

Under the Shadow of Virgin Mary: Forging a New Maternal Path in Margaret Deland's *The Iron Woman*

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Abstract

Published in 1911, Margaret Deland's *The Iron Woman* depicts the transformation in the American cultural scene of the second half of the nineteenth century as affected by the powers of industrialization, modernity, and intellectuality. While reflecting on an extensive change in the social landscape, cultural ideology, gender roles, and family relations, the novel presents a unique exploration of the motherhood experience. I argue in this study that Deland reconceptualizes the female maternal experience by defying an already established ambivalent discourse about mothers in the American culture. This ambivalence, as exposed and challenged in *The Iron Woman*, has confined motherhood within different power relations which seek to codify the lives of mothers religiously, culturally, socially, and psychologically. Although she lived in a pre-feminist era, Deland was able to anticipate a modern feminist argument of motherhood in her characterization of real mothers who struggle in their society and resist conforming to the traditional idealization and essentialist prototypes that accompany mother figures in the American cultural mind. The major concern of this study is to discuss how Deland challenges a number of cultural codes of motherhood; such as, the religiously idealized Virgin Mary, the socially constructed "True Woman," and the newly introduced modernist "New Woman." Stepping beyond a dual, ambivalent discourse that glorifies mothers on one hand, and blames them on the other, Margaret Deland forges a new maternal path in her mother characters who resist inconsistency in culturally embedded notions of motherhood which codify and perpetuate a restrictive mother image while neglecting actual experiences of mothering.

Keywords: deland, industrialism, motherhood, *the iron woman*, womanhood

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The transition into the modern industrialized 'progressive' era in the mid-19th century America has received an extensive literary examination for its impact on various aspects of the American life. The iron and steel industry, labor movement, workers' rights and dilemmas were explored along with the accompanied social and cultural transformation regarding religious values, women roles, and family relations. American women writers of the time like Rebecca Harding Davis in her *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) and Mary Heaton Vorse in her *Strike!* (1930) have contributed to the rising debates on the effects of this transition upon different social and cultural notions. The American novelist, short story writer, and essayist Margaret Deland (1857-1945) has reflected on a fin de siècle American industrial society with its turbulent social, cultural, and economic issues. Deland, who was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania (today, the steel city of Pittsburgh), has depicted the industrial change in her hometown and childhood community in the fictional locales of Old Chester and Mercer in both her *The Awakening of Helena Richie* (1906) and *The Iron Woman* (1911). In both works, Deland introduces an argument on the role of the mother within this society and the socially and culturally established mother image in time women started to work, earn money, and spend more time in the public rather than the domestic sphere. Unfortunately, Deland has not received the appropriate critical attention she deserves though she contributed to different debates on women's rights and the impact of the growth of industrialization on society in general and women and family in particular. The significance of *The Iron Woman* lies in its rejection of how society judges its mothers. While Deland questions different motherhood molds with no intention to present any potential new alternatives, the work confirms that perfect, ideal mothers do not exist. As a middle class white woman, who carries a social philosophy that renders "the individual" responsible for the "public good" and larger social problems (Morey, 1998, p. 58), Deland was not expected to resist strongly ingrained mother images in the public mind and this may further marginalized her work. This resistance should be acclaimed as an early anticipation of the later changes in women roles and the accompanied feminist arguments discussing this change during the twentieth century and after.

Set in the 1860s, *The Iron Woman* revolves around the life of Helena Richie, the gentle, romantic, and traditional mother who was the major character in Deland's *The Awakening of Helena Richie*; and Sarah Maitland, the strong iron woman of the title who owns and manages the Maitland Iron Foundry. However, the title assumes two incompatible worlds according to the Victorian values of the 19th-century American culture. On one hand, the story explores the industrial world of Sarah Maitland who is presented as lacking the femininity expected of all women, as she runs an iron company and does not look as interested in any womanly behavior; therefore, her womanhood is constantly judged throughout the story. And on the second hand, Deland presents the maternal world of Helena Richie who embodies all feminine and womanly standards which attract the younger generation in the story including her son, David Richie, Sarah's son and step daughter, Blair and Nannie, and Elizabeth Ferguson, the daughter of Robert Ferguson who is the superintendent in the Maitland's works and the landlord of Mrs. Richie's house. While this may look like a comparison between two mother models which will be judged as 'good' or 'bad' according to religious, cultural, and social codes of motherhood, the work

turns to reject this binary opposition by presenting a real life for each of these women in which they succeed at one side and fail at another. While Helena is presented as an ideal all-loving, all-caring mother, the plot exposes a secret she is forced to reveal at the end of the story about her past sexual degradation. Likewise, the successful businesswoman in Sarah appears as a failure in her understanding of her role as a mother in the new industrial age, which pushes her son, Blair, to seek a fantasy of the perfect mother in other mother figures like Virgin Mary and Helena Richie.

