mother" (204), and, since we know from the outset that she is hanged as a murderer, our interest in the narrative grows out of our wish to understand Vera's subjective experience. The narrator, Vera's niece, cannot finally know everything, and we, in consequence, are denied a full explanation (producing a lack of closure which is typically noir). But Vine's close attention to the subjectivity of this central mother figure clearly separates *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, as it does other Vine novels (for

example, *Brimstone Wedding* and *Asta's Book*), from the world of the male-centred thriller.

As this will perhaps suggest, our view is that, in exploring the relationship between female and male crime fiction, there is something to be gained by *not* defining the male tradition solely with reference to the "classic" detective or private eye novel. There has been considerable recent attention paid to female detective fiction, most notably in studies by Kathleen Gergory Klein, Sally R. Munt and Anne Cranny-Francis. What can perhaps be added to such studies is a sharper awareness of the diverse strains of male crime fiction that might be seen to have influenced the work of writers like Margaret Millar, Patricia Highsmith, P.D. James and Barbara Vine (Ruth Rendell). Klein, who (with reference to both male and female authors) explores the difficulty of reconciling the "divergent scripts" of "detective" and "woman", deliberately narrows her focus in order to isolate a formula so recognisable - and so inherently conservative - that a "proper woman" could not function as a "proper detective" (Klein, 1-4 and 122-26). Amongst feminist critics who assess the ways in which female writers have revised male conventions, there is a similar tendency to concentrate on the traditional whodunit or hard-boiled fiction - the latter being defined primarily with reference to Chandler's "crusader/knight" (Munt 3) of the mean streets, who is taken to be the most representative figure of the genre (sometimes coupled with Hammett's Sam Spade, or with such successors as Spillane's Mike Hammer). Cranny-Francis, for example, focuses on the fact that the male-dominated genre of the private eye novel is a challenge to women because it is "based...in romantic images of the lone male - strong, brave, independent - a compendium of the *macho* values apparently so popular in American society" ("Gender and Genre" 69). Writers of female detective fiction, Cranny-Francis argues in *Feminist Fiction*, offer a reassessment of this genre, challenging the myth of the traditional detective and introducing "contradiction and complexity which involves the reader in a renegotiation of her/his own subject position" (143). Munt stresses the

same sort of discontinuity, arguing that writers like Highsmith and Rendell produce novels characterised by "a dissolving sense of reality; lack of self-perception; reticence in moral pronouncements; obsessive, pathological characters; the narrative privileging of complex, tortured relationships" - all of which can "conceivably be annexed as 'feminine' tendencies within the genre" (Munt 20). Other critics have followed a similar line in identifying the ways in which female crime writers have subverted the traditions and conventions of the established genre: so, for example, SueEllen Campbell's article on the detective heroine in the novels of P.D. James, though conceding that *Innocent Blood* is "not really a detective story at all," suggests that the generic shift we can see in it - the fragmenting, displacing and inverting of the hero's functions and of the formulaic ingredients of detective fiction - are a reflection of a distinctively female adaptation of the genre (Campbell 498).⁴

This body of criticism offers accurate and useful analyses of some key contrasts between women's crime writing and male detective/private eye fiction. What it does not explore, however, are the ways in which women writers have drawn upon and modified a different kind of male crime fiction, in which there is no solving detective figure bringing tidy closure - which itself, in fact, challenges and subverts the conventions of detective fiction. P.D. James' *Innocent Blood* and the other female crime novels discussed here are much more closely related to what we have called a-heroic noir than they are to the traditional detective story or hard-boiled private-eye novel: that is to say, although they can fruitfully be compared to "Chandleresque" novels, it is more to the point to consider their kinship to the work of writers like James M. Cain, Horace McCoy, Jim Thompson, Cornell Woolrich, Gil Brewer, Charles Williams, Charles Willeford and David Goodis. These male writers, from the 1930s on, were themselves forcing a reassessment of the more traditional forms of crime fiction, recurrently representing "male figures who are both internally divided and alienated from the culturally permissible (or ideal) parameters of masculine identity, desire and achievement" (Krutnik xii-xiii). In comparison to detective and

private eye novels, these texts are not committed to "proper" hero formation; they are more diverse and less formulaic, and indeed are constantly reworking and deviating from generic expectations.⁵ The women writers considered in this paper differ not in being more subversive but in substituting an interest in female identity under pressure for the engagement, in classic film noir and the "tough thriller," with the "problematic... potentialities within masculine identity" (Krutnik xiii).

For women writers, a preoccupation with the problematisation of female identity is often part of a more general expression of "dis-ease with the family," which has been a pervasive theme in feminist crime fiction. But what distinguishes the noir crime novel from other forms of female crime fiction (and particularly from much female *detective* fiction⁶) is the refusal to offer positive female role models. Instead, women's noir very often challenges assumptions about female identity and, through the sympathetic representation of "transgressive" female desire and insecure, fragmented female identities, subverts the idealised cultural possibilities of stereotypical femininity.⁷ As we will see, Highsmith, James and Vine provide representations of maternal guilt which break down conventional dualities (angelic/evil; nurturing/destructive), and ironise male authority. The mother figures they represent are not permitted an escape from the traditional narratives of maternal guilt (they are, in a sense, "guilty as charged" - inflicting psychological damage, erring in their judgements or themselves committing crimes of violence). But we experience the "both/and" of the character's dialogic consciousness, even if, in the noir world, there is no possibility of a healing resolution.⁸

The obsession with male identity is sometimes taken to be a defining feature of film noir: indeed, it has been argued that within canonical film noir there is no category of "women's noir" (Silver and Ward 214). As the above discussion suggests, however, the "*maudit noir* sensibility" is by no means invariably masculine. The potential within noir for the exploration of female identity has been particularly

apparent in the neo-noir films of the '80s and '90s, which have frequently centred on the strong, independent woman. This later generation of filmmakers, credited by Silver and Ursini (14) with transforming "a movement into a genre", has portrayed a range of striking female characters. Powerful *femmes fatales* go unpunished, as in Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981) or John Dahl's *The Last Seduction* (1994); tough women take on traditional male investigative roles, like that of Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski, eponymous heroine of Jeff Kanew's 1991 film, or that of Megan Turner in Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* (1990), of which Bigelow said, "I wanted to do a 'woman's action film', putting a woman at the centre of a movie predominantly occupied by men" and putting audiences in the position of identifying with "a very strong, capable person who just happens to be a woman" (quoted by Cowie 165); and mother figures can occupy central roles in ways that thoroughly subvert conventional expectations - whether by being the murdering bitch as warm-hearted heroine in *Dolores Claiborne* (Taylor Hackford, 1995) or the sweet-natured and happily married mother-to-be as successful investigator in the Coen brothers' *Fargo* (1996).

Even in classic film noir, there is more scope for the representation of female desire and identity than is often acknowledged, most obviously in films which fuse basic noir elements with characteristic features of allied genres, in particular with those of melodrama. The term "melodrama", of course, covers a diversity of forms, but for the purposes of this discussion we will take it to be characterised by a focus on personal and familial relationships, the presence of moral polarities, and an emphasis on private sentiment, emotional moments and pathos; given its circularity of structure, closure in melodrama is satisfyingly achieved, with the family acting paradoxically both as the site of alienation and as the means of resolution, "love and parenthood magically [transforming] familial anxiety and despair into bliss."⁹ It can be argued that noir to some degree overlaps with melodrama - for example, in their common preoccupation with entrapment within a constricted environment. Elizabeth Cowie, who takes the shared characteristics of noir and melodrama to be "extremes of

emotional experience", the presence of chance and coincidence, and a compression of dramatic time, argues effectively against an oversimplified conception of film noir as "a male preserve", a predominantly masculine form that is the antithesis of "the woman's film"; instead, she suggests, there is a much less rigid sexual division between these genres, with films noirs very often having as their narrative focus the obsessions and desires of female characters (Cowie 125-30).¹⁰ The same kind of interpenetration can be observed in literary noir, and it is evident that the generic fields of film noir and the noir crime novel, as they evolved from the 1930s and 1940s on, frequently interacted with family melodrama and "the woman's film". So, for example, numerous heroine-centred films which have strong affinities with the woman's film also have a place in the noir canon (e.g., *Spiral Staircase*, *The Dark Mirror*, *Sorry, Wrong Number*, all films in which the home itself is imaged as the claustrophobic, threatening noir world).⁵ In crime fiction there is a much stronger strain of women's noir, which similarly creates a mixture of generic elements, a blending of noir with family melodrama.

