"Something Better Left Alone": Interrogating the Mother in *Dolores Claiborne*

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> [P]aradoxically, the very attractiveness of feminism was that it provided an arena for separation from oppressive closeness with the mother; feminism was in part a reaction against our mothers, who had tried to inculcate the patriarchal "feminine" in us. Feminism was a chance to find out who we were and what we wanted.
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> — E. Ann Kaplan, *Women* 172

From Voyeur to Witness

Based upon Stephen King's 1992 novel, Taylor Hackford's *Dolores Claiborne* (1995) takes a mother-daughter relationship as its dramatic focus. Estranged for fifteen years, Dolores St. George (Kathy Bates) and her daughter Selena (Jennifer Jason Leigh), are reunited when the former is accused of murdering her wealthy and aged employer. This meeting is anonymously facilitated by John Mackey (Christopher Plummer), a detective long-convinced of Dolores' murderous propensities. Driven by his failure to prosecute her for the death of her husband, Joe, some eighteen years earlier, Mackey hopes Selena's return will become the source of Dolores' undoing. Equally convinced of her mother's guilt for the earlier crime, Selena dutifully returns to their island-home where she calls upon her experience as a successful New York journalist to orchestrate Dolores' defence. During her stay, she is forced by her mother to confront the events that led, during an historic solar eclipse, to Joe's death. Although she initially rejects both her mother and the testimony she provides, Selena comes, at the close of the film, to face her own repressions and, in so doing, effects a reconciliation with the woman whose claims she has hitherto denied.

With its opening sequence, *Dolores Claiborne* literally and metaphorically frames Dolores for murder. It begins with the camera panning the grounds surrounding a large and secluded house. As it closes in on the glass-fronted door, its surreptitious movement ensures that the viewer is positioned as a voyeur, peering into the gloomy interior. No one is yet visible in this frame. Instead, the pleas of one woman, "No, Dolores! Leave me be! Let go of me! Let go of me, Dolores," along with the sounds of a struggle—only presented through the magnified shadows which play across the wall—are heard. The first person to appear in the film is Vera Donovan (Judy Parfitt), who tumbles down the stairs, breaking through the banister to land at the viewer's

feet. Following this dramatic entrance, Dolores unsteadily descends. A close-up shows her apparently sighing when she realises Vera is still alive. Seen hastily ransacking the kitchen, Dolores returns with a marble rolling pin, which she raises above Vera's head. At this moment, the bloodied Vera looks directly into the camera that is, like Dolores, positioned above her. She utters her second invocation, "Please," which, because of the camera position and angle, seems addressed to viewer and Dolores alike. The rising tension of the opening sequence reaches its zenith at this point, only to be dissipated by the arrival of the mailman. Entering the house, he discovers Dolores, suspended over Vera's broken body with rolling pin held aloft. His reading of the scene as a site of murder, "Oh, my God! What have ya done? Jesus, Dolores! Oh God! Oh my God! Ya killed her," along with Dolores' tears as she drops the rolling pin, bring the sequence to a close.

The opening of *Dolores Claiborne* offers the voyeuristic thrill of being privy to a violent transgression that ought to remain hidden. The pleasures of watching without being seen are, however, called into question at the moment at which Vera gazes directly into the camera and utters her monosyllabic plea. This challenge to the viewer-voyeur is augmented by the arrival of the mailman, whose obvious shock, along with the judgement he pronounces, introduces a moral and legal dimension into the drama of looking. His presence ensures that the voyeuristic pleasure of the opening sequence in part gives way to the responsibility of witnessing. Soon after, the mailman's role as judge and jury is assumed by Mackey and by the townspeople who alternatively shun and torment the murder suspect. As the chief representative of the law, Mackey's role is to speculate on Dolores' motive and uncover the evidence that will eventually indict and convict her. For Mackey, a successful investigation would not only demonstrate the punitive consequences of violence but at the same time satisfy a personal agenda. It would confirm his previous sense of Dolores' responsibility for Joe's death and bolster his own self-image.

From the viewer's perspective, Mackey's investigations promise that the crime scene will be revisited during the course of the film, but with a more complete understanding of how and why Vera dies. For this reason, Mackey not only represents the law but also embodies the viewer's desire for a more prolonged and detailed revelation of what would otherwise remain concealed. When Dolores eventually provides a detailed account of the events preceding Vera's death, the opening sequence of the film is seen from a different slant. As well as vindicating Dolores, this subsequent perspective shows how the cinematic "framing" of the murder suspect and simultaneous duping of the viewer are achieved through the selective and careful editing which operates in the film's opening. Until this point, the viewer, like Mackey, scrutinises Dolores, watching by turns for the signs of her murderous potential, the moment at which she submits to the pressure to confess, or, indeed, unwittingly provides the evidence which will bring about her downfall.