While *The Awakening of Helena Richie* was considered a “runaway best seller” (Reep, 1985, p.15), *The Iron Woman* has received little recognition. This unjustified negligence of such important novel reiterates the marginalization that many female writers suffered in the 19th and early 20th centuries. While a research on *The Iron Woman* may contribute to revive an interest in writers like Margaret Deland and her contribution to a female world of literary writings for all venues of scholarship, the significance of this present research lies in its exploration of an important argument about motherhood and the woman’s position in this human experience that predates many feminist discussions of mothers in literature. A 19th-century fictional exploration of an American family and American motherhood may seem as far from the interest of contemporary readers, especially international or second language readers, but the anticipatory argument of motherhood that Deland presents in *The Iron Woman* appeals to our contemporary discussions of the role of motherhood in a rapidly-changing technological age as in the twenty-first century. With Deland challenging all these cultural codes of motherhood, one may question the possibility/ impossibility of theorizing about different cultural and social models of motherhood and the ability of contemporary literature of all origins and languages to question any authority that seek to restrict women and mothers in a narrowly shaped discourse.

Motherhood has been subjected to different ideological discourses which either celebrates and idealizes it as an elevated experience for building and perpetuating the nation, or degrades and criticizes it as an oppressive tool for isolating and disempowering women. With the rise of industrialism and the change in women positions in society, women started to question their roles and the impact of marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood on their work ambitions. Feminism itself has been inconsistent in its discussion of different experiences of motherhood. According to Kinser (2010), this ambivalence has shaped the relationship between motherhood and feminism, which she describes as “complex, dynamic, and sometimes contentious relationship” (p. 1). Examining various feminist writings on motherhood, Kinser (2010) found that feminism had “no single, unified, monolithic response” about the experience of motherhood (p. 2). The nineteenth century and early twentieth century American literatures reflect such ambivalence in approaching the maternal experience by exploring how motherhood is riddled within a variety of patriarchal, religious, modernist, and feminist power allocations. In its depiction of different images of mothers and their conflicts with their children and society in the late 60s of the nineteenth century, Margaret Deland’s *The Iron Woman* exemplifies how already established notions on motherhood are unattainable in reality. I argue in this paper that in light of a confining patriarchal ideology and a disoriented impact of industrialization and modernity, Margaret Deland presents a new path for understanding motherhood in *The Iron Woman* that defies the ambivalent discourse which governs the lives of mothers/women and leads to a maternal downfall of four mother figures in the novel in regard to their social conformity and mother-child

relationship. After I introduce the three mother images/codes that Deland resists in her work, I discuss the conformity or nonconformity of the novel's mother characters to each of these images starting with Sarah Maitland and then Helena Richie. However, two other mother figures have appeared in the novel and it would be significant to also discuss how they conform, or not, to the traditional codification of motherhood in public culture.

The fin de siècle American society was governed by a number of images of the mother figure that shows a discrepancy in the representation of the woman/mother in Victorian America. These images, conjured individually or collectively, include the ideal mother as in Virgin Mary, the culturally constructed, socially approved "True Woman," and the 20th-century modernist "New Woman." Deland's characterization of mothers in her novel reflects how maternity is fluctuating constantly between religious ideological authority, 19th-century Victorian ideals of femininity, and 20th-century emancipating feminist modernity. First and foremost, a set of ideals were constructed in nineteenth century American cultural ideology and instilled in the collective unconscious of the people to present a divine image of the mother as reflected in the character of Virgin Mary. This focal image of a mother goddess had governed the judgment of all mothers in 19th-century America. The idealization of the mother figure in culture presents a powerful, protective, all-loving, and self-sacrificing woman who devotes her whole life to take care of her child. She is depicted as the only source that provides the child with security, love, and satisfaction. Being a mother, woman is supposed to voluntarily sacrifice her own life and enter a self-negating state in which she recognizes her existence only in relation to her child. This image assumes a state of unattainable perfectness that renders mothers of all races and social classes impotent and confined in an impossible socially approved and culturally constructed mother role. The patriarchal ideology of the 19th –century- American society presents a mythical view of motherhood as the basic unit to construct a unified and strong generation. Among the earliest feminist critics to study motherhood are Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto (1989) who described the idea of a perfect mother as a "fantasy" that leads to a contradiction in dealing with mothers as they are idealized on one hand, and blamed for their children's faults on the other (p. 79). The image of Virgin Mary stands as a divine icon to which women should refer to evaluate and reform their motherhood experiences. Gatta (1997) argued that the divine woman provides a "symbolic compensation for what might be culturally diagnosed as a deficiency of psychic femininity, or anima, in America" (p. 3). Gatta discussed that the different prevailing forces of patriarchy, rationalism, and industrialism in 19th century America have created an unconscious cultural resistance in the form of idealization of the female experience of motherhood. The return to the iconic image of the Madonna in the 19th-century American cultural and literary history creates a safe haven which might provide an escape from the disorientation of the fin de siècle forces of modernity and industrialization.