In critical discussions of this kind of hybridisation, one central question is whether the introduction of the thriller plot into melodrama produces "the repression of female discourse and female subjectivity," legitimising "the ultimate control of the narrative by a male protagonist" (Kaplan 135). As the foregoing discussion will suggest, our own view is that such "repression" is only likely in narratives that represent the protagonist as having a role in the restoration of normative order - as the upholder of "power and privilege in the name of law and justice as it validates readers' visions of a safe and ordered world" (Klein 1). In contrast, what we have called a-heroic noir, in which the protagonists are most often subordinate and impaired, is an exploration of the condition of powerlessness. If this form of noir is combined with melodrama the hybrid is unlikely to be dominated by an authoritative male hero: as we have said, in contrast to the hard-boiled private eye novel, there is no just and confident detective figure and no plot resolution that acts to re-establish

patriarchal orderings. The female crime novels discussed here are notable for the absence of any positive male characters functioning to restore order or to represent "the Law" and "the Father". Like melodrama, a-heroic noir presents a weak protagonist - generally speaking, in its masculine form, a man who is characterised by impotence or impaired masculinity, submitting passively to his fate or driven to an act of violence from the consequences of which there is no escape; polarised judgements are broken down by the creation of a central figure who is not heroically pitted against the forces of evil, but who instead struggles against his own self-division - against the "schisms...within the male psyche" (Krutnik 129). The "crisis of masculinity" portrayed is most obviously a crisis of *agency*. That is, the narrative centres on a testing of the protagonist's masculine competence and his capacity for self-determination; he engages in a quest to consolidate his masculine identity, the positive trajectory of which is subject to a series of inversions, delays and inner conflicts, obstructing and frustrating the pursuit of resolution (Krutnik 86-9 and 130-31). Examples are legion, both in novels and film noir, including (amongst hundreds more): the narrators in John D. MacDonald's *Soft Touch* (1958) and Gil Brewer's *Nude on Thin Ice* (1960); Cassidy in David Goodis' *Cassidy's Girl* (1951), or indeed the protagonists of almost any of Goodis' novels; Al Roberts, the fatalistic protagonist/narrator of Edgar G. Ulmer's film, *Detour* (1945); "Swede" and Steve Thompson (Burt Lancaster's roles) in Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946) and *Criss Cross* (1949).

In women's noir, what we can see is the replacement of this impaired male character by a female character who is similarly entrapped and lacking in social power and effectivity. Where maternal themes are focal, what is presented is obviously not "the positive figure of the mother" (Hansen 13), but neither is it the "mythic monstrous mother" (Daly and Reddy 14) often seen in male noir. These are narratives which disrupt polarised judgements, so that "good" and "bad" mothering are no longer distinct, but instead are aspects of a psychologically split character who

is humanised and rendered sympathetic. In contrast to masculine noir, the dominant element in the narrative is not *agency* but *community* - stereotypically identified as, respectively, "masculine" and "feminine" modes (Daly and Reddy 6-7). By making available to us the subjectivity of the mother figure, what these texts reveal are women who are suffering, in Jessica Benjamin's terms (215-18), from "the loss of recognition" (of understanding, empathy, appreciation, love); they are deprived of any intersubjective context within which they can receive a "recognizing response". The noir world is one of loss and deprivation, and when we hear their voices it becomes apparent how far their sense of deprivation or isolation has been due to their position within families or societies which deny them recognition as equal subjects. Although alienation and isolation are also suffered by the male noir protagonist - who is recurrently "a stranger in a hostile world" (Silver and Ursini 85-6) - the impairment of social bonds and the absence of mutuality are more to the fore in the fractured world of female noir, in which protagonists must above all struggle with an absence of the "integration and community" that Munt, for example, sees as a part of the positive trajectory of feminist crime novels (125). The loss of connection, then, rather than of agency, is often the key cause of anxiety, with the mother's "communal self" denied, unrecognised or allowed expression only in relationships that are distorted and damaged. The site of crisis is most often the family, which acts as the locus for the noir theme of the fate that comes "out of the past" to destroy the protagonist. That is, the theme of the past taking possession of a character is assimilated to the theme of inheritance - of what is passed on from parents to children, which is frequently, in fact, the self-division that is at the heart of the noir world. What separates this sort of mixture from a purer melodramatic plot is the absence of clear moral choices or appeals to morality, the resistance to reassuring closure and the emphasis on interiority (the representation of selves divided and of the difficulties of coming to terms with or understanding self-division and inner duality).¹¹

In the generically mixed fictions of Millar, Highsmith, James and Vine the elements of noir and melodrama are balanced in quite different ways: where the noir elements are strongest, the tone is more clearly determined by the sense of cynicism and bleak irony that is so familiar in the thrillers of, say, Jim Thompson and, amongst female crime writers, in the fiction of Highsmith and Millar, in which female loss of recognition, the absence of effective communion and deprivation of intersubjectivity create irretrievable alienation. Where the melodramatic strain is uppermost, the mixture is more likely to move towards pathos, compassion and emotionalism, as is apparent, for example, in the mother-daughter plots of Vine's *Asta's Book* and (to a lesser extent) of James' *Innocent Blood*. In these later texts, although the noir sensibility is still strongly apparent, there is an overriding mood of hopefulness, a redemptive element that leads away from the invocation of the noir world and allows us to glimpse the possibility of the mother functioning as "a subject whose consciousness is relational, or intersubjective" (Daly and Reddy 5).

Mothering murderers

Perhaps the most clichéd embodiment of maternal guilt is the mother of the psychopath: "And then, as he ripped back the shower curtains and stared down at the hacked and twisted thing sprawled on the floor of the stall, he realised that Mother had used her keys" (Bloch 38). There is no doubt that, for Norman Bates, Mother holds the key: his upbringing explains his internalisation of Mother and this in turn accounts both for his violent act and for the blank space in the narrative of his crime. As in McCoy's *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, the resolution of the plot hinges on a full revelation of the formative role of the mother figure. In both novels, we view these maladjusted relationships from the perspective of the male psychopath, and in *Psycho* our judgements are inevitably shaped by the views put forward at the end of the novel by the conventional figure of the psychiatrist, Dr Steiner. Though Steiner admits that they will never know the true extent of the mother's responsibility "for what [Norman

Bates] became," he speculates (fixing his medical gaze on the long-dead Mrs Bates) that she was a man-hater who may have deliberately prevented Norman from "growing up" (146-47). This reductive and simplifying psychiatric explanation is the only view we have of Mother as distinct from Norman's version of her, and Mrs Bates has, accordingly, entered popular mythology as the bad, controlling maternal figure who most evidently does hold the key to Norman's psychosis.¹² Such figures can generate a degree of sympathy: Norma Bates, for example, is a victim first of her husband (who deserted her) and then of Norman's murderous impulses; in Raoul Walsh's film, *White Heat*, the scenes between Ma Jarrett and her son, Cody, are genuinely touching, and the heroic outlaw's qualities of loyalty and integrity are manifest in Cody's devotion to his mother (Shadoian 196-200). But what we do not have is access to the mothers' own subjectivity: in terms of the crime narrative, they have caused the mental instability which accounts for the violence of their sons; they are objects, figures in the background, guilty violators of an idealised patriarchal feminine (the angelic, perfectly nurturing mother).