Once Vera's death is revealed as suicide, Dolores' attempts first to prevent it and then bring about its completion through a "mercy killing," testify to her compassion

and the bond between the two women. This originates in their shared isolation and will to survive in what Vera calls "a depressingly masculine world." Yet even though Dolores explains the compromising position in which she is discovered, she also confesses, at the close of the film, to the murder of Joe. In so doing, she exposes a terror which proves to be domestic, familial and incestuous rather than occult or psychotic. Her violence is shown to be a rational response to the destruction wrought by her husband. Overturning the film's visual codes, which gesture toward horror and gothic genres, this confession presents the viewer with a mother driven by a desire to provide for and protect her daughter. In this film, the mother—even in her homicidal incarnation—is vindicated.

The way in which *Dolores Claiborne* first frames the mother and then goes on to absolve her points to the film's subversive agenda. Such a framing crucially invokes a cinematic tradition in which the mother is constructed as "evil, possessive and destructive" (Kaplan, *Motherhood* 48). This figure, particularly associated with the horror genre, is raised in *Dolores Claiborne* only to be exorcised by Dolores herself. From this perspective, the dramatic effects of Dolores' testimony seem to bear out Sarah Harwood's point that "To gain any discursive flexibility or extend their representational repertoire, mothers must actively contest their own representations" (102). When, at the close of the film, Selena comes voluntarily to her mother's defence, standing up for her against Mackey and his accusations, she does so because she acknowledges the validity of her mother's story. Such a belated reassessment of the mother after long years of neglect and disavowal is suggestive of a wider movement within feminism itself.

In her account of the development of post-war feminism, E. Ann Kaplan argues that women, for psychic and ideological reasons, have failed to "identify with" and "look from" the position of the mother. Representing one of the chief repressions at work within feminist discourse, such a failure to acknowledge the mother's oppression within a patriarchal system ironically reflects that system's relegation of the mother "to silence, absence, and marginality." Dominated by the daughter's perspective, feminism has, until recently, "remained locked in ambivalence toward the mother" (Kaplan, *Women* 172-73). This ambivalence, as Kaplan suggests, has its origins in the unconscious:

> On the unconscious level, we were angry with the mother on two counts: first, because she would not give us the independence we needed, or the wherewithal to discover our identities; second, because she failed to protect us adequately against an alien patriarchal culture by which we were, psychologically, culturally, and (sometimes) physically harmed. (173)

As Kaplan explains, such ambivalence toward the mother has only recently been addressed by feminist critics and theorists, principally those willing to develop the psychoanalytic insights of Melanie Klein and others. Through their work these feminist

theorists are beginning to assess the ways in which mothers, like their daughters, are "constructed [...] by a whole series of discourses, including the psychoanalytic, the political, and the economic" (Kaplan, *Women* 173). The trajectory which has governed feminism, as its initial anger toward and neglect of the mother has given way to a return to and re-evaluation of her, is noticeably recapitulated within *Dolores Claiborne*. Remaining firmly focused on the mother-daughter relationship, *Dolores Claiborne* traces a process whereby the daughter's longstanding judgement of her mother is called into question and finally rescinded. By the close of the film, Selena's loyalty to her father is supplanted by a new allegiance to the mother who has sought to defend her against the excesses of the patriarch. The way in which this trajectory is presented, along with the transformation it effects, is the focus of this reading of the film.

The Mother and the Law

As he enacts a drama of detection, Mackey sets about asking the questions and gathering the evidence he believes will convict Dolores. Even though these activities periodically interrupt and sometimes even trigger exchanges between Dolores and Selena, they increasingly take second place to the development of the mother-daughter relationship. Since, for Mackey, the only satisfactory outcome to his investigation is the arrest and conviction of Dolores, his presence threatens to impose another separation on the two women, bringing the drama that unfolds between them to a premature close. For this reason, Mackey's presence, despite an initial investment in the detection narrative, calls forth an ambivalent response on the part of the viewer. As the film progresses, the viewer is, like Selena, compelled to negotiate two versions of the truth, represented by Mackey and Dolores respectively. Suspended between these two figures, Selena must also decide whose narrative she believes and where her loyalties lie—with a law which presumes the mother to be guilty or with the woman who comes only belatedly to explain her actions.

While it is overshadowed by the mother-daughter relationship, detection nonetheless provides *Dolores Claiborne* with its central trope. Both Mackey and Selena are identified with the investigative role and both subject Dolores to forms of interrogation. Less obviously, but more significantly, Dolores herself assumes the mantle of investigator in relation to Selena. Seeking to decipher the identity of a daughter who has become a stranger to her, Dolores is cast as an analyst-detective who reads the symptoms of Selena's present disorder. Acknowledging her daughter's traumatised condition, she sets about tracing the repressions that Selena's symptoms mask and *simultaneously* reveal. In this way, Dolores emerges as the agent who, acting on her daughter's behalf, prompts a direct confrontation with the past. In the exchanges which take place between them, Dolores consistently challenges Selena's recollections of family history. She acts as a repository for the memories Selena has repressed or, alternatively, for experiences denied. The centrality given to Dolores' interrogation of her daughter's history not only enables an exploration of memory and repres-

sion in *Dolores Claiborne*, but also becomes the means through which the film itself reappraises the role of the mother.