The ideal example of motherly perfectness in Virgin Mary is the first mother image to be resisted and marginalized in *The Iron Woman*. Blair Maitland, the spoiled extravagant son of Sarah Maitland, is presented in the novel as in search of maternal love and female beauty, which he finds in an old valuable painting of a Madonna and a child. Unappreciated by Sarah, the painting costs five thousand dollars which Sarah keeps complaining about throughout the novel in a significant allusion to the conflict between moral/aesthetic values as represented by the maternal painting and materialistic ideals as represented by the industrial Sarah. Wondering how

much iron ore it would take to pay for the painting, Sarah mocks that Blair had “spent five thousand dollars on a picture that you could cover with your two hands” (p. 243). Although this painting of the divine woman and its sublime image of motherhood are not recognized by Mrs. Maitland in her practical life and vulgar house, they stand as judgmental of all the mothers in the novel including Sarah Maitland, Helena Richie, and Elizabeth’s mother, Dora. Deland (1911) described, “[I]n the half-light, the little dim Mother of God – immortal maternity! – could scarcely be seen” (p. 188). This marginalization of Mary’s painting in Sarah’s house assigns an unattainable fantasy state to the motherhood experience it carries. However, it does stand in between Sarah and her son as Blair yearns for this motherly idealism in his mother, and later in Mrs. Richie. His insistence on buying this painting reflects the lack of maternal love that he vainly looks for in his mother who is depicted as a powerful woman contradicting all traditional female and maternal characteristics as an owner and operator of the family’s iron works. For Deland, women like Sarah are no longer only maternal raising good kids, but also industrial raising a working generation and building a country. When Sarah gave Blair a tour into the foundry for the first and only time, he was impressed by its magnificence as something aesthetic, but he could not understand the work ethic and the great labor behind this industry.

Idealizing maternity in the image of Christ’s Mother generates devastating guilt and blame in the mothers who feel impotent in their attempts to reach to Mary’s image. Trapped in a cycle of blame and idealization, the mother enters the dark state of guilt in which she starts to consume her own self out of fear of imperfection. The two major mother figures in Deland’s novel are presented as realizing their inability to be perfect mothers like Virgin Mary; therefore, they blame themselves for their children’s moral perversity. Sarah Maitland recognizes her own failure in raising and teaching Blair to be a responsible and dependable person. She is shocked to hear how Blair took advantage of the emotionally disturbed Elizabeth Ferguson, who is supposed to marry David Richie within few days, and convinced her to marry him instead. After Blair’s elopement with Elizabeth, Mrs. Maitland realizes that she is responsible of her son’s moral fall due to her misunderstanding of her role as a mother. As a strong and financially independent, working woman, Sarah interprets motherhood in terms of money. Deland says; “To Sarah Maitland, no work which it was a woman’s duty to do could be unwomanly; she was incapable of consciously aping masculinity, but to earn her living and heap up a fortune for her son, was, to her way of thinking, just the plain common sense of duty” (p. 53). She thinks that she is a good mother as long as she provides her children with all their material and physical needs neglecting a child’s need for love and instruction to be able to depend on himself/herself away from his/her mother’s world.

The awakening of Sarah Maitland after the shocking behavior of her son, Blair, has made her realize that maternity does not mean money. She tries to undo her mistakes and decides to disinherit Blair to push him to work and earn his own living. During this last meeting between them, Blair refused to work in the foundry shouting, “[T]ake a job in your Works? I’ll starve first!... I’ll forget that you are my mother; it will be easy enough, for the only womanly thing about you is your dress” (p. 293). Sarah covered her face and wept as if the humility she felt by her self-centered son has melted the iron of her soul. She suffered afterwards from an accident in the foundry and stayed home waiting hopelessly for another chance to fix things with her son. While the material/capitalist mother type of Sarah is failing in front of the spiritual/ moral world

of Virgin Mary, Deland shows that mothers are unjustly judged according to this ideal religious model of motherhood. She implies that even the Mother of God may appear ‘imperfect’ to some as she could not fully protect her son from the cross. Lying in her deathbed, Mrs. Maitland stares into the “little dark canvas” for a long time and says; “Mary didn’t try to keep her baby from the cross...I’ve done better than that; I brought the cross to my baby” (p.333). Exceedingly, Sarah believes that she surpasses any imperfection a mother can hold. Therefore, she realizes her failure as a mother in society, enters a dark state of guilt, deteriorates, and dies.