Patricia Highsmith (in another novel made famous by a Hitchcock film) also creates a notable example of maternal over-attachment as a cause of mental illness. Charley Bruno's mother, towards the end of *Strangers on a Train* (1950), feels perplexed as she ponders the possible causes of his drinking and his aberrant behaviour: "hard as she tried, she could never discover why or where it might have begun, because Charley had always been given everything...She got up, needing a drink herself" (205). This ironised, failed meditation is our only view of the thought processes of Bruno's Ma: as in male noir, the mother is there primarily to explain the son's capacity for murder. In *Edith's Diary* (1977), however, Highsmith creates a mother who is the centre of consciousness for most of the novel. Though she ends by feeling bemused about the question of her responsibility for her son's abnormality, Edith is an articulate, self-aware character, and the combination of diary entries with close third-person narration ensures that we are in contact throughout with the

subjectivity of the mother as she moves from being a woman with a public role (writing articles, active in the community) to being a woman whose voice is only to be heard in diary entries that attest to her total isolation and powerlessness.

Superficially summarised, the plot of *Edith's Diary* sounds closely analogous to that of, say, *Psycho*: a mother-figure, abandoned by her husband, shares a house with an overly dependant son who is a murderer - and for whose crime the mother might be said to bear a heavy burden of responsibility. What Highsmith does, however, is to use this basic idea for quite different ends, transferring blame from the guilty mother to a guilty society: this is not, then, to borrow Kaplan's phrasing, a novel that could be viewed as a matrophobic construction serving "to deflect attention from the economic, political, and cultural ills no one knows how to cure" (Kaplan 142); rather, it is a deeply sympathetic construction of motherhood as a parallel to the helplessness of a "motherly" liberal ethos confronted with incurable socio-political ills; further, it is an examination of some of the ways in which post-World War Two American society shaped and also betrayed an ideal of mothering that might be said to embody some of the most generous and selfless of liberal values - compassion, tolerance, gentleness. Edith is only "one single woman...in a small town in Pennsylvania" (285), but her life, as she drifts towards true "self-lessness", comes to seem a reflection of a very widespread sense of loss and bemusement.

It is because we enter so fully into the subjective world of Edith that we understand the ways in which she tries to live up to these values; and it is our immersion in her world that gives us a grimly ironic, unequivocally noir sense of the gap between the world of the liberal ideal and the criminally deranged world that Edith actually inhabits and that judges her to be mad - as Edith writes in her diary, "The difference between dream and reality is the true hell" (265). The "dream" for Edith contains the idealised mother and family - an image of perfection which she only finds possible to preserve in the realm of domestic fantasy she creates in her

diary. Writing her diary is for Edith a release from the silence required by her habitual tact and reticence - her *not* saying things in awkward social situations, whether they involve adultery or murder; her determination to bear up, not to make scenes, not to "fight" because it's "too sordid" (100-101; 108). Edith has tried hard to conform to the role of the idealised wife/mother and one of the novel's ironic reversals is that her diary contains a secret which is not dark but radiant - a fictional realm in which Edith imagines that she has fulfilled the ideals of the conventional good mother and has reaped its rewards (e.g., 62). As a "mother-author", what her voice increasingly expresses is a sustaining literary lie, a dream of Cliffie's successful movement into marriage and a career, allowing him to separate himself from his mother but still to remain close to her, a fantasy only intermittently disrupted by intimations of her secret fears - by the opposing image of herself as a "bad" mother whose existence is meaningless and wholly devoid of intersubjective relationships. As these fears become more intense, Edith has a terrifying sense of the void and, like many another noir protagonist, feels unable to act against her "fate". Advised by the one strong woman she knows to "act now", Edith responds with a silence that expresses both her inability to assert her own subjectivity and her desperation at the loss of connection:

In the seconds of silence, Edith felt for the first time an abyss beneath her, around her, black and dangerous. She had a sense of empty time, lots of time, years, months, days, evenings. She was reminded more strongly...that life really had no meaning, for anyone, not merely herself. But if she herself were alone, was going to be alone, then the meaninglessness was going to be that much more terrifying. That was it. She felt terrified for a few seconds, as if she had a glimpse of destiny, fate, the essence of life and even death. It had been her destiny to meet Brett Howland, for instance, to become his wife and have a son by him, and if that were taken away - Brett was obviously already taken away, and as for a son, was Cliffie of much substance? (111)

As she becomes increasingly alienated from the world around her, Edith's diary moves more and more towards a fictional indulgence in now-abandoned hopes of ideal mothering, of recognition and mutuality. The final irony of *Edith's Diary* is Cliffie's decision to carry the diary with him forever, fearing it and imagining it to contain dark secrets to be hidden at all costs, little realising that it contains his idealised portrait rather than his real self: "he would never open this diary...He wouldn't let anyone else look at it, ever" (318).

What *Edith's Diary* achieves is an ironic exposure of the male view of the mother, undermining all positions of male authority which would conventionally provide closure in a crime novel (e.g., the detective in *Strangers on a Train*; the psychiatrist in *Psycho*). It is devoid of sympathetic male characters, certainly of any who would be capable of performing the restorative functions of the active, solving male - the traditional detective or the hard-boiled thriller hero. The men in Edith's life are so ineffectual that they are dependant in the way that the patriarchally constructed female is. Edith's son, Cliffie, who is particularly marked by inertia, is happiest of all when he is "mummified" - "wrapped up like a mummy so that he couldn't even move a hand or arm" (45). He is in one sense just "a minor human failure" insignificant in the larger scheme of things; but in another sense, his failures are the embodiment of national apathy, loss of will, aimlessness and paranoia (61; 114). The other main men in the narrative are also passive: Uncle George, a bedridden, immovable object; Edith's husband, Brett, unable or unwilling to act to have George institutionalised. The only occasion on which Brett seems moved to act is when he (despicably, we feel) tries to take on the role of detective, wanting to prove that Cliffie murdered George - "trying to stir up a case of murder" (211-12; 247). Highsmith ensures that we share Edith's aversion both to the "smug, self-righteous" (315-16) Brett and to the psychiatrist he ultimately brings to see her, and that we understand her sense of alarm at the male invasion of her house - of its interior, which is Edith's inner realm, containing physical evidence of her fantasies (294-95).

Highsmith leaves unresolved the question of how far Edith herself is responsible for her son's weakness. She is no monstrous mother responsible for the mental derangement of a psychopathic son. Nevertheless, Cliffie commits a murder and Edith carries a share of the guilt, not just in being overly protective or in having helped to shape his attitudes but in not trying to avert the murder of George. She has failed to "say the words" ("*criminal act...even possible murder*") when she realises Cliffie has been experimenting with overdosing George (167-69). She goes out for a walk when she knows George might be in a dangerous condition, ultimately, on the day that Cliffie does murder him, lingering off-stage and deliberately suppressing her suspicions (192-99). Edith's silence about the fact of murder is in a sense just a further manifestation of her instinctive suppression of unpleasant realities. We have, however, been drawn so fully into her subjective experience that we do not morally judge her silent assent to the murder of George. The murdering son has, in effect, acted on Edith's unspoken wish; he has put an end to a crime (the abandonment to her care of an utterly disagreeable, incontinent old man) inflicted on her by the male world, and if anything our tendency is to share Edith's fleeting thought that George's death represents "great progress" (209). Cliffie has served her interests in a way that her liberal conscience would never have allowed her to do. There is nothing romanticised or redemptive about his contempt for society's moral norms, and in contrast, for example, to Cody in *White Heat*, he has no intense feeling of devotion to his mother that might act as a foil to the coldly impersonal machinery of law and society.¹³ But Cliffie's blackly comic maladjustment ultimately comes to seem less criminal than the behaviour of the normative male figures of Brett as detective and the psychiatrist he brings to see Edith - men who, between them, are responsible for Edith's death at the end of the novel, an ending which is, as the dust jacket proclaims, "more terrifying than mere murder."