Selena's life before she is called home (by Mackey's unsigned fax and news-clipping), is depicted in *Dolores Claiborne* through a brief early scene which shows her to be aggressive, determined and competent within her work environment. First viewed as she confronts her editor and erstwhile lover over the space allocated for her latest story, she is also shown downing the pills which, it later emerges, maintain her psychic equilibrium. Her editor's question—"Why does every story have to be do or die with you?"—assumes a deeper resonance as the film progresses. For not only does the incestuous story the teenage Selena unwittingly "tells" her mother bring about her father's death, but it is also retold by Dolores in order to stave off Selena's present self-destruction. As the film develops, it becomes clear that Selena's psychic integrity is maintained only precariously, with the aid of numerous medications, cigarettes and alcohol. For most of the time, she exudes a nervous energy that is only ever productively channelled when she is engaged in her long-distance journalistic investigations or her legal defence of Dolores. From the viewer's perspective, the significance of Selena's symptoms changes throughout the film. Initially, Selena's demeanour appears to signal the pressures of a highly competitive profession. Later, her symptoms can be read as a consequence of her mother's murder of Joe. Finally, they prove to be the sign of her repression of incest and of the story that, once revealed, provided Dolores' with a motive for murder. Significantly, Selena never directly articulates the story of her victimization by her father, although it is visually represented from her perspective in one of the film's closing scenes. Until this point, it is her "telling" reactions to the question of her father's impropriety, on two separate occasions—vehement denial and panic—which act as confirmation of incest.

The questions relating to identity and denial which *Dolores Claiborne* dramatizes are presented through a sequence in which non-recognition and then misrecognition feature. On her arrival at the local court-house, Selena is greeted by Mackey, who pointedly reminds her that they have met before—in the year of the eclipse. Ignoring his comments (and the veiled reference to her father's death), she demands to see her mother. Oblivious to Selena's arrival, Dolores busies herself by furiously cleaning the room where she is kept. With a mere glance at Selena, she protests that she did not request a lawyer. Clearly shocked to be introduced, by an embarrassed police officer, to her own daughter, Dolores' adversarial stance momentarily dissipates. The awkward embrace between mother and daughter which follows is witnessed by Mackey, who hovers expectantly behind Selena in the doorway. His presence as an observer of the intimate mother-daughter reunion symbolizes the law which threatens to sever the renewed—if somewhat tenuous—connection between the women.

As well as highlighting the years of absence which lie between them, Dolores' failure to recognize Selena draws attention to the class distinctions separating mother and daughter. In this scene, Selena is figured as a middle-class outsider, while her mother clings, despite the protests of the police officer—"Jesus, Dolores! You're a suspect,

you're not a maid"—to her role as domestic servant. These class divisions later assume a greater significance when it becomes clear that Selena owes her status, as an educated professional, to the labours Dolores has performed for Vera. At the same time, Dolores' misidentification of her daughter's role unwittingly articulates Selena's position in relation to the law. Adopting a studied indifference to her mother, she refuses to become embroiled in what she describes as a "small domestic drama" and instead assumes the role of legal advocate for the murder suspect. Declaring a willingness to submit to the law Mackey seeks to uphold, she later tells Dolores: "You didn't kill Vera? Then great. You've got nothing to worry about. You did, then you deserve whatever comes." In her dealings with both Dolores and Mackey, Selena draws upon the legal expertise she has accrued as a journalist and in this way appears able to sustain her mainland identity. Ironically, this identity is grounded in an ability to persuade people to speak out, or reveal for public consumption, what otherwise remains concealed. Her doubly defensive stance in the film, as she upholds the rights of the defendant, and simultaneously refuses the appeals of her mother, proves even more appropriate given the repressions that define her existence.

In *Dolores Claiborne*, the mother's readings of her clearly wounded daughter (both as teenager and adult) align her with a psychoanalytic tradition but also lead her to participate in the investigative processes to which she herself is subjected by Mackey. In her joint role as analyst-detective Dolores consistently registers and reads Selena's symptoms and the measures taken to alleviate them. She first notes her daughter's chain-smoking and then, when unpacking Selena's bags, the copious medications she carries. In this early scene, Dolores sits in Selena's old room while the camera pans the walls. Amidst the display of newscuttings and photographs devoted to public atrocities is a picture of Virginia Woolf. While Selena's longstanding interest in the recording of history is suggested by the official markers adorning the room, the single image of Woolf—herself a victim of incest—suggests the film's concern (shared by Dolores) with a different, hidden history. As if to underscore this point, Dolores' expression registers her anxieties for her daughter and she conjures a memory of Selena as a child. The game of hide-and-seek played by mother and daughter as they roam the house closes with Dolores' playful call, "I can't find Selena anywhere. Where is she? Is she lost?" Echoing through the house, these questions equally resonate throughout the film, as Dolores seeks for the daughter who, although returned, is nonetheless "lost" both to her mother and herself.