Although the religious code of motherhood as explained above assumes an ideal mother image, it actually accompanies this image with a negation of womanhood itself. The ideal mother is no longer a woman with personal needs, sexual desires, and feminine attributes. According to Buchanan (2013), assigning a religious code to motherhood will submit it to the standards of “good and evil,” “god and devil” (p. 8). While Virgin Mary’s religious mother code represents “god” and “good,” an “antithesis” should be created for the “devil” and “evil” opposition. Buchanan argued that in this discourse “Woman is the antithesis of Mother” as woman represents the “negative attributes, such as childlessness, self-centeredness, work, materialism, hysteria, irrationality, the sensual/sexual body, and the public sphere” (p. 8). As a perfect mother, woman should not carry any of these attributes; therefore, a self-negation process is imposed on mothers in which they neglect their feminine and womanly needs to meet the larger needs of motherly perfection. This new state conforms to the 19th-century ideals of “True Womanhood” which will be discussed as the second cultural code resisted and challenged by Margaret Deland in *The Iron Woman*.

In the 19th century setting of Deland’s novel, women were expected to commit themselves to the ideals of the perfect mother while performing according to the image of the “true woman” of the time. While woman should be powerful and protective for her children, she should keep her obedience and submissiveness in the male-dominated society in which she lives. Such ambivalence adds to the burden that women are supposed to carry within a biased patriarchal cultural ideology. They are at the same time both powerful in relation to their children and powerless in relation to their society. Smith-Rosenberg (1991) has discussed the incompatibility between true womanhood and ideal motherhood. She argued that, “The True Woman was emotional, dependent, and gentle – a born follower. The Ideal Mother, then and now, was expected to be strong, self-reliant, protective, an efficient caretaker in relation to children and home” (p. 199). Sarah Maitland does not embody any of these standards for 19th century women. She is described as, “a silent, plain woman, of devastating common sense, who contradicted all those femininities and soft lovelinesses” (p. 7). As a widow with two little children, Sarah does not accept the dependency and submissiveness that the society projects on women. Her resistance pushes her to indulge in the world of iron industry and sacrifice the world of womanhood which seems unattainable if woman decides to get to the patriarchal public sphere and rejects weakness and oppression. Sarah understands very well that the new age of industry needs work, not beauty. Her late husband, Herbert Maitland, was “a mild, vague young widower who painted pictures nobody bought, and was as unpractical as a man could be whose partnership in an iron-works was a matter of inheritance” (p. 7). As compared to Sarah, Herbert would not fit for a large iron foundry as the Maitland’s in this transitional progressive era. He died after six months of their marriage. “[H]is wife has so jostled him and deafened him and

dazed him that there was nothing for him to do but die – so that there might be room for her expanding energy” (p. 8). With this energy, Sarah has decided to deviate from the feminine roles and the true woman ideals that oppress women and restrict them within specific socially constructed molds.

Between ideal motherhood and true womanhood, Sarah judges herself as a mother and a woman in terms of her ability to work hard, heap up fortune, and build a nation. She does not find self-fulfillment neither in femininity nor in maternity as her work represents the only success she needs. The domestic private sphere of the true woman of the time is turning into the iron foundry for Sarah. “[She] walked through her Iron Works as some women walk through a garden: - lovingly” (p. 105). When referring to the ladles in her foundry, Sarah states, “I call that ladle ‘the cradle of civilization’” (p. 107). Deland presents Mrs. Maitland as representative of the transformation in the industrial society and its impact on gender roles. Her views on both motherhood and femininity are presented as the reasons for her troubled relationship with her son. As a woman worker, Sarah believes in the “productive beauty” rather than the feminine beauty as discussed by Marquis (2003). Marquis argued that, “productive beauty is considered in concert with ‘traditional’ ideals of beauty, fertility, and domesticity; production through work replaces procreative production for Sarah Maitland” (p. 980). Although Blair is impressed with how Sarah is able to run an iron foundry by herself, his abhorrence and rejection is directed towards her lack of femininity and her way of maternity rather than her work itself. He considers her “ugly” referring to her physical “feminine” beauty and as “an esthetic insult to motherhood” (Deland, p. 136) when referring to her maternity. She is also the financially independent woman who is not a victim of patriarchal authority and who does not need the support of patriarchy in general. Deland wants to present a picture of the modern independent “New Woman,” but she is aware that she cannot present this female type as faultless.