The murdering mother

Highsmith's Edith is overly anxious to conform to the ideal of the protective, nurturing, compliant mother figure; like Mrs Bates or Mrs Bruno, she is guilty of an excess of these conventional maternal qualities. Bad mothering can alternatively, however, be associated with a repudiation of such "feminine", self-sacrificing traits - with an inclination towards tough, masculine forms of behaviour, leaving children damaged either by maternal deprivation or by maternal power, aggression and violence. The stereotype is succinctly expressed in Raymond Chandler's *The High Window*. Mrs Murdoch, ultimately exposed as a murderess, is introduced as the antithesis of femininity: "She had a lot of face and chin. She had pewter-coloured hair set in a ruthless permanent, a hard beak and large moist eyes with the sympathetic expression of wet stones. There was lace at her throat, but it was the kind of throat that would have looked better in a football sweater" (10).

Like the overindulgent mother, the harsh, destructive mother of male noir is not necessarily, even when she is a killer, a wholly negative figure. So, for example, irony reshapes the image of maternal guilt in Jim Thompson's *The Grifters* (1963), a blackly humorous noir portrayal of one of the toughest and most phallic of mothers, Lilly Dillon. Although she is for the most part represented from a male perspective (that of her son, Roy), Thompson's clipped, ironic style ensures that she is also neither a monstrous nor an evil feminine figure but one whose faults and crimes come to seem an inevitable part of the brutal world that his novels create; we sympathise with Roy, but also see the blindness and unfairness of his view of Lilly; we are given enough information to understand her actions and see them as having their own kind of legitimacy.¹⁴ The "male look" may dominate, but it is so fully ironised that we see *through* it to the perspective of the mother:

Roy lit a cigarette, glancing at her over the match; more irritated than interested in what she was saying. What did it all amount to, anyway? Maybe she'd had a tough childhood - although he'd have to take

her word for that. All he knew about was his own. But having had one, and knowing how it felt, why had she handed him the same kind of deal? She knew better. She hadn't been under the same ugly social pressures that had been brought to bear on her own parents. Why, hell, she was married and living away from home at about the age he'd finished grammar school!

Something about the last thought dug into him, cut through the layered rationalizations which warmed him in their rosy glow while holding her off in outer darkness. Irritably, he wondered just how soon he could decently break out of here. (109-10)

Lilly kills, in self-defence and by accident, both her son's mistress and her son, and the unremitting self-discipline that keeps her going pulls her back from despair to deliver her last line with tough-guy cynicism: "Well, kid, it's only one throat, huh?" But we see clearly Roy's refusal to give Lilly a "recognizing response" and his evasion of any responsibility for his failure to "break out" of his own delusions and rationalisations; we give considerable weight to Lilly's story, to her own account of her past poverty and deprivation (109-10) and her explanation of what Roy perceives as her bad motherhood: although certain "ineradicable instincts" survive, her motherly impulses have by and large "eroded and atrophied," leaving her with "a fatalistic do-or-be-damned philosophy which could accommodate itself to anything but oblivion" (6-7).

The focus of the narrative, however, is Roy Dillon, and Lilly's main function is (as in more matrophobic crime stories) explanatory: "She was what she was, and thus Roy had become what he was" (49). Roy, who taunts her (30-1) by sardonically sending her "gooey sentimental" Mother's Day cards, is determined to maintain his self-protective hardness by denying his connection with her (holding her off "in outer darkness"). What the narrative moves towards, however, is his ultimate realisation of his Oedipal attachment to his mother, and his own death is precipitated by his fantasy

of "keeping" her. With his final recognition of the forbidden, "unadmitted bond" between them comes an ironic determination (ironised both by his mixed motives and by his "miscasting" of Lilly) to assume the dominant male role of "the pimp disciplining his whore" or "the wise and strong husband taking his frivolous wife in hand": "And so he must protect her...Keep her available..." (183).

The Grifters, then, demonstrates the extent to which a powerful example of male noir can modify our responses to the "bad" mother, but it does not go very far towards making the mother a subject in her own right. Margaret Millar, writing during roughly the same period as Jim Thompson, makes the female voice much more central to her ironic pictures of corrupted social and familial relationships and of a world in which "evil and fear grow like cancer cells, inexorable, aimlessly destroying" (*Iron Gates*, 210). Amongst her guilty mothers are some who are unquestionably less forgivable than Lilly Dillon. For example, in a novel of maternal revenge, *Beyond This Point Are Monsters* (1970), Millar creates a possessive mother who begins by killing her husband and ends by imprisoning her son's murderer, treating him as a surrogate son: over-mothering is his ultimate punishment. Like *Beast in View* (1955) and *A Stranger in My Grave* (1960), this is a novel which could well be taken to support the observation that thrillers as a genre speak primarily "from the patriarchal position" (Kaplan 129). Millar's interest in the female perspective, however, also leads her to make extensive use of the mother's subjectivity in a much earlier novel, *The Iron Gates* (1945). Here, two maternal perspectives are created, that of a naive/angelic biological mother and that of a treacherous/phallic step-mother, a strategy that generates a more sympathetic understanding of both mothers as well as a sense of shared guilt. The close third-person narration brings us at the outset into contact with both the conscious and subconscious mind of the wicked step-mother figure, Lucille, who herself has a dual nature. She is haunted by the crime she has committed, and we feel intensely both her burden of guilt and inner division:

She...caught sight of herself in the mirror. She had forgotten the mirror was there, and for an instant, before she had time to set her face, she seemed a stranger, a lady in a mirror, no longer young...She paused to look at the stranger, smiling faintly because it was only a game, yet uneasily because games were never just games, Andrew said, there had to be some motive behind them. Perhaps even after fifteen years that was how she still felt, like a stranger in the house, visiting someone else's husband and someone else's children. (12)

Lucille experiences a terrifying rift between her inner turmoil and her conventional social self - perfectly adjusted, reasonable, tactful, the self she "makes up" when she looks in the mirror (34), trying so hard to replicate the ideal image of the good mother that she wholly suppresses her other self. Even before her mind finally disintegrates (leading to her suicide), she experiences what we retrospectively recognise as a kind of self-estrangement, a displacement of the murder on to an imagined, hideous figure, a man with an axe rumoured to haunt the park where the good mother, Mildred, died - a figure so grotesque and terrifying that she is unable to recognise it as an image of her own dark side. Characteristically of Millar, the "good mother" also carries a share of the guilt. Culpably passive and naive, she has left a wholly "innocent" diary that unwittingly reveals both the guilt of her best friend, Lucille, and her own fatal compliance and obtuseness.¹⁵ The male figures who play a part in this maternal drama are flawed and equivocal. The psychiatrist, the detective and the husband/father all seek to interpret and judge, but their understanding is limited and the "justice" they try to dispense is at best imperfect and at worst criminal: the father figure, for example, seeking redress against the woman who has destroyed the ideal nurturing mother, succumbs to the inexorable "contagion" of evil and himself becomes a murderer.

Millar's representation of the subjectivity of the mother to some extent, then, constitutes a movement away from more conventional male treatments of maternal

guilt, but she nevertheless leaves certain stereotypes more or less intact: we may pity and come closer to the mental anguish of the evil stepmother and may see, with a sense of pathos, the innocence of the nurturing mother, but the women upon whom the plot centres have still enacted a drama in which both are guilty and in which female "goodness" can only be the weakness of a murderess or the mask of a murderer. In the work of later female crime writers, however, we can see representations of the murdering mother which handle the nurturing/destructive duality in more complex ways, much more fully reclaiming the subjectivity of the mother and ironising all positions of male authority. They move towards the kind of re-visioning of maternal aggression that makes a film of the '90s like *Dolores Claiborne* so powerfully effective: that is, as Dolores' voice becomes (through "her" flashbacks) dominant, the narrative not only establishes her guilt (she did kill her husband) but validates her actions (she was right to kill him); the bitch (and witch) moves from being the suspected villain (the "monster" in her den) to being not just a victim but a heroine, and, as male judgements (paternal, legal) are undermined, she is recognised by her daughter as an "equal subject" *because of* (not in spite of) her capacity for violent action.