Eclipsing the Father

Returning together to their long-abandoned home, Dolores waits on the porch as her daughter wrestles with the locked door. Surveying the desolate winter landscape, Dolores sees it become infused with colour and peopled by men who comb the undergrowth in their search for Joe. Transported back in time by this, the first of many visions from her past, Dolores anxiously orders the young girl (Ellen Muth) who

appears before her into the house. At this juncture, the adult Selena, unaware of the vision her mother inhabits, responds to the instruction, apparently spoken out loud. In this homecoming scene, which demonstrates Dolores' protective stance toward her daughter, the unexpected collapse of the boundaries between past and present is emphasized. Although mother and daughter share the same spatial location, Dolores speaks from a past to a daughter whose place is the present. As well as disrupting the linear narrative, the past transforms the muted colour and light which otherwise dominates the screen into a bright and colourful spectacle. This technique is particularly accentuated during the eclipse when the landscape is unnaturally vibrant with colour. Such visual transformations draw attention to but also represent an ironic comment on the idealization of the past, which takes its most acute form in the repressions governing Selena's recall of her own family history.

The different versions of history to which mother and daughter adhere bring them quickly into conflict with one another. Noting Selena's excessive drinking, Delores is the first to allude to Joe, by hinting that Selena appears to have inherited his alcoholic tendencies. This suggestion is rebutted by Selena, who asks, "Is that why you killed him?" Repelled by such directness, Dolores withdraws from the kitchen table where she and her daughter have been seated. Selena, for her part, also sets aside the question of Joe's death by launching into a diatribe against her mother: "Let's face it mother. We barely know each other. We haven't spoken in years and that's much your doing as it is mine." Remaining at the table with her back to the door, Selena is unaware of the vision that arrests her mother, in the shape of Joe's appearance from the past. Viewed from Dolores' perspective, he enters the domestic space even as his daughter continues her attack: "Let's not pretend that we're in some goddam Norman Rockwell reunion here [...]. As for dad, the few memories I have of him I'd like to keep. Are you listening to me?" At this point, a close-up of Selena shows only half of her face in the frame, while Joe's figure moves in. Selena's sudden awareness of her mother's absorption elsewhere is picked up by the camera, which retreats from the daughter and the steadily encroaching Joe. As it withdraws, it encircles Dolores, moving from left to right, so that, for one instant, Selena and Joe are fully eclipsed by the mother-figure. The threat posed by Joe, as he looms behind Selena, is diffused at the point at which Dolores effectively blocks the view. In this way, the film registers at a formal and symbolic level a mother who momentarily shields the viewer from the past before going on to reveal the threat it represents.

When the camera completes its encirclement of Dolores, the grey interior of the kitchen is flushed with colour and Dolores fully inhabits the earlier moment from which her vision of Joe is derived. She busies herself in the kitchen while her adolescent daughter flirts with Joe, tending to his every whim on his return from work. Notwithstanding Joe's seemingly playful exchanges with Selena, his presence incites a barely concealed anxiety in Dolores. The source of this anxiety becomes more apparent when, in Selena's absence, Joe subjects her to numerous bad-tempered insults. These kitchen antics prove to be a mere preamble to perhaps the most violent

sequence in the film. When Dolores' back is turned (as is Selena's in the kitchen scene), he takes a piece of heavy firewood and strikes her. His weary comment, as he nonchalantly leaves his stricken wife and returns to his newspaper ("Why the hell you make me do it?") suggests the extent of his violent misogyny. Even as she endures the pain of his attack, Dolores is careful to hide it from Selena, and waits until her daughter has departed for bed before retaliating. As Joe relaxes in his chair, she strikes him across the head with a milk jug. Standing over the stupefied Joe, Dolores follows this attack by wielding an axe at him. She is careful to screen this weapon and Joe's bloodied condition from Selena, who comes to investigate the noise. As in the scene of Joe's visionary arrival, it is the mother's body which shields the daughter. Dolores' ultimatum to Joe, "This is the last time you will ever hit me. Ya do it again, one of us is going to the bone-yard," forces his submission.

In this remembered scene, Dolores' reactive violence aligns her with an emergent cinematic tradition, identified by Hilary Radnor, in which the conventional *femmes fatales* of classical Hollywood cinema are supplanted by "a new generation [...] of psychofemmes—of women who refuse the violence of men." As Radnor goes on to elaborate, the actions of psychofemmes are grounded in an "ethical imperative," while the narratives in which these women feature "offer symptomatic articulations of the larger problematic of feminine culture and its relationship to the violence of men" (248). In the case of Dolores, a desire to protect Selena from Joe's violence leads her to adopt tactics which ensure that Selena will not bear witness to his excesses. Ironically, this concealment contributes to Selena's idealized view of her father and distrust of Dolores, for as she pointedly tells her mother, "I remember *you* hitting him."