Although Sarah Maitland is seen as an embodiment of the 20th-century modern “New Woman,” she exposes the inadequacy of this social construction when applied to a mother. This newly established social construction, introduced in late 19th-century, accompanies the transformation of society into industrialism and modernity and introduces the educated, free-minded, working, and financially independent woman who can control her own life socially, economically, and sexually. Unfortunately, the positive attributes of independence, determination, ambition, and freedom, which are celebrated by women and feminists in the early 20th-century, are condemned for mothers because they threaten to oppress and subjugate their children. The result is an ambivalent discourse that celebrates the childless new woman and blames her if she is a mother. I discuss in this section how the mother-son relationship in *The Iron Woman* is molded in light of the ideals of the modernist “New Woman.” The troubled relationship of Mrs. Maitland with her son has questioned her embodiment of modern new womanhood. She is blamed for her son’s financial dependency on her and his inability to understand the importance of work. As a strong working mother, Sarah’s lack of femininity has caused Blair to tend towards an unattainable ideal world of femininity and romanticism that he lacked as a child in relation with his mother. She is described early in the novel as the unwomanly woman, “[t]he only feminine thing about her is her petticoats” (Deland, p. 16).

This lack of femininity presents Sarah as a “castrating” woman who threatens her child’s manhood. On the other hand, Blair is depicted as “feminine” rather than “masculine” in the novel. He has an unappreciated painting talent through which he seeks a romantic/feminine world of his own away from the manly world of his mother. Therefore, he is attracted to the traditional motherly world of Mrs. Richie who is presented as an embodiment of femininity, true womanhood, and ideal motherhood. Instead of trying to indulge himself in the world of manhood as an adult, he is reversed to a state of femininity which he lacked in his mother as a child. The power of the new woman in Sarah is castrating to her son. Deland explains that, “the torrent of her angry shame suddenly swept Blair’s manhood of twenty-four years away; her very power stripped him bare as a baby; it almost seemed as if she had sucked his masculinity out of him and incorporated it into herself” (p. 138). The unwomanly Sarah who is celebrated religiously for her purity and asexuality as a mother is condemned in the new womanhood discourse as a masculinized castrating mother.

Although Deland presents Sarah as a strong and dominating woman who fails as a mother, she does not consider her work as the reason of her maternal downfall. Therefore, Sarah is celebrated as an independent working woman, but condemned as a dominant mother. However, Mrs. Maitland’s failure pertains to her inability to differentiate between her position as an owner of an iron foundry and her role as a mother at home. As she is responsible of paying wages to her employees, she understands motherhood in the same manner, as a provider of material sufficiency. By depicting the destruction of the domestic garden of the Maitland’s to provide a space for the new industrial change, whether of the “railroad tracks” or the family’s iron works, Deland provides an alternative kingdom for Sarah instead of her home. The woman’s need for a private territory at home is replaced by the iron works for Sarah. Similarly, she turns the dining room into an office and the dining table into a desk for her work. When Blair protests against that and against not having flowers on the table as in Mrs. Richie’s house, Sarah answers, “I don’t eat flowers” (Deland, p. 6). Her lack of femininity makes her unable to differentiate between what is useful and what is beautiful. Beauty for her is usefulness; therefore, she does not appreciate the painting of the Madonna that Blair buys and she evaluates it only in terms of its expensive price. While she does not reject or blame woman’s work in the new industrial age of the late 19th century, Deland condemns Sarah’s excessiveness and her inability to separate between her work and her home and to understand her role as both woman and mother. Deland intends to resist the current molding of mothers into the “New Woman” construction because it blames mothers instead of supports them.

In light of all these images of mothers including the “ideal mother,” the “true woman” and the “new woman,” where does the character of Helena Richie stand in Maragaret Deland’s *The Iron Woman*? Mrs. Richie is the opposite of Sarah Maitland in her representation of traditional motherhood as well as ideal femininity. All children in the novel are attracted to her way of life as fitting appropriately in the 19th- century prototype of woman and mother. Blair Maitland is fascinated with her femininity and maternity. Helena is an all-loving mother who is devoted to take care of her child. We see her adopted son, David, seeking his own way into manhood away from his mother. Unlike the dependable, spoiled Blair Maitland, David chooses to study medicine and travels alone to Philadelphia for training. He has a strong conviction that a man should depend on himself whether financially or emotionally; therefore, he rejects the

financial help of both his mother, his to-be-wife, Elizabeth, and later Mrs. Maitland who offers building a hospital in Mercer to compensate him for what Blair did to Elizabeth. Although Helena appeared as overprotective of her son in some cases, she is in no way a domineering or oppressive mother. She is continually reminded by Mr. Ferguson, her landlord, neighbor, and the superintendent in the Iron Works, that her son needs to find his own way in life away from her “apron strings” (Deland, p. 69). On the other hand, Helena Richie is an embodiment of traditional femininity that is needed in the gloomy industrialization of Mercer. Unlike Mrs. Maitland, Mrs. Richie takes care of her house and her garden in an attractive feminine way. She is also depicted as the “true woman” of the 19th century who plays her role as a gentle, passionate, and beautiful female conforming to the standards and judgments of society.