P. D. James' *Innocent Blood* (1980) makes far less outspoken claims for female strength, but nevertheless goes some way towards imagining the story of the mother who kills. In James' novel, as in *Dolores Claiborne*, the mother narrates as well as commits an act of violence, but here it is not the justified killing of a child-molester husband, but the murder of a child to protect her child-molesting husband, an act which her role as a mother makes all the more chilling: "At the trial the pathologist described the post mortem findings. Death had been by throttling; the neck was bruised with the marks of human hands. They must have been her hands. Who else's could they have been? But she couldn't remember touching the child..." (157-58). As in *Edith's Diary* and *The Grifters*, we see the mother's guilt in the context of a wider critique of a brutal and hypocritical society: the "bad mother" is

forgiven; our sympathy is extended to her; weighed down by tragedies of her own, she is to be seen "as suffering woman rather than monster" (Daly and Reddy 117-23). The character of the mother, however, has more affinities with Lilly Dillon than with Edith. That is, she is a tough, masculine woman from a harsh background who has had to harden herself from an early age; long-absent and capable of murder, she re-enters the life of her now grown child.

As the title suggests, this is an exploration of the burden of the past, the transmission of guilt and the impossibility of innocence (hence its noir character). Longing for an identity that is not just fabrication, an adopted daughter, Philippa, commits herself to unearthing a past which is capable of "touching" her, imagining at first that she can separate knowledge of this past from the way her present life is lived (35; 54). The main object in Philippa's subject formation is her biological mother, Mary Ducton, who is just being released after spending ten years in prison for child murder. Mary's own subjectivity is never as fully available to us as that of her daughter, but James has various means of counterbalancing the novel's focus on the daughter's quest for identity, allowing the mother to narrate the crime and giving her insights which establish her ability to reflect morally on the horror of her experience. Thus, Mary Ducton has from the outset knowledge that is always at the heart of the noir world, that there is no real way to insulate the present from the past. As a narrator, she is more distant from us than, for example, Edith: the story is written down ten years after the crime for a specific audience (her daughter) and it is shaped by knowledge of the way in which others (courts, psychiatrists) have interpreted her behaviour, as well as by a painful sense of society's abhorrence of such a crime; she distances herself from herself by writing in the third person. Nevertheless, her narrative is at the centre of the novel and not only gives us an extended account of how she experienced her role as a murderer but of the ways in which she felt her actions to have been determined by her own father's brutality (157; 166-67). What Philippa does not, however, learn from her mother's narrative is the still suppressed

truth which, for her, is more shocking than the offence for which Mary Ducton has been punished - that is, that she herself has been abused, unwanted and nearly killed.

From the first, Philippa is acutely aware that it is not possible to experience another's pain and fear, and it is thus only when she discovers how much pain and fear her mother had inflicted on her as a child that her ability to bear the burdens of the past is actually tested. The effect of this revelation is that Philippa, feeling a "dense confusion" (286-87), experiences the missing crime from the perspective both of the child and of the mother. She now understands much more fully both the "terror and anguish" of the child and the violent but divided nature of her mother, who has herself, of course, been both child victim and adult killer, and who now, because of her crime, "doesn't count as a human being" (296). This "painful self-knowledge" comes to Philippa as she wanders in the "dead city," the only glimpse in the novel of the noir city, derelict and decaying; the knowledge breaks down Philippa's self-absorption; it makes her realise the extent to which she is "bound" to her mother, and also constitutes in a sense an inheritance of her mother's experiences - not just in the double vision of child and murderer but in the fact that her first impulse has been to tell her mother she wishes her dead (286-91), an act which she herself comes to see as the murder of her mother, who commits suicide that same night. By the end of the novel the daughter has at last fully encountered the "monster-mother", and, although the negative, destructive aspects of the mother cannot be gainsaid, a process of identification has begun, the recognition of "the human connection", of "the monster-mother inside herself" and of "the universality within the monster". Having began her quest by asking "Who am I?", Philippa ultimately finds the answer only by entering fully "the den of the 'monster-mother'" (Daly and Reddy 119-23).

The figure of the guilty mother is framed by the failed figure of a nurturing mother ("the good step [adoptive] mother") on the one hand and, on the other, by weak and corrupt father figures, Philippa's child rapist father and her incestuously-

inclined adoptive father. The men in the narrative who occupy the two male roles which often dominate the male thriller - detective and psychiatrist - are, as in *Edith's Diary*, compromised, weakened figures who carry no normative authority. So Scase, father of the murdered child, is to some extent fulfilling the role of the detective, hunting the criminal, planning to bring her to justice, but in contrast to the traditional detective he has no secure male identity - indeed, it is the insecure, threatened masculinity of a "nonentity" (70) which makes him cling to the knife he carries like a "potent extension of himself" (123). Maurice Palfrey, Philippa's adoptive father, is a sociologist whose function is very similar to that of the conventional figure of the psychiatrist, that is, the provision of an authoritative patriarchal judgement with the intention of explaining the crime and its ramifications - of upholding "certain abstractions: good public order, a pleasant life, natural justice...the universal religion of liberal humanism" with which Philippa herself has been inculcated (99-100). Maurice takes it upon himself (138-39), for example, to contextualise the narrative of the crime written by Mary Ducton (a murderer's rationalisation), but James makes sure we see the limitations undermining the authoritativeness of his judgement. When Maurice reveals the true extent of Mary Ducton's guilt (273-78), he keeps back knowledge of another sort of parental betrayal. It is not only, as Philippa suspects, that he has adopted her as "experimental material" to prove his theory that a child is the creature of its environment; we later discover that his own paedophilic urges (urges that also motivated Philippa's rapist father, Martin Ducton) motivated the adoption (272; 280). In the characterisation of Maurice, both the scientific and the fetishistic male gazes are condemned, and when he at the end takes over and sorts things out, we see it far less as the legitimate ordering of a traditional figure of masculine authority than as a cynical repression or "silencing" of the few weeks during which Philippa experiences a strong bond with her mother. The relationship between Philippa and her mother brings many moments of intense present enjoyment, and this brief idyll of mother-daughter unity comes to seem the most positive, if also the most vulnerable, relationship in the novel (see, e.g., 182, 255 and 311).

Spoiling daughters

The intense mother-daughter relationship that is formed in *Innocent Blood* acts to counterbalance James' ironising of innocence, establishing an interlude, however transient and fated, during which the harsh realities of the noir world recede. What this suggests, perhaps, is that where both of the characters in the central mother-child relationship are female, the crime plot is more likely to be temporarily displaced or superseded by the more conventionally melodramatic elements in the text, such as pathos, the appeal to sentiment and emphasis on emotional moments unqualified by irony or cynicism (Bratton 162). Arguably, this is also true in male crime fiction, in which this is, of course, a highly unusual central pairing.