While the visions to which Dolores is subjected, as opposed to the memories she actively invokes, more readily disrupt her temporal location, the vision she beholds in the kitchen proves deceptive. Presented to the viewer as an involuntary memory of the kind already experienced by Dolores in the porch-scene, it is brought to an end with a close-up of the tear-stained face of the adult Selena. This view of Selena shows that Dolores has taken control of the vision, translating it into a narrative which she has relayed to her daughter. This intervention marks a turning-point in the film. It indicates Dolores' first attempt to master her own memories and present them to Selena, so that she too can gain insight into the past.

Dolores' willingness to supplant Selena's "few memories" of her father with some of her own originates in her constant desire to protect her daughter—this time from the illusions created through a partial recall of events. Yet while Selena's reaction acknowledges the validity of her mother's recollections, her verbal rejoinder, "What do you want me to say? Thanks for sharing?", indicates her continued defensiveness. Undeterred by this, Dolores attempts, on the following morning, to establish both a physical and emotional connection with her daughter. Brushing her hand across Selena's face, she comments, "You're my daughter. I know that probably feels like something better left alone but it's true." Struck by the roughness of Dolores' touch rather than the tenderness of her approach, Selena only exclaims, "My God! Your

hands." Dolores' wry comment that they are indeed "Scary," subtly voices the fear these supposedly murderous hands incite, but also prompts her subsequent musings on the labours they have performed. As she tells Selena, "You wanna know about someone's life, look at their hands." What follows is Dolores' own account of her years of "hell" as housekeeper to the upper-class, tyrannical and intensely fastidious Vera. The passing of Dolores' working life is rendered in the film in a scene Dolores conjures through her storytelling. The smooth hands of a younger woman hanging out rows of sheets to Vera's exact specifications visibly age and toughen by the time this task is complete. The arrival of Mackey, who breaks in on the mother-daughter scene, leads Dolores to justify her undisguised hostility toward her old adversary. She informs Selena that she is not "making" but keeping "an enemy," and supports this point by recalling Mackey's actions during the investigation into Joe's death. In the scene she presents, Mackey's intuition that Selena can incriminate her mother leads to what Dolores describes as his "torture" of the young girl. He is viewed leaning over the weeping Selena, pressing his face close to hers as he fires off his questions. Mackey's desire to break Selena on this occasion is thwarted both by Dolores' objections and the authority of his superior who refuses Mackey's demand for "just five minutes alone" with Selena. This memory suggests that Selena's initial failure to recognise Mackey, despite his first heavy-handed attempt to remind her of their previous meeting, represents a repression of the forceful interrogations to which he subjected her in her adolescence. At the same time, Selena uses the occasion of the eclipse to explain her absence from home at the time of Joe's death. Unwilling to confess the cause of her flight—the prospect of a confrontation between her parents over Joe's molestations—she withholds from Mackey the secret which would provide him with Dolores' motive.

Representing a law which upholds both the name and memory of the father, Mackey later demands of Selena that she prove her own patriarchal allegiance by bringing Dolores to book. One of Mackey's tactics as he approaches Selena in the local bar takes the form of a confession to the inebriated woman. "I used to have a problem with that myself," he tells her. This comment, which additionally identifies Mackey with Joe, is followed by the detective's declaration that he and Selena are "alike." In support of this claim, he points out their shared devotion to professional life and lack of familial ties. In this way, Mackey tries to forge an alternative kinship with Selena, based upon their identities as joint upholders of truth. Such a kinship demands that Selena incriminate her mother for the death of Joe. Mackey's own professional status, as he tells Selena, rests upon a track record in which he has successfully prosecuted all of the murders he has investigated, except in the case of her father. By revealing family secrets, Selena can rectify past injustices and ensure that she and Mackey each maintain their personal and professional integrity. Failing in his rhetorical seductions, Mackey quickly alters his strategy for dealing with Selena. His increasing aggression suggests that he views Selena's reticence as a sign of her collusion with her mother's criminal activities. Reverting to the tones he adopted for his

interrogation many years earlier, Mackey confronts the adult Selena with her complicity in any further destruction wrought by Dolores. His scriptural citation, taken from Ecclesiastes, "For God shall bring every worker to judgement with every secret thing, whether it be good or evil," aligns him with a monolithic truth and authority. His final comment, "Vera Donovan's on my head. The next one's on yours," indicates his sense that, by refusing him, Selena must take responsibility for the future violence her murderous mother will inevitably enact.

Once Selena realizes that Mackey's obsession with her mother's guilt has led to her own return to the island, she dismisses his claims and exits the bar. She returns to Dolores, whose later reminiscences concerning the domesticated daughter she once had prompt Selena's admission that her private life is filled with "a lot of nobodies." This veiled allusion to sexual promiscuity and emotional lack represents the first point at which Selena reciprocates Dolores' confessional mode. However, this moment of potential intimacy is disrupted by an invasion of locals, who drive through the yard screaming insults and firing guns. As Dolores gamely takes them on with her axe, Selena's own adversarial resolve, already weakened by the day's encounters and the alcohol she has imbibed, finally vanishes. She stands, terror-stricken inside the house, trembling and tear-stained at the approach of the accusers. Following this incident, Selena's desperate attempt to regain her equilibrium through an intake of pills is witnessed by Dolores. As she watches Selena crouching beside the sink and waiting for the medication to take effect, Dolores' pained expression shows that her suspicions about Selena's means of dealing with emotional distress are confirmed. Dolores accedes to Selena's plea to be left alone, "You see how I am right now [...] just give me ten minutes," only because the ringing of an imaginary telephone distracts her. This auditory hallucination signals the commencement of another memory for Dolores' and returns her to the immediate aftermath of Joe's death. On this occasion, the young Selena answered the telephone to be confronted by abuse from an anonymous caller. Her reaction to this intrusion was as self-destructive as her adult response to the present-day hostilities. She smashed a Christmas bauble, using the shards to slash at her neck.