However, besides the beauty and submissiveness of the “true woman,” the cultural ideology of the time assumes moral and sexual chastity in the woman as well as asexuality in the mother, as part of her idealization under the shadow of Virgin Mary. Throughout the novel and until the revelation of Helena’s secret at the end, Deland depicts Mrs. Richie as an emblem of ideal motherhood that stands in comparison to Mrs. Maitland’s maternal deprivation. The downfall of Helena as a mother pertains to her hiding the truth about her past sexual degradation before coming to Mercer. Her claims of true femininity and ideal motherhood are deconstructed by this socially and culturally rejected truth. Helena finds herself obliged to reveal the most important secret of her life only to be able to save a falling woman from suffering the same shame and torture that she herself suffered. When Helena discovered that Elizabeth left her husband to escape with her lover, she decided to confess the sexual “immoral” life she had and the bitter consequences she lived to prevent them from disgracing themselves and their families. As a mother, she is willing to sacrifice her own reputation to save her child. Morey (1998) discussed that Deland wants to show that the outside physical appearances of people are not enough to make a human judgment; one should look for the real truth behind the worn masks. “Helena’s interest in appearances will be her moral downfall until she is able to renounce her own prideful secrecy in order to offer Elizabeth a saving lesson in womanly self-sacrifice” (Morey, p. 68). This revelation has deconstructed the perfectness and idealism that Helena carried throughout the novel; therefore, she supports Deland’s argument that no mother figure is perfect and resists the projected religious, cultural, and social codes of motherhood.

Elizabeth’s awakening and her realization of her responsibility for her own actions reiterates another awakening that Deland presented in her previous novel, *The Awakening of Helena Richie* (1906). The writer traces the life, downfall, and awakening of Helena before leaving Old Chester to move to the city of Mercer. As a beautiful charming young lady, Helena has attracted the residents of Old Chester with her beauty and virtues. She told the people that her husband was a drunkard who died after causing the death of her only baby twelve years ago, though the truth is that she left her husband in Paris after her baby’s death to be with her lover, Lloyd Pryor, a widower with a young daughter. In Old Chester, the lovers were waiting for her husband to die due to his drinking to be able to marry, and Helena was living on the outskirts of society claiming that Lloyd is her brother. A twenty- three-year-old- Sam Wright fell in love with her, but he committed suicide after she had confessed her reality and relationship with Lloyd. The old passion in Lloyd has dimmed over the years, and he became fearful that his relationship with Helena would destroy his fatherhood of his nineteen-year-old daughter. After

Lloyd's cold response to a letter she wrote asking for marriage, Helena realized her own mistakes and decided to take the baby she had adopted and leave Old Chester. Deland has utilized Helena Richie's story to create a similar experience for Elizabeth Ferguson in *The Iron Woman*. Although this secret story will announce her maternal downfall, Helena was keen to reveal her secret and her realization that the social norms and the cultural codes of the time assume a renunciation of one's individual freedom for the sake of the common good. She had lost Lloyd's respect only to find herself in a clash with the society that rejects her as an embodiment of a forbidden female sexual and moral perversity. The double personality that Helena adopts and her past mistakes have determined her downfall as a mother whose imperfection is inevitable in Deland's social views.

Helena Richie is presented as a victim of a social ideology that confines mothers within certain ideals and specific roles ignoring their rights to choose their own lives and to meet their own needs as women. Although Helena appeared as an embodiment of true womanhood and ideal motherhood, her sexuality threatens both of these images. Deland presents Helena as an intellectual mature woman who is aware of the society's judgments as well as the cultural and moral codes that restrict women in the 19th century. Therefore, she chooses to suppress her sexual needs and sacrifice personal happiness for a projected general good of society. The culture's idealization of motherhood according to the image of the Madonna assumes asexuality in all good mothers. Purity and chastity are the two judgmental attributes for the feminine in the 19th century as described by Marquis (2003). In order to be a good mother, woman should stifle her sexuality to live only a devoted life for her child who himself is the result of her sexuality. Chodorow and Contratto (1989) argued that "Fantasy and cultural ideology also meet in themes about maternal sexuality. An assumed incompatibility between sexuality and motherhood is largely a product of our nineteenth-century heritage" (p. 91). Aware of this asexual state of motherhood, Helena Richie refuses the proposal of Mr. Ferguson although she admires him. She knows well that her ideal picture of motherhood does not allow her to re-marry. As a mother, woman should play an assigned constructed role by society in which she is a self-negating passive performer. Irigaray defined "mother" as "Someone who always acts according to commands and stereotypes, who has no language of her own and no identity" (as cited in Patterson, 1989, p. 31). Therefore, the mother appears as trapped in a powerful/powerless conceptualization that idealizes her on one side and subjugates her on the other. While conforming to the ideals of society, she is also responsible for installing these ideals in her children; thus, we see Sarah Maitland as advocating a "work ethic" and blaming her son, Blair, for ignoring it, and we also see Helena Richie surrendering to the social decorum of the time and insisting to install it in the younger generation.