Probably the most famous example of a mother-daughter plot structure in male noir is James M. Cain's *Mildred Pierce* (1943), the least typical of Cain's novels and one in which crime (or potential crime) is secondary to family melodrama, giving us a more sympathetic insight into the position of the mother and bringing to the fore questions of female identity and matrilineal inheritance. In contrast to the heroine of the film version (1945), the Mildred of Cain's novel does not shoulder the blame for another's crime (her daughter Veda's murder of Monty). Instead, her crime of bad mothering nearly leads Mildred herself to the act of murder, when she tries to kill the monster she has produced. The account she gives to Bert of the attempted strangling of Veda is mediated in the novel by the "objectifying" commentary of the third-person narrator, which obviously distances us from Mildred's own interpretations and emotions, but also allows Cain to deploy an irony that, on the whole, increases our sympathy for Mildred. Thus, the attempt to strangle Veda, the central "crime" of the narrative, is heavy with irony: "But it wasn't at Monty that she leaped, her husband, the man who had been untrue to her. It was at Veda, her daughter, the girl who had done no more than what Mildred had once said was a woman's right. It was at a ruthless creature seventeen years younger than herself..." (548). That is, it is a young

woman who shares the hard, sharp, unyielding qualities that mark Mildred herself out as a phallic mother. The irony works here to remind us of Mildred's life-long struggles, dominated by the Depression; it also serves to underscore the extent of her blindness and the pathos of her situation. When Mildred thinks she is responsible for "strangling" Veda's voice, for example, she believes she has "destroyed the beautiful thing that she loved most in the world..." (550). She has not, in the event, destroyed either Veda or her wonderful voice (which Veda only pretends to have lost), and we are left in the novel with the final, redeeming irony that Mildred's only "real" act of violence is the metaphoric severing of her excessive attachment to Veda: (552-53) "What it cost her to swallow back her sobs...and draw the knife across an umbilical cord, God alone knows."

In the novels of Barbara Vine, family structures are considerably more complicated than the one created in *Mildred Pierce*, and the problematisation of maternal identities is correspondingly more complex. Vine has been called Rendell's "*éminence noire*" - her more domestic but more disturbing alter-ego.¹⁶ The domestic settings of such novels as *A Dark-Adapted Eye* (1986) and *Asta's Book* (1993) are perceived through the eyes of female characters who feel impelled to give accounts of their family circumstances which would be impossible for the male characters to provide. Thus, for example, in *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, Daniel Stewart, the man who wants to tell the story of Vera as a murderer, remains off-stage and ultimately gives up, frustrated by the fact that the mystery cannot be fully resolved, whereas the female narrator, Vera's niece, is able to cope with this lack of closure. In *Asta's Book*, there are two women who construct detailed family narratives (Asta herself as a diarist and her niece, Ann Eastbrook, supplying the framing narrative); what the men, in contrast, construct are model houses and genealogies. The "heart of the mystery" (295) in these female narratives is motherhood itself - in both cases, an experience so intense and so important that it seems to justify the crimes committed, even if it is not (in the case of Asta) or may not be (in the case of Vera) biological motherhood. Both

novels foreground the emotional character of mothering by making "a bizarre question of genesis" (291) a key element in the plot. By throwing the actual identity of the child open to doubt, the mother as a "choosing subject"¹⁷ is made central, and the *choice* of mothering a child becomes the main factor determining the "terrible converging of human lots" (218).

What Vine insists on most strongly is that we recognise the positive, redemptive aspects of this intense maternal devotion at the same time that we see its destructive potential. In the novels of Highsmith and James we have seen the nurturing mother/destructive mother duality broken down: that is, it is presented in *Edith's Diary* as different aspects of an acquiescent personality and, in *Innocent Blood*, as different phases in the life of a mother who is capable of both destruction and love. In Vine, however, actual violence (Vera's murder of Eden) grows directly out of the violence of Vera's maternal devotion. Like Mildred Pierce, Vera is driven by motives which are "rooted in their time" (25) and by an obsessive maternal attachment, first to her sister/daughter Eden and then to Jamie, who may be either her son or Eden's. As in *Mildred Pierce*, excessive mothering makes a monster of the daughter, "a snake in the grass, a cruel tormentor" (283), and the mother figure is finally driven to violence, though here not to an abortive effort to strangle the viper she has nursed but to a spectacularly bloody murder. In spite of the fact that she does actually commit murder, however, Vera Hillyard is a character to whom we are asked to respond more emotionally than we do to Mildred Pierce: although she in many ways remains a mystery to us, the intensity of her maternal devotion is more fully presented, and, in contrast to the permanently fraught relationship between Mildred and Veda, there is a powerful mother-daughter bond established between Vera and Eden, who begin by dearly loving one another. Vera has an equally powerful mother-son bond with Jamie, whom she obsessively mothers in compensation for her sense of separation from others and for the fact that they deny her recognition:

Francis [Vera's son] had not returned with us and now, two hours later, he had not appeared. Vera, tucking Jamie up in bed, lifted her face from kissing him and said:

"They're so lovely when they're little and when they grow up they're just people. They're not like you, they haven't got your ways and they're more unpleasant to you than they are to their worst enemy." (192)

Although this mother-son relationship is clearly a damaging form of possessiveness, the image of her "doting care" and "selfless love" comes to dominate the narrator's recollection of her, cancelling out her negative and destructive traits and making her seem "more sinned against than sinning": "you couldn't dislike a woman who loved a child so dearly as Vera loved Jamie" (292; 185).

The move towards a melodramatic emphasis on sentimental attachment and pathos is still more marked in *Asta's Book*, in which the actual crime is so far removed from the main plot that it is only secondarily "crime fiction" (even though bookstores shelve it, with other Barbara Vine novels, in the crime section). Vine's novel contains a violent murder, but one which is marginalised. The unsolved crime remains in the background of a narrative that instead focuses on a search for identity on the part of a daughter (Asta's favourite daughter, Swanny), who has discovered that she is not her mother's child. The central irony of *Asta's Book* is, in fact, that the "traditional murder" is in every way removed from Asta and the life she leads, but that, out of her longing for an idealised mother-child relationship (a perfect child, perfectly mothered), Asta lies to Swanny and denies her knowledge of her parentage. Although Asta feels herself completely separate from the sordid crime committed in the Roper family, her silence and secrecy about Swanny's origins ironically allow a supposed connection to grow within Swanny into a monstrous delusion that she is the daughter of a sluttish woman and a murderer. Thinking she is the "lost child," Edith Roper, Swanny becomes what she imagines Edith would have been, speaking with a working-class accent, dressing herself like a bag lady, creating an alternative self that

gradually absorbs the old Swanny: "Destiny had been cheated and it was for her to put things right. Or, believing herself to be Edith Roper, she *wanted* to be her, she had found an identity at last..." (308-9). Although, at the very end of her life, "Edith" goes away, Swanny still gives "the impression of a great fear and a great horror just contained" (370).

As in *A Dark-Adapted Eye* and *Mildred Pierce*, the mother at the centre of the plot is a woman overly anxious for the success of the daughter whose life she ultimately damages. She projects her "secret desires" (93-4) on to the child she clandestinely substitutes for her own still-born baby and is unable to bear the thought that either the daughter or the relationship will be less than ideal. As "inordinately proud" of her daughter as Mildred is of Veda, Asta takes particular pride in her social success, and it is, ironically, a published photo of Swanny at the height of her success that draws forth the poison pen letter which calls into question her whole identity: "...you are really nobody...Off a rubbish heap, for all you know..." (77). Having suppressed the true narrative, Asta can only have recourse to a desperate assertion of maternal rights: "You're mine" (204-5).

Like Vera and Mildred, Asta is a split mother, though in her case this inner division does not lead her to murder or attempted murder. It is in Asta's diaries that her divided nature becomes apparent - on the one hand, the effort to live out the role of "ideal mother"; on the other, her wish to achieve the writer's honesty of vision. Like Highsmith's Edith, Asta thinks of her diary as the one place where she can be free, but (also like Edith) she is a "mother-author" who feels compelled to narrate a false self, to create herself in conformity to the socially constructed "good" mother. Whereas Edith's "diary self", however, is that of a nurturing mother, it is Asta's public self that conforms to this ideal. In contrast, Asta's writing and story-telling self is boldly assertive; as a narrator of stories, she rejects sentiment and submissiveness as "bosh": "Sentimentality and tenderness, sensitivity and diffidence, it was all bosh.