Returning to the present with this memory uppermost, Dolores tries to redeem the situation. "It was a bad patch," she tells Selena, referring to the events which followed Joe's death, "and now you're feelin' it all over again." Even though she understands the way in which the past informs Selena's present, Dolores fails fully to admit the extent of her adolescent daughter's psychic disintegration. Selena, on the other hand, is less euphemistic in her diagnosis: "I had a fucking nervous break-down, mother!", she asserts. Dolores' continued repression of this history is apparent when she instructs Selena, "don't say words like that!" The ambiguity of this instruction means that Dolores—whose own language is memorably colourful—censors either her daughter's obscene language or the term "nervous break-down." Still refusing to admit the effects of Joe's mysterious death and the unproven accusations of murder levelled against her, Dolores argues that Selena could not have achieved "a full schol-

arship at Vassar college" had she suffered "one of those things." Such continued denial leads Selena to flee the house. As Dolores watches this flight (and, indeed, its failure, since, in her drunken and drug-addled state she drives into the mud), the lights from Selena's car are dazzlingly transformed into the torches carried by the search-party of eighteen years ago. With this visual trigger, Dolores is returned to the earlier vision to which she was subjected on the porch. It resumes at the point where she ordered her daughter into the house. The young Selena appears in this scene to ask, "What did you do to him, ma?" Dolores' response, "Nothing, baby. I promise," is clearly borne of her desire to reassure the girl that the revelation of Joe's incestuous activities, and the murderous response these provoke, do not implicate her in his death. This lie is only addressed at the close of the film when Dolores admits that it is not only Joe's abuse of his daughter but also her response to it which underlies Selena's trauma.

Confession and Repression

The occasion which prompts Dolores finally to speak out about the death of Vera is yet another encounter with Mackey. After Dolores has retrieved from Vera's house those belongings not requisitioned by the detective as evidence, Mackey confronts her with the fact that she is sole heir to Vera's fortune. This revelation banishes Dolores' previous nostalgic reverie concerning Vera, and the anger she has thus far reserved for Mackey and his violation is redirected toward her former employer. Cursing them both, Dolores abandons Selena and leaves the scene of the crime. Tracked by her daughter to a nearby graveyard, Dolores responds to Selena's belated articulation of the question, "What really happened in that house, mother?" At this juncture the film returns us to the opening sequence to take in the events preceding Vera's death. These are shown from Dolores' perspective and illustrate the mixture of compassion and antagonism which characterizes the relationship between the two women. In the scenes in which she cares for the dependent and infantilized Vera, Dolores is effectively seen to mother the dying woman. The desperate struggle between them at the top of the stairs proves to have been caused by Dolores' attempt to prevent Vera's suicidal plunge and the rolling pin is raised over Vera's head in response to Vera's plea that Dolores help her complete the act of dying.

While these scenes resolve the question of Dolores' guilt, Selena responds not by acknowledging her mother's innocence but by providing her with a list of lawyers who can take on her defence. On the night before the hearing, however, Selena asks Dolores why she bothered to stay with someone as "abusive, mean [and] cheap" as Vera. "If someone hurts me, I leave," she says in a barely disguised attack on her mother. This apparent instance of mistaken identity—as Selena alludes to the damage caused by her mother rather than Joe—provokes the final confrontation between mother and daughter. When Selena characteristically springs to the defence of her father on the grounds that he was merely "a drunk," Dolores realises for the first time

that Selena has repressed his sexual abuse. Her rhetorical question in response to Selena's selective memory, "You don't seem to remember much of anything," gives way to incredulity: "You honest to God don't remember, do you? That's why you're so unsettled." Infuriated once more by Dolores' euphemistic terminology, Selena bypasses this question and retaliates with an attack which takes as its target her mother's language: "Unsettled. Don't you mean boogery, mother? If you're attempting some kind of meaningful analysis, perhaps we'd better define our terms. It's the cornerstone of critical thinking, the ability to communicate with an agreed-upon vocabulary." While Selena's linguistic display underlines the extent to which not only language but memory itself separates the two women, Dolores is undeterred by her daughter's "Vassar shit." In this crucial exchange, both women use language defensively: Dolores uses words she hopes will contain her daughter's state of disorder and Selena deflects attention away from the question of memory and forgetfulness by highlighting the linguistic and conceptual differences which separate mother and daughter. In so doing, Selena draws upon both education and class to outfoot her mother. Realising for the first time that Selena's failure to remember informs the judgements she has made, and contributes to her decline, Dolores sets about retrieving the history her daughter has repressed. Pouring Selena a drink she forces her to sit and listen to one final narration: "When we're through, when *I'm* through, you can go upstairs and take whichever one of those pills makes you feel best." The glass she passes to Selena is, as Dolores' memories surface, taken up by the hand of Joe. With this match-shot, the past is seamlessly integrated into the present and the viewer returns to the events Selena has repressed.