Although their realist and human presentation in this novel resists the culturally constructed roles for their motherhood, both Sarah Maitland and Helena Richie realize that they should pay a huge price before they can escape the dual, ambivalent judgment of their society. A personal sacrifice would always accompany a deviation from public and traditional norms. Deland presents these women as real, not ideal; therefore, she affirms that there will be no possible way to use the religious and cultural models of our society and then judge women accordingly as if they are flawless, exemplary, and perfect. These women have learned that they should endure the consequences of their own deeds although this should not make them less of

women or mothers. The new Helena in *The Iron Woman* has resorted to social norms only to dissuade the young David and Elizabeth from challenging society in claiming their personal freedom. She says to Elizabeth, "I understand the disgrace such wickedness will bring! No honest man will trust him [David]; no decent woman will respect you! And listen, Elizabeth: even you will not really trust him; and he will never entirely respect you!" (Deland, p. 459-460). These are the words of society that rejects divorce and relationships outside marriage and their impact on both personal and public good. According to Reep (1985), in the characterization of Helena and Elizabeth, "Deland draws a sympathetic yet critical picture of a woman who must move from self-delusion and a preoccupation with self to realistic evaluation of herself and her personal responsibility" (p. 62). As a mother and a woman, each of these ladies reveals how her female identity is culturally constructed and should be approved by religious ideology and patriarchal authority.

Although she is the opposite of Sarah Maitland in *The Iron Woman*, Helena Richie does not embody a successful mother. As she violated the social ideals with her sexual self-centered previous life in Old Chester as depicted in *The Awakening of Helena Richie*, she disrupts society again in *The Iron Woman*'s city of Mercer by destroying an icon of ideal motherhood that is glorified by the younger generation in the story. Nevertheless, Margaret Deland does not condemn Helena as a fallen woman, but instead she seems to praise her courage in using her own experience to save a fallen woman and establish a lesson in society. The sympathy that Deland shows to her mother characters in *The Iron Woman* assures her strong argument against the idealization of mothers in all cultural and social prototypes. By presenting a maternal downfall of the two major characters in the novel, Deland anticipates a modern feminist argument for the new industrial age and the 20th-century women roles. Albertine (1990) argues that Deland is trying to bridge "the pre-industrial and the modern worlds" by warning against potential dangers of the industrial transition in society and women's work (p. 253). Like she does with Helena Richie, Deland also sympathizes with Sarah Maitland and her inability to balance her work (the public) and her motherhood (the private). Thus, she makes her realize that materiality alone is not enough to keep the stability of her family in face of the changing waves of the industrialized world.

The ambivalence of the patriarchal culture towards motherhood is represented in Margaret Deland's *The Iron Woman* through the character of Robert Ferguson who is the superintendent in the Maitland's works and the landlord of Mrs. Richie's house. His contradictory attitudes appear in his relation with both Sarah Maitland and Helena Richie. He admires the strength and perseverance of Sarah, but criticizes her relationship with her son. He considers women as "Vain and lazy" and the "reason that Sarah Maitland was the only woman he liked, was that Sarah Maitland was not a woman!" (Deland, p. 16). He is an embodiment of the patriarchal contradiction towards women. He admires Sarah, but he does not consider her a woman to be loved; therefore, he falls in love with Helena Richie. Likewise, he is ambivalent in his relationship with his niece, Elizabeth, who lives with him after her father's death. With Sarah Maitland he is the supporter of woman's empowerment and freedom, but he is the patriarchal oppressor with Elizabeth in whom he installs a fear of failure that keeps warning her not to be like her adulterous mother. Mr. Ferguson rejects Elizabeth's feminine tendencies in dressing or attending a dancing school, but he is attracted to the femininity and "true" womanhood of Helena

Richie. He believes in Sarah's abilities in work and financial matters, but he is essentialist about women when referring to them as having "no financial moral sense!" (Deland, p. 380). Ferguson's ambivalence reflects an inconsistent patriarchal ideology in the America of the 19th century. He believes in the idealization of the mother, but he pushes the ideal mother in Helena to rebel against her confinement and accept his marriage proposal. His oppression of his niece affects her relationship with her mother and installs an inferiority complex in the young girl.