Drama was what she liked, vitality and power. Many of her stories featured violent death" (72). But she cannot bring this sense of uncompromising assertiveness to bear on the submissions and evasions of her private life, and as the novel develops it becomes plain that her falsely unified ideal of motherhood has forced her to betray the writer's ideal of integrity. She has placed the truth about her own subjectivity (her act of choosing to mother) under erasure, excusing her silences and evasions by expressing the universal truth of human untruthfulness:

When I first started writing this diary I told myself I'd write down only the absolute truth. Now I understand that's not possible. It wouldn't be possible for anyone, not just me. All I can do is be honest about what I feel, I can do that, what I feel and what I believe in. Total openness about facts I can't manage and I've given up arguing with myself about it. I needn't tell lies but I can't tell the whole truth. (65)

Asta is a woman who can both mother *and* write, and her act of keeping a diary is a private defiance. What Vine explores, however, are the limits to this dual role, which are revealed in her silence about the truth of Swanny's birth. We never know whether the truth has been told in her private diary entries, but the missing page testifies to Asta's feeling that she must adhere to the conventions dictating the kind of self she can present (Daly and Reddy 5-10): that is, having created herself publicly in conformity to the myth of biological motherhood, she must destroy the page of her diary that would truly "record her [daughter's] arrival" and so disrupt or undermine the myth:

I had this great urge to write and just record her arrival and my happiness. Is there anything to compare with the happiness that follows great grief, when all is made good, like waking after a bad dream you thought was real? My girl, my daughter, at last I

Here a page was missing. (418-19)

Asta's adoption of Swanny and her assertion that Swanny is "hers" are implicitly acceptances of motherhood "as a choice essentially *separate* from biology, drawing a distinction between the ability to give birth and the decision to care for children" (Daly and Reddy 3-4). This cannot, however, be part of the narrative Asta herself feels able to tell, and her evasions ultimately lead Swanny to conclude that she comes from a world of violence and death, rather than from a world of love and birth.

Asta's suppression of the truth about Swanny's birth must be seen as a crime against her, inflicting on her psychological damage for which, at the time the story is set, there is no help (92). The revelation that there is a mystery concerning her birth preoccupies her for twenty years with its repercussions, engaging her in a fruitless quest that leads to "the ultimate madness and destruction of everything she had once been" (369). The division within Asta is bequeathed to Swanny as a divided identity, "divided into two by some strange illness of the mind, less and less herself..." (27). The effect of the revelation (or lack of a true revelation) is one of separation and isolation, a feeling that she is an outcast (95). She has been obedient and submissive, "the favourite daughter, the good wife" (292), kept by her mother and husband "in a kind of subjugation" and treated like a child. It is editing the diaries that transforms her into an independent woman, but she is simultaneously cut loose from the whole of her past identity and feels compelled to find another. The book's final irony, however, is a sentimental one: Asta, sick with longing for her Platonic lover's child, has unawares raised that child as her own favourite daughter (321). This happy secret, together with the presence in the text of the idealised male figure of Asta's Platonic lover, Harry Duke, considerably softens the noir elements of *Asta's Book*. The unrecognised family romance does not, however, cancel out Asta's crime against Swanny, which retains its disturbing character in spite of the love story that lies behind it:

Our need to know our own origins is deep-seated, is at the root of personality...This part of [Swanny's] life, its foundation in fact, was cut

away, as a spade swiftly digs a pit and makes an abyss. Asta built the foundations and Asta dug the hole she fell into. No doubt, she didn't know what she was doing. (303)

This focus on the secret self, the destabilising of identity, the confused relationship between guilt and innocence and the "blank waste of despair" on the aged Swanny's face (307) are, as we have seen, familiar elements in noir crime novels. The narrator's speculation that Asta "didn't know what she was doing" suggests a gap in Asta's self-perception and recall (she ultimately no longer herself remembers the truth about Swanny's origins) to which we can find parallels in the other female noir that we have examined. Just as the amnesiac-hero of male noir signifies "a splitting or breakdown of a unified male identity" (Krutnik 132-33), so the gaps in understanding and memory amongst guilty mother figures are evidence of the fragmentation of secure, normative identities. Asta's forgetfulness, the blanking out of the crime itself in *The Iron Gates* and of the moment of the crime in *Innocent Blood*, Edith's suppression of so many bad things that her memory itself starts to disintegrate, Vera's retreat "into herself and into deep silence" (291) - these "absences" reflect some of the conflicts and uncertainties within the mother figures whose guilt is at the heart of each narrative.

The novels of all four of the female crime writers we have discussed can be judged, in comparison to the work of many feminist crime novelists writing from the mid-eighties on, as texts in which "the 'feminine' and much more so the 'feminist' content' is implicit rather than explicit" (Munt 25). It seems clear, however, that there is abundant feminist interest in the subjects explored in these novels - the nature of maternal guilt and self-division; the ways in which the "crimes" of the mother can be created by male transgressions (*Edith's Diary*, *Innocent Blood*) or by patriarchal constructions of motherhood and femininity (*The Iron Gates*, *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, *Asta's Book*). This interest is apparent when we see distinctly noirish traits surfacing

outside of genre fiction, in more mainstream explorations of the nature and causes of maternal guilt. So, for example, a recent British novel by Lesley Glaister, *The Private Parts of Women* (1996) - "serious" fiction that is also, as the jacket blurbs suggest, "a successful thriller"¹⁸ - has as its protagonists two women who, between them, contain some of the most familiar characters of female noir. The primary centre of consciousness is an absent mother, Inis, who rejects a daughter and feels guilt for having killed her baby by having an abortion; the other main character, Trixie, was, like the baby daughter of Inis, rejected by her mother, and has suffered a splitting of her personality into (in addition to her "respectable" persona) a *femme fatale* and psychopathic boy who struggle for control of her life. Trixie, in consequence, has a "hole in [her] memory" (174), leaving her, like the fractured female identities of noir, unable to know herself fully, unable even to know whether she will herself nurture a child or kill it, and we as readers remain in the end uncertain about whether she was responsible for the disappearance of a baby - "as if I would take a baby and strangle him" (238). Glaister's narrative is much more overtly feminist than the crime novels considered above, and it moves towards a more positive representation of female self-discovery and integration into the community, with Trixie finally free of the male psychopath and united with her sexual *femme fatale* personality, and with Inis returning to her family, running "to love" and not "from everything" (276). Like female noir, however, it has at its centre the "terror-filled love" (78) of guilt-ridden mothers and their children.

Increasing exploration of maternal subjectivity in crime novels written by women can clearly be linked to wider ideological and cultural changes, and standard decadal generalisations to some extent fit the texts we have been discussing: the work of Highsmith, James and Vine can be placed in relation to the emergence of modern feminism from the 1960s on; the novels of Vine, in particular, can be seen to reflect "the feminist reclamation of mothers and their subjectivity that begins in the late 1980s and early 1990s."¹⁹ One cannot, however, posit any simple line of

"development". So, for example, Millar's 1970 novel, *Beyond This Point Are Monsters*, is a significantly more matrophobic narrative than are some of her earlier novels; Highsmith's *Edith's Diary*, published in 1977, is in its way as subtle and sympathetic an exploration of maternal subjectivity as are Vine's novels of the late 1980s and early 1990s; "Vine" herself, in her Ruth Rendell persona, wrote, in 1989, a short story called "Loopy", which is as old-fashioned an Oedipal tale of a murderously lupine mother and son as one could hope to find; and in *Murder for Mother* (1994), the anthology in which this Rendell tale is included, the great majority of the other stories (mostly written in 1994, half of them by women) also make no attempt to represent the subjectivity of the mother. Similarly, in thinking of mothers' roles in neo-noir, it has to be admitted that *Fargo's* happily-married mother-to-be tackling the traditional role of the tough male detective belongs to the same decade as the murderous mother figure of *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson, 1992) and the bed-ridden mother who acts as the perfunctory explanation of yet another psychopathic son in Jon Amiel's 1995 film, *Copycat*. What we are looking at, then, is not what social scientists would call a phase change, but instead at what they might term a trend or "an expansion of the existing possibility set" - a broadening of what was once a predominantly masculine genre and an enlargement of the possibilities it offers for complex explorations of female identity.