Puzzled by the inexplicable decline of her young daughter, Dolores meets Selena from work and, determined to uncover the source of her distress, insists that they will travel back and forth on the ferry until it is revealed. When a physical struggle ensues, and Selena is nearly lost overboard, Dolores spots the cameo-necklace, once belonging to Joe's mother, which adorns her daughter's neck. The value of this previously concealed gift is immediately understood by Dolores who realises that it carries a sexual significance. Despite her denials, Selena's panic at Dolores' discovery is read by her mother as confirmation of Joe's molestations. Later, Dolores attempts to withdraw the money she has saved for Selena's education in order that they can escape, only to find that it has already been claimed by Joe himself. As Dolores adduces, when she confronts the bank-manager, this state of affairs is brought about because of her gender: "It's 'cos I'm a woman, ain't it?" Victimized by the legal system and by the unwritten codes governing banking practice, Dolores finds an unexpected ally in Vera. Amidst the eclipse preparations, Vera chances upon a weeping Dolores. She responds by encouraging Dolores to articulate her distress: "Enlighten me, Dolores. What turns a stone-hard woman like you into the blubbering mess I see before me?" Curiously, while Dolores does indeed tell her story, she does so in a way which implies, rather than explicitly names, Joe's sexual transgression. Deflecting Vera's "How far has he gone?" with "He wasn't always like this," Dolores is startled into

confronting the issue by Vera's more direct and exasperated, "Has he fucked her?" At this juncture, Dolores recalls the scene on the boat with Selena. This recollection within a recollection centres on the force of Selena's denial of the incest. Striking her mother across the face, she screams, "You bitch!" Bringing Dolores' rendition of a repressed history to a close, the young Selena's curse and blow produce an abrupt shift back to the kitchen and the scene of the storytelling. While the force of Selena's response and the use of parallel editing are equally jarring, psychic continuity is maintained as the adult Selena takes up the angry denial of her younger incarnation. Selena screams "You bitch!" at her mother, "You crazy old lying bitch. You're a fucking psychotic," before making her escape to her bedroom. The collapse of past and present, past into present which is underlined throughout *Dolores Claiborne* is rendered again at this moment in the film. The adult who runs up the stairs reappears as the adolescent girl who flees the house when she realises her mother intends to confront her father over his abuse. In her attempt to prevent Selena's departure, Dolores almost falls into an abandoned well and it is clear from her expression that this near-fatal accident provides her with a solution to the problem of Joe. This last memory is recalled by Dolores as she sits alone in the kitchen with an empty glass—abandoned by Selena once again.

In the morning, Dolores remains in the kitchen where she has apparently maintained an all-night vigil and, anticipating Selena's flight, already packed for her. With no mention of the momentous events of the previous night, Selena reverts back to her professional and legal mode. She delivers the final instructions Dolores needs in order to face the inquest later in the day. Her only concession before she departs comes with the words: "I'm sorry, mother. Sometimes being a bitch is all a woman has to hang onto." These words, which echo those uttered by Dolores at an earlier point, in fact originate with Vera and so connect the three generations of women who feature in the film.

Selena's last words on the matter of the mother-daughter relation prove less final than she anticipates when, driving away, she discovers the tape her mother has left in her car. This is meant to be found only when Selena has left the island and the hearing to decide Dolores' fate is over. Its contents, her mother informs her in the recording, will also be relayed to the authorities. As the tape plays, the film doubles back to the moment where Dolores' previous narrative was interrupted by her daughter's outburst. It returns to the scene in which Dolores confides to Vera, and begins with the older woman's intimation that she murdered her own unsatisfactory husband: "An accident, Dolores, can be an unhappy woman's best friend." Suggesting a way out of Dolores' predicament, Vera further colludes with Joe's murder by releasing her housekeeper from her duties. In a coded exchange, Vera tells Dolores "to share this remarkable experience [the eclipse] with your husband." Dolores' hesitation, "I can't," gives way once Vera utters the refrain which runs throughout the film: "Sometimes, being a bitch is all a woman has to hang onto." In order to acknowledge Vera's coded intervention, Dolores addresses her employer once again as Vera, drawing attention to the solidarity which exists between the women. She then proceeds

with her plan, beginning by offering Joe a bottle of whiskey (a ruse also used to force Selena to face the story of incest), before confronting him over both his fraud and his abuse of their daughter. As she had anticipated, Joe forces her to lead him to the money she has hidden, having retrieved it from his bank account. As he marches Dolores through the undergrowth, she escapes his grasp and, with Joe in pursuit, heads for the well. Clearing the danger zone, Dolores turns to watch as Joe falls into her trap. Ignoring his pleas as he hangs precariously over the well, a distraught Dolores waits for Joe's grip to fail. When it does, the camera focuses on Dolores and the darkness which envelops her as the eclipse reaches its apex. "It was beautiful" is the comment which accompanies this moment of natural wonder and simultaneous death. Remedying the lies she has told, Dolores' taped confession closes with the words, "All I do care about, all I ever cared about, is that you're safe and sound."