Although Sarah Maitland and Helena Richie are the two major mothers in Margaret Deland's *The Iron Woman*, two minor mother figures are presented as well. The significance of the following discussion of these two characters lies in its exploration of a mother-daughter relationship rather than a mother-son relationship. Both Elizabeth Ferguson and Nannie Maitland are motherless in the novel; however, we can still trace a mother-daughter relationship in them as the absence or death of the mother does not eliminate her impact. Elizabeth Ferguson appears as struggling herself in a love/hate relationship with her mother who is depicted as a bad adulterous woman. Dora is presented as an unfaithful wife who eloped with her lover causing the suicide of her husband and the suffering of her daughter. As religiously, socially, and culturally rejected mother model, the adulterous woman affects how her daughter understands her role in society as a woman and a future mother. This ambivalent reaction towards her mother is a result of Elizabeth's rejection of her mother's model and her struggle to be different from her. Rich discussed that "the ambivalent feelings toward the mother" creates a "rivalry relationship" between the mother and the daughter in which the latter tries to surpass her mother albeit by a complete rejection of her mother's model. (as cited in Patterson, 1989, p. 12-13). As a victim of the patriarchal authority represented by her uncle, Elizabeth expresses her rejection of her mother's sexuality by torturing her own body. She is characterized as a girl of bad temper that she suffers by constantly hurting her body. Elizabeth sees her body as the incarnation of her sexuality which is rejected by the patriarchal society in which she lives. As asexuality is imposed on a good mother, Dora is depicted as a fallen woman and a guilty mother because she seeks her own sexual needs. Although she suffers the absence of a mother figure in her life, Elizabeth is depicted as a "mother-dominated child" who is trying to get rid of the image of her mother that haunts her life. Instead of finding her freedom and peace in the maternity model of Helena Richie, her future mother-in-law, Elizabeth becomes a new victim of the society's woman's degradation and sexual oppression. Exposed to the socially projected models of true womanhood, Elizabeth suffers the renunciation of her sexual needs, first by her mother image and then by the promoted social norms and warnings of Mrs. Richie. She lived under the threat of her mother's prohibited sexuality. Friday (2010) argued that "So long as we have not repeated the model of our mother's life, most of us [women] will live with a suspicion of failure, of being incomplete" (p. 248). Thus, Elizabeth suffers from this imperfection and incompleteness because she fears a comparison with her mother by the restrictive patriarchal society in which she lives.

Nannie Maitland is another motherless girl in *The Iron Woman*. Her mother died when she was two, and she lived her whole life with her stepmother, Mrs. Maitland. As Blair, Nannie is presented as a "castrated" child who is unable to move away from the shadows of her powerful stepmother. She is referred to as "the afraid cat" because she is a timid, submissive character. "Nannie was always helpless with Elizabeth, just as she was helpless with her half-brother, Blair, though she was ten and Elizabeth and Blair were only eight" (p.1). Although she lacks a real maternal love as a child, she starts seeking motherhood in herself. Deland presents Nannie as the

true mother whom Blair misses. She acts as a mother for her brother although he appears as neglecting her existence except when he needs her to talk to his mother. Rich explained that “the woman who has felt “motherless” often focuses her energies on “mothering” others, thereby depending on their neediness to reinforce her own sense of usefulness” (as cited in Patterson, 1989, p. 13). As a motherless daughter and a deserted stepdaughter, Nannie finds her own usefulness in being a mother for her brother. And as a mother she is willing to sacrifice her own life for the sake of her “child.” Therefore, we see Nannie forging Sarah’s signature after her death to save Blair from being cut off without funds because of his disinheritance. The character of Nannie offers an explanation of the impact of the culture’s ideals of motherhood on daughters even if their mothers are absent. She tries to prove herself and establish an identity through the constructed self-negating mother role that she plays in the novel. With a subordinate and passive mother figure in the character of Nannie, Deland criticizes the limited arenas that the society offers for women in general and mothers in particular.

Motherhood has been assigned a comprehensive examination in Margaret Deland’s *The Iron Woman* whether the mother figure is present or absent. Deland presents a new outlook into the motherhood experience that examines actual maternity experiences rather than institutionalized discourses of motherhood. Away from taking sides or adopting biased views, Deland presents a wide exposition of the different challenges facing the American family in general and the American woman in particular at the threshold of a new century. Motherhood, for Deland, does not fit into any of the socially or culturally constructed molds because they ignore real mothering experiences and judge mothers as ideal. Between the pre-industrial “True Woman” as in Helena Richie and the modern “New Woman” as in Sarah Maitland, Deland challenges different essentialist discourses that restrict women and render them impotent to reach any acclaim in society. Her exploration rejects the adoption of any mother type that would essentialize and idealize motherhood. Therefore, by exploring different mother models, Deland is keen to refute the celebratory/oppressive dichotomy that governs the ambivalent discourse of motherhood for over a century. Analyzed from a variety of perspectives, the experience of motherhood has been assigned different allocations within the feminist, modernist, or religious discourses. Margaret Deland’s response in *The Iron Woman* shows it clearly that this ambivalence does not reflect an innate nature of motherhood itself, but rather exposes various power agencies trying to control and restrain this human experience within a set of constructed norms.

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