Notes

1. On reclamation of maternal subjectivity see also, for example, Cosslett and Walters.
2. See, for example, Kaplan 54: "despite their regressive ideological function on a strictly narrative level", the visual style of films noirs often overwhelms the narrative so completely that this is "the only period of American film in which women are deadly but sexy, exciting, and strong".
3. Some of the more useful definitions of noir are offered by Krutnik, Foster Hirsch, and Silver and Ward.

3. See Munt (17-18, 80 and 131-32) and Krutnik (88) on noir and male identity.
4. Given the fact that women writers started producing detective fiction in the nineteenth century, they, too, of course, contributed to the formation of generic conventions (see Klein *passim*).
5. Apropos of generic transformation, mid-fifties novels like Jim Thompson's *Savage Night* (1953), Charles Willeford's *Pick-up* (1954) and David Goodis' *The Blonde on the Street Corner* (1954), for example, deliberately violate - to stunning effect - generic expectations. On the representation of 'the crisis of masculinity' as a reflection of a pervasive sense of crisis in patriarchal structures, see also Silver and Ursini 5-8 and O'Brien 94-5.
6. See, for example, Munt's discussion (Ch. 5) of such feminist/lesbian investigative crime fiction as Vicki P. McConnell's *Mrs Porter's Letter* (1982) and *The Burnton Windows* (1984), and Barbara Wilson's *Murder in the Collective* (1984) and *Sisters of the Road* (1986).
7. Cook (73-84); Bratton (158-62); Telotte (5); Cameron (152-64).
8. See Daly and Reddy (10-13), who also introduce Elaine Tuttle Hansen's discussion of novels such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* - texts that, in contrast to the crime novels we are examining, "clearly resist and deconstruct the mythic duality, paradox, or splitting of the mother" (12-13 and 21ff).
9. See Michael Walker's discussion of the categorisation of these films in the 'Introduction' to Cameron (17-18).
10. Cowie discusses (137-59) the transformation of generic expectations in such films as *Raw Deal* (Anthony Mann, 1948) and *Secret beyond the Door* (Fritz Lang, 1948).
11. Melodrama, with its non-psychological conception of character, does not focus on inner division but rather (see, e.g., Doane's arguments) on "reading" other characters; again, in a-heroic noir, this is in contrast to the private eye hero-quest structure, where "reading" other characters is much more to the fore. Cowie (129-30)

sees noir as a development of melodrama in which, instead of such obstacles to the heterosexual couple as external forces of family and circumstance, there are obstacles which "derive from the characters' psychology or even pathology".

12. See Kaplan (130) on this sort of "medical gaze" turning the mother into an object.

13. Cliffie, in spite of his over-dependence, is deliberately presented as *not* suffering from Oedipal over-attachment or overmastering mother-love.

14. See Kaplan (131), who uses this as a means of judging the representation of the mother in *Now Voyager*. Thompson, in contrast, does not "repress...attention to the mother's experience..."

15. The entries (193ff) read by Sands finally make the whole story clear, with the first victim oblivious to the meaning of the narrative she is telling (and Sands' commentary, e.g., 196, underlining what Mildred was incapable of seeing).

16. Penny Perrick, *Sunday Times*, jacket blurb on *King Solomon's Carpet*; Munt (22).

17. See Walters (67-8).

18. *Daily Telegraph*, quoted on jacket; amongst American writers, Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison, for example, might be said to attempt a similar assimilation of crime fiction.

19. See Munt (19) and Cosslett (9).

Works Cited

Benjamin, Jessica, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

Bloch, Robert. *Psycho* (1959). London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997.

Bratton, Jacky, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill (eds). *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*. London: British Film Institute, 1994.

- Cain, James M. *Mildred Pierce* (1943). *The Five Great Novels of James M. Cain*. London: Pan Books (Picador), 1985.
- Cameron, Ian (ed). *The Movie Book of Film Noir*. London: Studio Vista, 1992.
- Campbell, SueEllen. "The Detective Heroine and the Death of Her Hero: Dorothy Sayers to P. D. James." *Modern Fiction Studies* 29 (Autumn 1983): 497-510.
- Chandler, Raymond. *The High Window* (1943). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971.
- Cook, Pam (ed). *The Cinema Book*. London: British Film Institute, 1985.
- Cosslett, Tess. "Feminism, Matrilinealism, and the "House of Women" in Contemporary Women's Fiction." *Journal of Gender Studies* 5 (1996): 7-17.
- Cowie, Elizabeth. "Film Noir and Women" in Joan Copjec (ed), *Shades of Noir*. London: Verso, 1993.
- Cranny-Francis, Anne. *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.
- _____. "Gender and Genre: Feminist Rewritings of Detective Fiction." *Women's Studies Int. Forum* 11 (1988): 69-84.
- Daly, Brenda O. and Maureen T. Reddy. *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *The Desire to Desire: the Woman's Film of the 1940s*. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1987.
- Glaister, Lesley. *The Private Parts of Women*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996.
- Greenberg, Martin H. (ed). *Murder for Mother*. New York: Signet, 1994.
- Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Highsmith, Patricia. *Edith's Diary* (1977). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980.
- _____. *Strangers on a Train* (1950). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974.
- Hirsch, Foster. *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen*. San Diego: A.S. Barnes, 1981.

- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*.
Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Hubly, Erlene. "The Formula Challenged: The Novels of P. D. James." *Modern Fiction Studies* 29 (Autumn 1983): 511-21.
- James, P. D. *Innocent Blood* (1980). Glasgow: Sphere Books, 1981.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. "Motherhood and Representation: From Postwar Freudian Figurations to Postmodernism." *Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. New York and London: Routledge, 1990.
- Kaplan, E. Ann (ed). *Women in Film Noir*. London: British Film Institute, 1980.
- Klein, Kathleen Gregory. *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Krutnik, Frank. *In a Lonely Street: Film, Genre, Masculinity*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Martin, Richard. *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema*. Lanham, Md., and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1997.
- Millar, Margaret. *A Stranger in My Grave* (1960). London: Transworld Publishers (Corgi), 1962.
- _____. *Beast in View* (1955). London: Hdder and Stoughton, 1967.
- _____. *Beyond This Point Are Monsters* (1970). London: Keyhole Crime, 1982.
- _____. *The Iron Gates* (1945). New York: Dell Publishing, 1960.
- Munt, Sally R. *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- O'Brien, Geoffrey. *Hardboiled America: Lurid Paperbacks and the Masters of Noir* [expanded edition]. New York: Da Capo Press, 1997.
- Shadoian, Jack. *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster /CrimeFilm*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977.

- Silver, Alain and Elizabeth Ward (eds). *Film Noir*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1980.
- Silver, Alain and James Ursini (eds). *Film Noir Reader*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1996.
- Telotte, J.P. *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989.
- Thompson, Jim. *The Grifters* (1963). Berkeley: Black Lizard Books, 1985.
- Vine, Barbara [Ruth Rendell]. *A Dark-Adapted Eye* (1986). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994.
- _____. *Asta's Book* (1993). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994.
- _____. *King Solomon's Carpet* (1991). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992.
- _____. *The Brimstone Wedding* (1995). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996.
- Walters, Suzanna Danuta. *Lives Together/Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Lee Horsley teaches in the English Department at the University of Lancaster. She is author of *Political Fiction and the Historical Imagination* (1990) and of *Fictions of Power in English Literature 1900-1950* (1995). Her book on *The Noir Thriller from*

1920 to 'the Near Future' is forthcoming in the Macmillan 'Crime Files' series.

Katharine Horsley is a Prize Fellow in English at Harvard University.