In Defence of the Mother

Without directly registering the effects of Dolores' confession, *Dolores Claiborne* shows a pensive Selena standing on the ferry as it departs for the mainland. Looking back to the island she sees Mackey, her mother's accuser, and for one moment their gazes meet. Up until this point in the film, the commingling of past and present and the frequent collapse of the two has been used exclusively to convey Dolores' subjectivity and perceptions. However, in the last sequence, on the ferry where her mother first confronted her over the incest, Selena experiences for herself the incursions of the past. As she buys her coffee, the waiter hands two drinks to a man standing beside her who, as the camera pulls back, is revealed as Joe. Her face registering the shock of this near encounter, Selena follows him back onto the deck. Here she sees her younger self seated and awaiting her father's return. Adopting the adult Selena's perspective, the camera closes in on the father-daughter scene, recording the girl's anxiety and her father's guarded movements. Periodically, Joe looks around to ensure that, as he coaxes his daughter to masturbate him—"You remember how I showed you"—his dealings go unobserved. The adult Selena, however, scrutinises this scene, her gaze taking in the younger girl's distress as she tries to resist her father and then her blank, unseeing expression when she accedes to his demands. Bearing witness to the traumas inflicted by her father, Selena's presence in this scene calls into question his attempt to reassure and persuade his daughter by claiming, "Nobody's gonna see us, sweetheart." In this scene, the young girl's unseeing expression as her gaze is directed outside of the frame indicates the defensive blindness she assumes, along with the repressions and denials which will subsequently govern her subjective recall of her relationship with her father. His actions are, however, belatedly witnessed by both the adult she becomes and the viewer. Throughout this scene the perspective offered by the camera remains firmly focused on the reactions of the victim of the sexual crime. It shows, alternatively, the expressions which surface in the adolescent girl and the look on the adult Selena's face as she observes her younger self. In this

respect, the transition from voyeur to witness which is a feature of the opening scene of *Dolores Claiborne* is reiterated at its close.

Although the recovery of these repressed memories confirms her mother's view of events, the subsequent scene demonstrates that Selena's resistance of her own traumatic history has not yet been exhausted. Her reverie interrupted by the waiter, she retreats to the bathroom to recover her composure. Under a sign, which ironically instructs passengers to "Report All Injuries," she gazes into the bathroom mirror. Instead of showing her face, the mirror reflects a view of Selena from the back. This terrifying reversal suggests the extent to which her identity is forged through a turning away from the past.

Such a denial of self is only remedied when Selena returns to the island and arrives at the inquest where her mother is being cross-examined by both Mackey and the magistrate. Coming belatedly to her mother's defence, Selena testifies to the bonds which existed between Dolores and Vera, points out the flaws in Mackey's case and exposes his ulterior motives. Admitting her own part in the "prosecution" of Dolores, Selena accepts that she has wronged her mother and challenges Mackey to do the same. As an indication of the extent to which Mackey's drama of detection takes second place to the question of the mother-daughter relation, the outcome of the hearing is left inconclusive. It is brought to a premature close when, in a reversal of their roles, Selena offers her mother her hand and leads her away from Mackey with the words "He can't hurt you anymore."

In their dockside leave-taking, Selena admits that while she "doesn't know how to feel" about what Dolores has done, she knows it was done on her behalf. In a final gesture, Dolores touches the scar on her daughter's neck and in a reference to Selena's self-destructive urges asks, "Do I still have to worry about you?" Selena's response is to admit the loss their estrangement has brought about, "I don't wanna lose you again." Dolores' reassurance, along with the looks of recognition which pass between mother and daughter as they part, bring the film to its completion.

As it dramatizes the mother-daughter relation, *Dolores Claiborne* not only challenges existing conventions informing the portrayal of the mother in cinema, but also develops a cinematic language with which to articulate the relationship between memory and repression. Providing a means of confronting the image of the mother which circulates within male-dominated and somewhat misogynistic forms of representation, the film additionally charts the place of the mother within feminism. By the close of the film, Selena has been made to confront the traumas of her past and, in so doing, to renegotiate the place of the maternal in her life. From this perspective, the drama of the mother-daughter relationship in *Dolores Claiborne* can be said to encapsulate a wider movement in which the mother's place within a patriarchal culture is reassessed. Making visible both the divisions between mother and daughter and the ways they can lead one another to confront and resist the forces which conspire in their silence and separation, *Dolores Claiborne* represents a startling cinematic incursion into the "depressingly masculine world" of the genres it calls to account.

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